

Zeroplanic

Sebastian Anthology Archive ***The Professionals* Fan Fiction**

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Includes both circuit as well as fanzine stories, formatted by the author.

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Adagio (Part 1 of the Adagio series)

This was the first Professionals story I wrote - the one that began the whole Pros thing for me. I was at the time a Star Trek fan and very interested in K/S, which I had tried to write with appalling results. (I once wanted to track down my only zine-published K/S story which my dear friend HG found for me. "Are you sure you want me to send it?" she said. "Is it THAT bad?" I asked. "Yes," she replied.

*So there I was in 1982, a young married mother with two bad K/S stories to my writing name, ironing away in the bedroom watching a video of *The Professionals*. The episode was 'Foxhole on the Roof' which had been given its first showing the night before. I burned a hole in a shirt as I got lost in the episode... "Those guys have something... they could have something together....I could write about this!"*

At that time I had just been put in contact with ET and we were due to go to London to meet a bunch of Star Trek fans. Star Trek never got a mention that weekend: we spent the whole time talking, dreaming, writing Pros. 12 mature women with sleeping bags we never used, for we were up all night every night watching someone's grainy third-generation videos of our new heroes. It wouldn't be true by any means to say that UK Pros fandom began that weekend, for there was already a movement afoot and some excellent stories (confusingly known as Hatstands) already written by the existing group, but of those twelve women who met for the first time in London that weekend, all produced at least one story and some of those were classics.

Adagio was my first shot at a Pros story: it has passion, but it's largely understated, and it received some comments that it lacked tenderness between the characters. Myself, I think it's there, but you're the judge...

=====|||=====

The pub was one often used by employees of the less publicised -- and less civilised -- government services. The man sitting at the bar was studying the other drinkers in a way which looked desultory; in fact, he was mentally separating, with a trained eye, the probable CI5 agents from the more ordinary clientele. When the doors swung open and a suave dark man came in, the solitary toper recognised him instantly from the photos he had been shown, and did not waste many glances on him, nor his curly-haired companion. Instead, he simply watched the scene carefully as he had done for many days now without spotting any likely contacts; taking economical sips at his brandy, listening to snatches of conversation, catching the drift of feelings, the emotions revealed by a word, or a look. His employers were getting impatient. He would have to make a move soon.

The man called Bodie and his partner were playing darts, against two other scruffy, muscular young men; there was much chivvying and bragging and noise interspersed with short bursts of intent, silent concentration as the drub and thud of dart contacting board went on. When the game was over, the victorious duo bought a round for the losers and left the pub, smooth head beside unruly one, talking.

The disgruntled losers drank up at the bar, next to the man there. Their conversation was quiet, but easily audible to the listener, whose senses were suddenly alert.

"-- cocky bastard --"

"-- makes hisself out to be god's gift -- the old man's favourite --"

Even when the conversation turned to other things, he listened carefully, judging which was the most sour, the most susceptible, and when the quarry left the bar he slipped from his seat and followed.

The blank-faced man and the edgy service agent sat on a bench, out in the open in an empty section of the park. At first the former had experienced the chilling intuition that he had made a rare misjudgment of character and temperament, which could have for him a literally fatal result, given the intolerant nature of his employers; but he had mentioned then the sum involved and the hard-eyed resolve of the other had flickered. True, the man had not yet agreed, but the first and biggest hurdle had been passed and it was clear they would make a deal.

"A million? Sterling?"

The other confirmed it, watching without pity or distaste the greed and irresolution struggling in the other's eyes. Greed was a powerful force; coupled with envy and resentment it could lead a man to do almost anything...anything at all....

The deal was made.

"One-twentieth now. The balance on completion of the job. The deadline is 12 weeks from today; no later. I must add," said the recruiter, gravely, "that my employer's payroll is large; and

though his rewards are generous for those who serve him well, should you be assumed to have reneged on the deal, elimination will swiftly follow."

There was one bad apple in every organisation. Even Cowley's Incorruptibles. The new recruit, his inside pockets and his plastic bag now unexpectedly bulging with 50,000 in used notes, walked home to his small flat in a daze.... It would have to be very carefully set up, if he were to get away with it and settle down to enjoy his million.

One quick, apparently unpremeditated shot from an untraceable source, perhaps. Or a slower, false campaign, with blind leads and a host of meaningless and misleading clues. It had to be one or the other. His conscience soon ceased to trouble him -- he had killed men before without a whiff of it, and so had his intended victim, and whether you were on the side of right or not was not only a subjective argument but also seemed less significant than usual -- given the prospect of one million pounds.

Bodie was drumming his fingers on the roof of the car, his elbow resting on the half-opened window. The noise was irritating Doyle, who had both a hangover and a last-night row with his girlfriend -- now ex-girlfriend -- to contend with.

"Cut it out, Bodie."

Bodie, in a sunny mood, looked over at his partner's tight face and smirked.

"Too many late nights, Doyle? Take a tip from me..."

"I wouldn't touch it," Doyle told him with repressed savagery, "with a ten foot sewer rod. Keep your mind on the job, for chrissake." He was keeping a constant surveillance, mirrors, windows, front and rear.

Bodie was faintly nettled by his partner's surliness. "What job? Straight pick-up."

"We can't be sure of that. Can't be sure of anything," muttered Doyle morosely. "Not in this fucking job."

Bodie considered, and gave him a cocky smile. "Who got out of bed the wrong side this morning then?"

"Just leave it out, will you?" snarled Doyle. "Where the hell *is* Cowley, anyway?" He jerked an irritated eye at the front door of the house they were expecting to collect their chief from. They had been here before, he vaguely remembered.

Bodie was not willing to let it drop. "Or were you *kicked* out?"

Doyle was silent. Freezingly so. The silence stretched, expressively. Bodie gave a mental shrug as he surveyed the black face of his partner, and turned to more pleasing views. For example, the fur-jacketed blonde passing the car, who had long nyloned legs, and a white poodle on a leash.

Bodie ejected a low breath of admiration. "Take a look at *that*."

Doyle's fragile control on the morning snapped. "Oh, just give it a rest. Sometimes I wonder about you, Bodie. All that relentless machismo."

"What the hell do you mean by that?" Bodie's face had changed, all the good humour fled. He looked cold, set and dangerous; his narrow lips set in a thin line and his dark eyes snapped cold temper.

Doyle gave a humourless bark of laughter. "Oho. That got home all right, didn't it?" He stared out of the window, not waiting for Bodie's reply.

"-- you're not bloody fit for company today, Doyle --"

Something caught Doyle's eye.

"-- and after this pickup you can fucking well clear off and take your poisonous temper out on someone else --"

-- Something long and slender, the sunlight glinting prettily over it; a black unwinking eye --

"*Down!*" yelled Doyle and, as Bodie ducked in blind, trained instinct, he was thrusting the car into reverse, hard, and swinging it round. There was an explosion of breaking glass and the whining sound of flying bullets. Guns drawn, the two CI5 men burst from the abused car, ducking and weaving as they made their way towards the narrow space between two houses.

Behind them, a small round hole smoked in the upholstery of Doyle's car, six inches from the spot where Bodie's sleek dark head had rested moments before.

"So --" Cowley drew the word out, pointedly "-- you failed to find any trace of the gunman?"

"Plenty of witnesses who saw Doyle spinning his car like a maniac. Also plenty who heard shots. No one remembers anything useful."

"Hmm...."

"The pick-up?"

Cowley shook his head, not in negation; just musing. "Was perfectly legitimate. I did put out the call -- however, the office was in some disarray, rearrangement of the filing system -- and Miss Pierce muddled two messages. You arrived in the wrong place, and too early."

"So it can't have been premeditated," said Doyle. His youthful face and sloppily casual dress well masked the quick mind and perfect reflexes -- the same reflexes that had saved Bodie's life an hour ago, and Cowley frowned at him.

"A premature judgment indeed, Doyle. But it does seem unlikely, on the present evidence."

"Miss Pierce?" said Bodie, with his usual economy of expression.

"Is clean," confirmed Cowley. "It's an open case, at the moment."

They left the office and walked down the street.

"So someone sees us sitting there, decides they don't like the look of our mugs and lets rip a rifle blast," said Doyle, disgusted. He turned to Bodie. "Good job I was there with my eyes open."

"Yeah, thanks mate," said Bodie without gratitude, preoccupied. "Look, maybe it's someone we sent down, roughed up a bit, all in the line of duty -- someone with a grudge against us --"

Doyle gave him a look. "Maybe against you. If it *was* set up, that call went out to you and it was sheer chance I was in the car too."

"It could be one of my ex-girlfriends. They don't take it well when I leave 'em." His expression was unbearably smug. Doyle kidded him along and they mentally filed the incident away until the next time -- if -- it should be repeated.

It was not.

Just another job; just another day. But things had gone wrong, and it was the end of Bodie's life. He knew that, instantly, when the trigger failed to pour out the expected stream of slugs into his opponent; produced only a bewildered click, and then silence.

Bodie saw it all as if in slow motion: the man who faced him, crouching in a desperation that was only now turning into speculation, hardening into a light of unlooked-for triumph as he saw that Bodie was defeated. He and Doyle had chased this criminal and his companion for two blocks, in and out of yards, down alleys, a mad game of tag until they cornered them here in this rickety old warehouse, Doyle taking one, he the other -- this man here, who was lifting his gun, focussing it on Bodie ten yards away with no cover in the centre of the dusty wide room. Nowhere to run. It should all have been different, he thought deep in shock, it should have been me where he is now. So death was finally here. For Doyle too, maybe; Doyle would be here otherwise. He had heard a volley of shots, and then silence. He'd always known they would go together, him and Doyle, when their number came up; it was written on the same slip. The snub nose of the weapon was centred on his heart, its open eye preparing to discharge his death. He could dive and roll, sure; but he wouldn't rise again. The hand on the trigger squeezed.

Doyle burst in through the door like an avenging angel, his brown curls standing out round his head, white face like a halo. With grim determination, he cannoned full-bodied into Bodie's would-be killer, knocking him to the ground. While the bullets from the gun of the man, who had nearly killed Bodie, sped harmlessly through the crumbling plaster wall, Doyle, his face empty, pumped an entire round into him. The man fell apart, ripped across like a badly perforated stamp. They watched it, mesmerized by the spouting blood.

Slowly, Doyle relaxed his taut muscles, returning to normal. He took his eyes off the corpse, picked up Bodie's useless gun and examined it, his mouth tight.

"We'll give armoury a bloody rocket about this," he commented grimly. When Bodie did not make the expected comeback, he glanced over. He saw his partner's rigid attitude, the dazed eyes, the pallor of his sweat-sheened face. Shock. He crossed the wide smoky room in three firm strides, took Bodie's hard shoulders between his hands. "Siddown," he ordered tersely.

Bodie let himself be pushed to the floor. Ray Doyle knelt beside him, looking him over carefully. No injury. No *physical* injury. He was surprised by his devil-may-care partner's violent reaction; they'd come close to death often enough before and walked away laughing. You had to laugh or you'd cry.... The old adage mocked at him as he took Bodie's cold hands in a rare moment of rough concern, rubbing some warmth into him.

"Hey," he said gently, looking into the white face. "All right, mate?"

Bodie looked at him, into the wide green eyes close to his own, became aware of the warm hands holding him. He was shaking. As his sluggish mind and senses began to stir once again with new life, he realised something else. He took one hand away from Doyle, reached up to push it against his sweat-dampened chest, reassured by the solidity there.

"You're shaking," he said with wondering curiosity.

"You were dead," replied Doyle briefly. "Right then, you were dead."

Their eyes were steady, in perfect understanding. For uncounted time, they touched, reaffirming and seeking reassurance. Until something else began to stir and waken, something unwanted, barely recognised.

A whole new question was born in that moment, to loom unanswered.

Abruptly, Doyle rose to his feet, extending a hand to Bodie. They stood dusting themselves off, and collecting their shattered thoughts.

Bodie looked at the ugly sprawled corpse, really saw it for the first time.

"Christ, Doyle. You made a mess of him."

"Look mate," responded Doyle sarcastically. "He had to go. One bullet or twenty, where's the difference?"

"Cowley'll see one, you can count on that."

They left the building, walking slightly apart, each thoughtful.

It was soon after that that the letters began. It was the old trick, individual letters cut from newspapers and pasted in erratically spelt sentences onto cards. The first, pushed under the windscreen of Bodie's car, simply said: YOU ARE GOING TO DIE.

Bodie laughed it off, showed it to Doyle and Cowley and it was filed away.

Soon there was another to join it -- I'LL GET YOU SOON BODIE. And another -- A SINGLE SHOT IN YOUR MURDERING GUTS. Another, thought-provokingly left in his flat which bore not a trace of having been forcibly entered, read -- REMEMBER NAIROBI? REVENGE, which might have been their first clue to the identity of the writer, since Bodie had killed a lot of people's sons, brothers and lovers in Africa; or might have been a deliberate blind.

They decided to take it seriously when the boot of Bodie's car exploded as he opened the door. ARE YOU GETTING SCARED taunted the note taped to the driver's mirror.

"This can't go on," said Cowley irritably when they met up in his office. "It's getting too close to home. You've come up with no leads at all?"

His acerbic gaze swept them both.

"I've just put a lot of work into it, sir," said Bodie ironically. It was his life and he was fond of it and here was the old man carrying on as if Bodie wasn't trying hard enough to find the arrogant so-and-so who was daring to threaten it.

Cowley ignored him. "We'll have to consider it a personal vendetta. One of your old friends, perhaps -- from your pre-CI5 days." One suspected that Cowley did not quite approve of Bodie's former hell-raising days. It was perfectly all right now that it was CI5 he raised hell for, of course. "All these hints are getting us nowhere. He's playing with you -- and you're letting him get away with it. You'd better see if you can bring him out into the open. Hide out somewhere our friend can trace you to; then take him." Bright-eyed and birdlike, he gazed at Bodie.

"I'm deeply relieved it's all going to be so simple," muttered Bodie with sarcasm.

Cowley fixed him with an eye. "It *is* quite simple. He's had his chances already, 3.7. If he was in a position to plant a bomb in your car at all, why not make it a fatal one? There has to be a reason. He's been making all the moves so far. Now's your chance to get one step ahead, and force *his* hand. If he's serious, he'll come after you and you can take him. If he's just a joker, then we know where we stand."

Bodie thought around the problem. Cowley was making sense, as usual. If he holed up somewhere, the putative assassin would assume Bodie'd gone to ground to escape his unwelcome attentions. He'd follow, move in -- and Bodie would be there, waiting. Bodie fancied his chances in a straight draw against any gunman in the country. Yes, he'd do it.

"That's agreed then, 3.7. You have one week's leave of absence granted you. Less if it takes less, of course." Cowley looked up, as if waiting for questions. There were none. "Well --" he began

testily, waiting for them to go.

"Alone?" The word burst out of Doyle.

Cowley looked mildly surprised. Bodie, after sparing his partner one glance, didn't move a muscle. He and Doyle had never been the same after that intense, shocking experience in the Grahamstown warehouse, weeks ago. They were wary, backing off; they had lost the easy give and take, the smart dialogue. It was as if that one unguarded moment had shown them more than they wanted to see.

Cowley was answering, "Certainly alone. No gunman's going to come running at the pair of you." He said that with a certain amount of well-concealed pride in his ace team. "In any case, there's no need for two of you on this job. I can use you here, Doyle, and Bodie can quite well look after himself."

Doyle stood quite still, digesting the logic of this. It was Bodie who moved round to stand facing him.

"Right, mate?" he said, quiet and impassive. Doyle looked up, his wide-cheekboned face giving nothing away. Bodie smiled at him, a little upward quirk of his lips. "Right?" he said again.

Bodie knew what he was about, all right. But --

Doyle nodded, removing his eyes. "Yeah. Keep your head down, mate."

Bodie left. Cowley looked down at his desk, but his attention was, for all that, firmly on the slouching man in sneakers lingering before him. There was something not quite right with these two. Cowley didn't yet know what it was. But he intended to find out.

All of Doyle was prickling with unease. "He shouldn't have to handle this alone, sir. He should have special protection."

"*Bodie* should?" Cowley stared at his unruly operative with the look intended to quell. "Good God, Doyle, if Bodie can't deal successfully with one loony out of the many who undoubtedly wish him out of the way, then he's got no place in CI5."

Doyle, angry, persisted. "We've got no proof it's a one man vendetta. No proof it's a crackpot with a toy pistol. It could be the opposite, carefully planned to *look* like a pathetic loony's no-chance death wish. *He shouldn't have to do it alone.*"

Cowley met it with abruptness, rapping the words out like an SMG, his eyes as hard as Doyle's own. "He has to. With Bodie gone, we're one man down and I've no intention of making it two just because you've some idea about playing nursemaid. I need you here, 4.5, and that's final. CI5 as a unit is more vital than one of its operatives."

4.5 looked as if he wanted to spit. Maybe that *had* been a little -- stark. Cowley, who understood

more than he was letting on, continued: "Don't worry so, Doyle. 3.7 has all the advantages of the very attributes needed to *become* a CI5 agent -- he's fast, he's armed, he's capable --"

If it was intended as reassurance, it failed. "Oh yeah," said Doyle, bitterly. "All the advantages. Except that granted to common Joe Bloggs in the streets. Because of CI5, he can't have special protection when someone's out to get him."

Cowley was still calm, facing his hot-headed young agent across the desk.

"Not without special circumstances, 4.5. I'm sorry."

Within two hours, Doyle was back. He threw a slim file onto Cowley's desk, the result of a ceaseless, exhaustive search conducted with determination. And desperation. "There," he said. "There's your 'special circumstances'. Sir."

Cowley picked up his glasses. "What is this, Doyle?"

"The Hess file," said Doyle with grim satisfaction. He had the soulless bastard now. "Bodie's needed as prime witness in the Hess trial when it comes up. Without his evidence you can't be sure of a conviction. Given the death threat, special protection," said Doyle, with a humourless quirk of his lips, "might be appropriate, loon or not, wouldn't you say, sir?"

After a long moment, during which nothing showed of the quick lines of thought suddenly racing around in Cowley's sharp mind, the CI5 boss nodded. "All right, 4.5. Consider yourself on one week's leave."

Doyle, thus summarily dismissed, turned for the door, thought of something and looked back. "In view of the -- changed circumstances -- I take it I'm allowed an R/T?"

Cowley acquiesced, crisply. Then, just before Doyle passed through the door, he said, "But I should restrict its use, Doyle, until the situation is resolved. This could be inside."

Doyle stared. "Inside? Inside CI5?" It was almost unthinkable. "I thought we were sure it was Bodie's murky past risen up to confront him."

Cowley's reply was cryptic, knowing that Doyle had taken the point. "Or his present. Don't advertise your departure, Doyle. I'll let it be known here that you're working on a special case for me within this building for the next few days. Dismissed, Doyle."

The door shut, and Cowley stared pensively down at the almost-forgotten manila file he held, the tale of a wrapped-up case, corruption, drugs and vice run by a Mafia-style German family with immense financial resources and a correspondingly large deficit of scruples. It was all over now, thanks to some smart CI5 work; all over bar the trial. The trial where Bodie was first-line witness for the prosecution.

He drew up the chair to his desk, opened the file, and began to read.

Doyle tracked Bodie without wasting a second and with only minor trouble; a lot less, probably, than any possible assassin would have since Doyle knew the workings of Bodie's mind. Bodie had laid clues -- made himself conspicuous buying a newspaper here, stopped for petrol here -- not too many, to alert their friend to the possibility of a set-up, but enough for any hired killer/competent nutter worth his salt to run him to ground. The village Doyle finally roared into was Almesbury, a sleepy little hamlet an hour out of London with little shops that sold postcards of the village green, rock, and ice-cream in cornets. Doyle wandered into one of the alternatives - a grocers' cum off-licence -- and stood gazing up at the rows of British sherry, Bull's Blood, barley wine.

"Can I help you?"

It was a young girl, quite pretty, in an unflattering brown overall. Doyle favoured her with a smile, his casual attitude showing off his lithe-muscled body in shirt and jeans to best advantage. He was devastating. And he knew it.

"Yeah, thanks. I was wondering -- d'you have any Glenfiddich?" They'd cracked a bottle on Bodie's birthday. It had been a good night, full of profound and solemn restructurings of the world's problems, culminating in a good deal of maudlin drunken sorrow at the injustices of life. The morning hadn't been so good.

"Yes, we do." She moved a metal stepladder, climbed up it a little way. Doyle's gaze rested on the long expanse of nylon-clad leg thus exposed to his view. "I know it's here -- because --" Obviously she was aware of Doyle's eyes; when she turned around with the bottle in her hand she had gone a little pink.

"Nice," Doyle told her, leaving it up to her whether he meant the whisky or her legs. Unhurried, he leant against the counter while she went about the business of wrapping up the bottle in tissue. She was young, and very conscious that she was in the presence of an extremely attractive male, exuding careless virility. It made her a little, fetchingly, nervous.

"You're not from around here, are you? Passing through?"

"S'right. Pretty little place."

"We get quite a few tourists in the summer. It's nice, to see some fresh faces."

"I'll bet." Doyle paid for the whisky with a 20 note and waited for the change. "I might stay myself. There's no hotel, is there?"

She was eager to help. "There's one a few miles out. The Feathers. That's where most go. Or there's a few bed-and-breakfast places here in the village. There's a hunting lodge in Almesbury House grounds they let out in the summer, very primitive --" She looked at Doyle, whose feral stance and casually-exposed area of silken-haired chest made him a clear candidate for the delights of primitiveness -- "That might have suited you, but it's taken at the moment. He was in

here earlier today, matter of fact. And the funny thing is --" she smiled a little, amused by the vagaries of fate -- "he was after Glenfiddich, too."

"Funny thing, coincidence," answered Doyle, stashing the bottle away in his holdall. "I might try the hotel; have to see. Thanks, love." He gave her a wink, and a smile to remember him by, and sauntered out.

Hilliard walked into Helen Grieve's office, perched on the edge of her desk. "Bodie in?" he asked casually.

She raised her cool blonde head from the typewriter.

"Owe him a fiver," he explained.

"He's on leave, actually. Gone fishing, I believe."

"Ah," he said noncommittally, and produced a bank note from his pocket. "Can I leave this with you to give him, then? You know Bodie -- likes his debts paid in on time --" As her hand reached for it, he withdrew it, saying as if in afterthought. "Or I could give it to Doyle when I bump into him. Save you the trouble. He's in, is he? Or couldn't he bear the pangs of separation?"

A lot hung on her answer. Hilliard was no fool. Nor any match for Bodie-and-Doyle together, they transcended the sum of their separate parts.

"4.5's in, all right," she said crisply. "But he's on a special job. In conference with the head right now."

"Ah. Well, I'd better leave this with you, after all." He let the fiver flutter onto the desk. It would never be reclaimed. Because its rightful owner would be dead in a few hours.

Doyle concealed the bike and helmet in a hedge, camouflaged it carefully, scaled Almesbury House's ten foot wall with ridiculous ease -- wouldn't keep out a determined midget, that wall -- and dropped down to the other side to take stock. He was on the edge of a wood. Good. Plenty of cover in a wood like this with nice thick trees. On the other hand, plenty of vantage points, too, for an assassin.

Walking quietly, he came to the lodge, a small rough-brick structure in a clearing. Primitive, she had said. A fast look round, then he was at the door, knocking at it, prepared for anything. Even a wolf in Bodie's clothing.

"Who is it?" came a low voice from behind the door.

"Little Red Riding Hood. Your better half. Who'd you think?"

He could hear bolts being drawn. The door opened. Bodie stared at his partner, his hand slowly leaving the inside of his jacket.

"Don't be all day about it, Bodie," said Doyle, irritably. He pushed past his partner into the habitation's sole room, stone-flagged floor, wooden table, two chairs; Bodie's sleeping bag still rolled up in a corner. Behind him, Bodie silently shut and locked the door. Then he turned to face his partner, who was hitched up on the table, watching him.

"Cowley had a change of heart," said Doyle, by way of explanation, dropping his aitches in the manner of a man who cares not where they fall.

"Cowley hasn't got a heart." Bodie's eyes were narrowed in a dark, suspicious line; his nostrils were very slightly flared and his mouth was set in an uncompromising, belligerent pout.

Doyle shrugged, and began to unpack his holdall. Out came the bottle of Glenfiddich -- he placed it, with satisfaction, beside its twin already reposing on the solid oak dresser.

"I don't need help to handle one bloody sniper, Doyle."

"I know that," answered Doyle. He hauled out the paperback he might get time to read, a towel. Clean T-shirts, underwear he'd packed in case of a protracted stay he left in the bag. "Think I'd be here on *my* account? Cowley's orders, mate."

"He didn't seem exactly prostrate with concern when I left."

"Changed his mind. I told you. Stuff it, Bodie. You've got me now, no argument. Let's get down to business. The old man thinks it might be inside."

Bodie, diverted at last from the inquisition into his partner's unexpected appearance, curled his lip. "Inside? No chance."

"Remember the earlier gun job? Three Clouds Lane, few weeks ago. Call for the pick-up came through CI5 channels," Doyle reminded him. "Simple shot at a sitting duck lured to the set-up place to wait for a non-existent passenger. Couldn't have been easier. Only it went wrong. Because I was there. And no one could have known that in advance, not even any CI5 turncoat. Pass me a drink, will you?"

Thinking, Bodie got the bottle down, poured two slugs of it into tumblers, passed one to Doyle. Careful of his appearance as ever, he was wearing a black shirt which made his skin look pale, in contrast to the dark hair and sombre brooding eyes. It struck Doyle, not for the first time, that his partner was a very attractive man. And for once, not aware of it as he said:

"We agreed that was unconnected. Helen Grieve passed on that message to me because it was on her desk in writing. A mistake; mess-up in the filing clear out. The shot could have been anyone. Kid fooling with a neighbour's rifle. Someone we've riled in the past spotting us and taking a chancy pot shot."

"Yeah, and might not have been. But we'll find out soon enough anyway," said Doyle. "He'll be

lying out there with a bullet in him and we just get the ident. and motive job." That was hard, for Doyle. He seemed uncharacteristically tense and sombre. Bodie, about to comment to that effect, saw his partner's set face and thought better of it. Instead, he raised his tumbler:

"Cheers."

"Cheers," said Doyle, and raised his in mocking salute.

They cooked a simple meal from Bodie's meagre supplies on the two ring Calor gas burner, ate, washed-up, prepared to settle in the early evening for a long wait. The one-roomed cottage had no electricity, though there was a toilet and washbasin -- 'cold water', said Bodie, expressionless -- attached, and was reasonably easy to secure. In the dark, they began to talk, to while away the hours of waiting.

"...Ellie?"

Doyle started. He'd been miles away. "Ellie. She's over."

"Over?"

He felt, rather than heard, Bodie's sudden attention. He made his own voice easy, relaxed. "Yeah. CI5 and women, you know, they don't mix."

Bless him or damn him, Doyle didn't know which, Bodie didn't take it up.

"Pity. I was thinking -- you and Ellie, me and Diane, we could have joined up one evening, gone to that little place along...."

Doyle had reached into his bag for the serious armoury he'd brought along, and was fitting together a rifle. "Diane? That's a new one. Funny. I thought you were off women."

There was a space of a few seconds. Doyle, unhurried, slotted the barrel over the next section and didn't look up. They were sitting with their backs against the wall; Bodie was looking down at him, his expression unreadable.

"What makes you think that?" he said in a flat, cool voice.

Doyle took a squint through the sights. "Don't hear so much about them."

Bodie thought about it carefully. What was Doyle playing at? Could he be making a cautious opening? Too soon to tell. His treacherous heart was beginning to race. Dangerous game, this. Especially if it turned out that only one of them was playing. Which seemed likely....

He ducked out, again. "Doesn't mean I'm not getting my share. Less talk, more action." He gave Doyle a heavy-lidded leer.

"And are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Gettin' your share. As you so charmingly put it."

"*More* than my share," said Bodie, smirking and mendacious.

Suddenly Doyle gave a short laugh. "Daft, isn't it?" he remarked, laying the completed rifle to one side.

Bodie was mystified by his partner tonight. "What's daft?"

"The bloody games we play."

Bodie felt carefully around this remark. Before he could reply, Doyle was continuing: "So much effort. You watch 'em and wine them and dine them, whisper sweet nothings at them, you make your move. All that time and energy. And for what? Just so you can make 'em give in, let you push yourself into them, spend a few minutes heaving about so you can come inside them -- and then it's all over. Until you get hot again. And again.... It's a pointless exercise, when you think about it."

In the dark, Bodie shut his eyes. The graphic words, coming from his normally more reticent partner, coupled with a vivid mental image that had come into his mind while Doyle was speaking, had had the immediate effect of arousing Bodie painfully. He was taken back to a time when he was fifteen, innocently passing an open door, and had glimpsed within the full-breasted half-naked body of a 17-year-old friend, changing out of her tennis gear. The shock of the instant hard excitement had been the same then as it was now; it had been a long time since blasé Bodie was so easily aroused.

He shifted position a little and said casually, "That's a bit strong, isn't it, Doyle? A little pessimistic. It doesn't have to be wham bang and thank you. There's plenty of fun to be had beforehand if you know the right techniques." The smug assurance in his voice was meant to convey the message that he, Bodie, was right up to date with any technique you cared to name, not to mention a few you probably couldn't.

Doyle was used to Bodie's style of braggadocio, and ignored it. He had risen to rummage in his bag. He paused to listen at the walls -- Bodie had earlier laid an unobtrusive circle of brittle, hard-snapping twigs in a ten foot radius of the cottage -- and returned to sit beside Bodie, a Magnum between his legs and a jar of gun oil at his side. He had slightly misjudged the relative positions of their bodies; now, every time he leant forward his shoulder brushed against Bodie's drawn-up thighs. Bodie didn't move. He liked it.

It was a surprise when Doyle resumed the conversation; Bodie had assumed it closed.

"Yeah. What you said just sums it up. That word you used -- techniques. As if it's a bloody

military operation. A cut-and-thrust CI5 manoeuvre timed and planned down to exact limits." Doyle sounded terse, concentrating on the gun he was checking over, his curly head bowed.

"It doesn't have to be like that, Doyle," said Bodie, with no trace now of mockery or cynical Bodieism in his voice. "It can be better than that."

"Yeah," Doyle agreed. He raised his eyes from the gun and stared unseeingly ahead. Remembering Ann? Bodie wondered.

"Come on now, Ray," he said bracingly. "You can't really seriously be telling me you're off sex. You know it can be good. The best thing there is.... It depends on your attitude."

"Yeah, well, maybe that's what's wrong. My attitude died. Someone shot at it. Death gets to you. I dream I'm coming high-velocity bullets these days."

There was a queer bitterness in Doyle's voice. Before Bodie, stunned and silent could reply, Doyle was shoving at him with a flurry of irritability.

"Give me more room, will you? Can't see a damn thing in this light."

Something was wrong, and Bodie, lost in his own confusion, didn't know how to help. After a while, he began to regale Doyle with mildly ribald tales of his past and Doyle's own, as if nothing untoward had passed, reminding him of the time they had taken the two Durham University girls boating; they had all ended up soaked to the skin. The plump waitress who couldn't choose between them and settled in the end for both -- an uncomfortable memory for Bodie, that, remembering Doyle's unselfconscious nakedness then, the image dim now and touched with new wistfulness.... After a while he was rewarded by Doyle's throaty laugh at some fruity anecdote (one of pure invention) and knew the crisis, whatever it had been, was over. For now. Doyle responded as he worked over the Magnum with some raunchy stories of his own that had Bodie chuckling, even as his guts churned in a turmoil of desire and indecision.... He sensed there would never be a 'right' time for this; that it might as well be now.

It might as well be now. You never know until you try. Ask and you shall be given. You never know your luck. Ten-million-dollar question time. The trite phrases bounced up at him incessantly. Bodie squeezed his nails into his unseen palm, felt the tension in his stomach ball into a tighter knot, the sweat beneath his arms icy on his goose-bumped flesh, and said in a completely casual, nonchalant voice:

"Did you ever make it with another bloke?"

In the silence that lasted for [no] more than one rushed heartbeat, Bodie ran over Ray Doyle's possible reactions to this bombshell -- a fist in the face seemed the most likely.

Doyle hardly glanced up from his lap. "Nah," he said briefly, and picked up the rag soaked in gun oil. He briskly began to apply it to the mechanism.

Even as Bodie's pounding stress symptoms began to slow down, the heady drop of disappointment was there rushing into its place. He grunted, noncommittally, and leant back against the wall, closing his eyes. That was it, then. 'Nah.' Not that he'd really expected any different, he told himself.

"You?"

The abrupt, unexpected continuation startled Bodie's eyes wide open. The knot of tension was instantly back, with a friend.

"A few, yeah," he said casually through his dry mouth and the cannonball in his throat.

He caught the gleam of Doyle's eyes in the half-light as Doyle looked up at the cool enigmatic face of his partner with curiosity.

"What -- all the way?"

Bodie gave a wolfish don't-care Bodie grin. "Yeah...." His heart was thudding so fast he thought Doyle must hear it.

Doyle looked away, apparently losing attention. "Never interested me."

"Ah," said Bodie. With a sudden vicious movement he was on his feet, snapping, "Get that bloody gun together, Doyle. You're supposed to be saving my life, remember?"

Doyle raised a thoughtful eye to his partner's ramrod back, but he said nothing. There was silence for several minutes. The enforced inactivity and the tension was beginning to wear on their nerves as far as their personal relationship went, but it did not impair their working efficiency. And never must. That was why they were a team. That was why they were still alive.

That was why, when five minutes later a shot rang out over their roof, echoed, was followed by another at one side, they were perfectly in unison as they dropped to crouch, guns drawn, frozen in twin perfect poses of catlike alert.

There were other shots. None hit close. When they finally died away, Bodie rolled to the window, flattened himself beside it and peered out. He could see nothing untoward in the dusk; no movements.

Doyle made for the door. "I'll go."

Bodie pulled him back, tucking his gun inside his holster and pushing past him, saying over his shoulder, "He's not supposed to know you're here. You're the ace up my sleeve, right?"

Kneeling by the open window, Doyle watched, every muscle tensed, his rifle trained exactly on the lithe dark figure of his partner, at first skulking round the four walls of the lodge, then loping zigzag fashion for the open. He kept Bodie's head in his sights. I could kill you, Bodie.

Astounding thought. I could kill you here and now, and you wouldn't know what hit you.

Or he could kill Bodie any one of a hundred times a year, with less direct methods, simply by being a fraction of a second too late giving him cover; making any one of a hundred warnings just -- too -- late.... His hand froze on the trigger, angrily. Too much. There was too much feeling. It had happened despite all their unconscious resolve; they had broken the unbreakable rule. They were like one person, and if anything happened to Bodie now Ray Doyle was also a finished man. He watched his gun hand, amazingly, shake. How had he been so weak as to let it happen? The future was a blank. He had no idea what would happen to them.

He had lost Bodie now in the woods. How could you give cover to a man you couldn't see? He waited. There was no sound, just the breeze in the trees, the intermittent squawking of the birds settling for the night. It had been too long; he'd have to go out. Bodie might be lying there dead right now, that arrogant suave figure sprawled on muddy earth, his blue eyes half-open, gazing sightlessly at his outflung hands. Conquered at last. Their luck couldn't hold forever. Get your affairs in order; encouraging advice to a new recruit. Had Bodie set his affairs in order? Doyle didn't care, about anything to do with life-after-Bodie.

There was a noise, close at hand. Doyle whirled round, on his knees, every CI5-trained muscle perfectly coordinated, both hands on the Magnum aimed at the door. It opened slowly.

Bodie stood there, tall and solid and uninjured, his dark eyes hard in the low light. In one hand he held his gun, exactly trained on Doyle as Doyle's was on him. From the other dangled a small corpse, feathered and bloody.

Relaxing his gun arm, stashing the weapon away one-handed, Bodie threw the butchered pheasant on the floor between them.

"Poachers," he said, expressionless. "I'll pluck, you draw, okay?"

Bodie went off to wash, leaving Doyle to stare at the pathetic, glassy-eyed body.

Doyle took the first watch. He surveyed the dirty, cracked windows ceaselessly. Behind him Bodie rolled and twitched in restless slumber. Doyle turned to look at his sleeping partner. Something about the movements....

"What are you up to?"

The bag shifted, and stilled.

"Nothing. Can't sleep." The disembodied voice had a faintly defensive, quivering edge.

Doyle stared. And threw back his head in silent, choking laughter.

"Randy bastard. All that hot talk get you going, did it? Don't mind me. You carry on." He chuckled to himself, turning back to the window.

"Fuck off, Doyle," came Bodie's curt, muffled voice; he turned over violently, shrugging the sleeping bag up furiously over his hot face, and took his helpless hurting feelings to sleep.

He was awoken much later by a featherlight touch. He stared up into Ray Doyle's eyes. They were hard, quite expressionless. Doyle was on the job.

"Company," said Doyle in an undertone.

Bodie scrambled quietly out of the sleeping bag, instantly awake and with all personal considerations forgotten. Doyle talked very quietly, bringing him up to date with the utmost economy of detail.

"Pencil flashlight. 50 yards off, intermittent -- he's in the trees."

Visibility from the paned windows was reasonable, thanks to the moonlight. The two CI5 men knew there were only three possibilities here, in this situation, with one door only to the cabin and windows to the front alone. Either their man would take the cabin, depending on a sleeping, unaware victim. Or, if he had access to any kind of armoury and instant, uncomplicated destruction was his plan, the cabin would offer no cover against grenades, or worse. Or he might be setting himself up, digging in during the last quiet night hour, ready to take his man after dawn, the moment he came into the open.

Options 1 and 3 would suit the two agents fine. They had three unstoppable advantages in either scenario; firstly, there were two of them, secondly, they knew he was here, and thirdly, they were hard men superbly trained for this very job; they were professionals.

Option 2 was the obvious sinker.

At this very second, a grenade or something similarly designed for use against soft-skinned targets in inadequate cover might be making its carefree way towards them. That picture was looming very large in Bodie's imagination just then. He rose to his feet in one smooth movement, shrugging into his holster.

"I'm going out."

Doyle caught at his arm. "Think about it."

Both men sensed that this time it was the real thing.

Bodie threw Doyle off, easily. "This is what we came for," he said, impatiently. "Come on, Doyle. What chance has he got in this light at a moving target, however hot a shot he is? And the second he shows, you'll be here all ready to give him the surprise of his life."

In the half-light Bodie moved around quickly and quietly, a bulky shadow. Doyle hoped he, crouched by the window with the rifle, was invisible to any watching eyes. This time he kept his

gaze not on Bodie, but sweeping exhaustingly, unceasingly around the clump of trees that bordered the clearing. Any movement and he'd see it. He had no doubt that Bodie's gunman would not last five seconds after making his first shot; Doyle had confidence in his own ability. He knew, too, Bodie would be doing all the right things, keeping within Doyle's range, making himself as chancy a target as he knew how. But -- there was always the risk --

All his instincts rose up in revolt. He should have pressed Bodie to think harder before this muddle-headed hero's way out -- with a punch on the jaw to highlight his argument, if need be. Now Bodie was out there alone, his frail skin and bone relentlessly exposed to a sniper's bullet which could come from any direction.

Damn Bodie anyway. Little bolts of tension assaulted Doyle from everywhere, raising the hairs on his neck, his scalp prickling. I shouldn't have laughed at him...

It was his last thought before it all began.

Bodie was feeling the dawn chill, but he felt marvellously awake, every sense clear and alert. He and Doyle, together; they could take anybody. A whole bloody battalion. He paced around, dodging erratically, waiting for some sight, some movement that would give him warning. He'd have to be quite sure, 100%. It wouldn't look too good if CI5 caused the death of some innocent poacher or estate worker out for an innocuous stroll and attracted by the weird sight of Bodie's shady pre-dawn dance in and around the trees....

There was a sudden movement, a cracking of twigs. He whirled and crouched, ready for a split second assessment, and to fire if need be.

A figure detached itself from the opposing trees, and made its leisurely way towards his colleague. "Hello, Bodie."

It was such an anti-climax. Released from caution, Bodie shook his head, an amused crinkle passing over his lips as he began to rise.

"Christ, Don. Don't tell me Cowley's sending more reinforcements. At this rate, maybe the whole of CI5 will be here on bodyguard duty by sunrise." The older man really must care, he thought to himself; somewhere behind that granite exterior maybe there beat a heart of pure --

Hilliard's face was puzzling him --

stone --

Too late, far too late, Bodie saw the trap; the cold-eyed resolution akin to fanaticism in the eyes of the other CI5 agent as he fired his gun.

A searing, shattering pain rent through Bodie and he was flung backwards, astonished to find his legs folding under him and the ground smacking into his head. Time blinked out.

Doyle had shot his man with deadly accurate aim. He had grasped the run of things far quicker than his partner, but still too late. At the moment Doyle's bullet impacted with his guts, Hilliard's own gun had gone off, a reflex spasm of his trigger finger, spraying off an aimlessly lethal round of bullets. One had taken Bodie...

Hilliard lay twitching and groaning. Doyle's bullet had been planned for his groin. He hoped, abstractly, he hadn't severed the main femoral artery; he wanted Hilliard to go right on living. For now.

He spared Hilliard one more glance. Just one; to ensure he was still alive and not likely to move again until the cavalry arrived. Then he never wanted to have to look at him again.

Bodie lay sprawled out much as Doyle had earlier, blackly, fantasized. Dropping to his knees beside Bodie, Doyle worked quickly. He slit Bodie's shirt with firm hands that barely shook at all, parting it to reveal the bullet wound in his shoulder, noting with relief that it didn't look too serious. He pressed a sterile pad from the medical kit in his bag over it and packed wadding over that, finally fastening Bodie's jacket tightly across it all to keep it secure even if Bodie moved while he was gone. He had one last check on Bodie's breathing before turning him into the recovery position. A final glance around; then he ran for the edge of the wood, scrabbling over the wall and dropping down near his concealed bike.

It took him three minutes to reach the phone; he waited just long enough to hear his urgent request for an ambulance acknowledged, then slammed down the receiver and revved his bike back into action, leaning forward in a grim crouch and tearing along the deserted country lanes leaving a trail of exhaust smoke. All was just as he'd left it.

He went once more to the fallen body of his mate, and knelt by his side. Still out cold. Worried, Doyle checked him carefully, but he was breathing without difficulty. Must have banged his head as he fell, he decided, and with that thought Doyle studied him, with almost dispassionate interest; he swept the sweat-darkened hair -- funny, it was beginning to curl in the dewy air, off Bodie's marble-white forehead. Unlike his vision, the dark eyes were closed; the eggshell pallor of the lids accentuated by the strange dawn light, blue shadows around the hollows there. His face looked cynical, even cruel. Doyle had no illusions about Bodie. No one had. He was a hard, determined man, capable of violence, even sadism if the occasion looked right for it. But Ray Doyle knew Bodie better than anyone in the world did. Inside Bodie's iron-hard shell lived something else, something that had been tentatively offered to Doyle. Who had rejected it, only hours before.

He continued his exploration, down to the thin mouth that barely moved sometimes when he spoke, let some dry comment out of it that would amuse or infuriate. Down to the strong neck, the powerful line of the shoulders.

Doyle took a deep, hissing breath. Where was the bloody ambulance? Bodie was lucky to be alive at all. Anger rose in him, a monstrous anger directed right at Bodie for his ruinous misjudgment. Usually suspicious and hard to win, this time his instincts had let him down. Bodie sighed, a whisper of warm breath that touched Doyle's hand.

"Bodie," said Doyle, aloud.

Bodie did not stir, could not be reached.

Doyle lowered his head. "*Bodie*," he whispered.

Nothing moved.

"*Bodie!*"

The single, anguished cry, hurled out with all the despairing force at Doyle's command, rent the still air and the silence of a pre-dawn forest.

It reached a pair of alert ears, not far off.

"Faster," rapped out Cowley.

Cowley, sharp-eyed, gazed piercingly at his surly young operative who was lounging against the wall, arms folded, one off-white sneakered foot resting on his other calf.

"There's something wrong with your attitude, 4.5."

Doyle emitted a sigh and shifted, his eyes pointedly fixed on a point just past his chief. Normally intolerant of the slightest hint of insubordination, on this occasion, Cowley, who could see that there was something very wrong, was trying very hard to understand. But Doyle was fast outlasting his patience.

"Is it Armstrong? Are you finding it difficult to work with him?"

Doyle looked at him then, his eyes wide. The last thing he wanted to do was give Cowley the impression he was sulky and off-key because he wasn't working with Bodie.

"Armstrong's a good man. We work well together. Don't we, sir?" he said, challengingly.

Cowley acknowledged it; yes, Doyle and the new laddie he'd been teamed with were efficient and capable together, no clash of personality. But there was something missing; that extra, almost telepathic interaction he had come to depend on from Doyle and his partner. He would not, for example, happily risk sending 4.5 and 4.2 into the sort of top-flight operation he had always reserved for Bodie and Doyle.

No sense hoping this tough independent man would confide in him, pour out his troubles to Cowley's practical ear. Doyle was far too remote, too self-contained for that; he was way out in a place Cowley couldn't reach. Bodie too. It couldn't be good for the pair of them. You could only take the old tenet of 'if you never care, you never get hurt' so far before the last vestige of feeling, the ability to *let* oneself feel, died; crushed beneath the years of automatic repression.

"No more time to discuss the matter," he said brusquely, "if you could call it a discussion, given this incommunicative mood you seem to be in. 3.7 leaves the hospital today; he is lucky it wasn't much worse than a simple shoulder wound. He tells me you haven't been to see him?" He looked up suddenly, to catch Doyle's defiant-urchin expression.

"3.7 is -- was -- my working partner," said Doyle steadily. "Nothing in the rules says I have to spend my off-duty time with him."

"Oh indeed not," agreed Cowley, quietly. "Let me see -- tomorrow he leaves for one month's rehabilitation and refresher course -- three weeks if he keeps his nose to the ground. Then he'll be back on the job. Perhaps you'll revive when we get you two teamed again."

He saw with satisfaction that Doyle had come away from the wall at last, in more senses than one. He moved nearer Cowley, his eyes urgent.

"Is that -- necessary, sir?"

"How do you mean, Doyle?" Cowley regarded him with apparently total puzzlement.

"Armstrong and I work okay," repeated Doyle in a monotone. "After four weeks, Bodie and I'd need time to readjust. Why not just keep 4.2 and me together and find someone else for Bodie?"

Find someone else for Bodie. Got you, Cowley considered, with some satisfaction but no triumph. In this battle for further insight into Doyle's unease of the last week, at last he'd forced Doyle to play his hand. He replied, solemn and absolutely noncommittal:

"We can certainly consider that, yes, 4.5."

Find someone else for Bodie. For some reason Cowley couldn't get the phrase out of his head.

Doyle was knocked off course by his chief's response. He'd braced himself to meet a far more explicit reaction, and an uncomfortable inquisition. There was more to the old man than met the eye. Whatever you threw at him he was always one step ahead.

Still, Doyle mused grimly as he loped his way along the dusty streets, if Cowley knew what this was all about he was not just one jump ahead, but several, since Doyle himself had only a nebulous, clouded idea of what was wrong between him and Bodie. And still less of what to do to put it right.

His path led him into a bar and then, unable to settle, into another. In the third, he saw a face he knew, Freya Anstee, a dark and vivacious girl who worked in one of the other service units and who had seen quite a lot of Bodie at one time. Before the unknown Diane, anyway. Tonight, however, she was with a tow-headed public-school type in a blazer. She had noticed him. When the Eton vet disappeared into the Gents she came over to where Doyle sat nursing his pint.

"Hello, Ray," she said, smiling.

Her perfume hit him like an aromatic cushion. He acknowledged her with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

"How's Bodie?" she continued as he had known she inevitably would. "I heard he stopped a bullet a while back." Her eyes were wide and troubled.

"Bodie's fine. Back to his former perfection of figure. I see you've traded him in for a new model, in any case." He jerked an ironic glance, dead-eyed, towards the Gents.

"Not my doing," she said quietly. "I'd have him back tomorrow."

"Well, that's CI5 for you, love. They don't allow emotional involvement. It's written on every pay cheque and you have to sign to say you haven't committed it before they release the cash."

He was probably a little drunk, he decided. He stared at her provocatively, up and down. Bodie had known that pretty little body.

"I see," she said after a moment. He was making her uneasy tonight, this friend of Bodie's. "Well, all the best, Ray. And to Bodie."

As he supposed he had known he would, he ended up at Bodie's flat. He rang at the door, in code.

Bodie appeared. White-faced, sleek and unsmiling, he confronted Doyle. Doyle faced him out. When Bodie spoke, it was with heavy sarcasm.

"Don't I know you from somewhere? Wait a moment -- give me time...begins with a D, am I right?"

Without replying Doyle pushed past him and went in. Bodie, who wasn't yet fit, followed him. "I wasn't expecting *flowers*, Doyle. Don't worry about it."

"I wasn't," returned Doyle, flinging himself into one of Bodie's comfortable armchairs. He looked up. Their gazes met; moody street-wise urchin with controlled, dangerous fighter, in deadlock of a war in which neither clearly knew the areas of contention.

"Well, it's really nice to see you again," said Bodie ironically. "Make yourself at home. Have a drink."

"Coffee," said Doyle briefly.

"I -- see." Bodie, immaculate and spruce now that he had showered a week in hospital off himself, surveyed his dishevelled partner from head to foot, taking in the creased jeans, the dusty sneakers, the sweat patches under the arms of the T-shirt. "Yeah, coffee it had better be," he

drawled.

While he was in the kitchen, the doorbell rang. With a scramble and a bound, Doyle was there, slamming shut the communicating door behind him. It was a girl, blonde, wide-eyed with surprise. He regarded her coolly, blocking the entrance.

"Yes?"

"Is Bodie in? The hospital said he'd been discharged."

"He's not allowed visitors."

She tried to make sense of this. "But I visited him in the hospital yesterday -- and now they've let him home --"

"Yeah, well, he's had a bit of a relapse. Nothing to worry about, love. But absolutely no visitors. He mustn't be," said Doyle wickedly, "excited."

"Look, who *are* you?"

"Private nurse," Doyle told her laconically, leaning on the doorpost and enjoying the expressions of disbelief, doubt and distrust that flickered over her face as she surveyed his scruffy attire and languid posture. "The Equal Opportunities Act opened up the way for a whole lot of us."

She made up her mind. "I'll just see him for a moment. I won't disturb him."

She made a move. Doyle was upright in a second; nothing sloppy or casual about him any more as he barred the door, and his voice and eyes were hard:

"Sorry, love. Try again some time."

Doyle kicked the door shut, locked and bolted it, and sauntered back into the living room, hands in pockets. Bodie was off-loading mugs of coffee.

"Who was it?"

"Some girl. I got rid of her." He picked up his coffee, tasted it, made a face. "Too strong, this."

Bodie was outraged. "*You did what?*" he said, with dangerous quiet.

"You heard." He met his partner's angry, belligerent expression without flinching.

"Bloody hell, Doyle," said Bodie, tight-lipped. "What are you playing at?"

Doyle grinned at him, with feline savagery. "Ah c'mon now, Bodie. Two old mates like us -- your first day out of nick, grand reunion, you're off again tomorrow -- s'natural we'd want an

evening alone together."

"How drunk *are* you?" demanded Bodie, after a pause.

Doyle thought about it. "Just right." He gave Bodie a big, beaming smile, drained the rest of his coffee and leant back, hands behind his head. He was here to stay.

Bodie resigned himself to it. He was even pleased by it -- not that he'd show it, any more than he'd given Doyle any hint of his puzzlement and hurt that Doyle hadn't come within a mile of him when he'd been sweating it out in hospital. They began to relax, more into the old pattern, a quiet exchange of news, gossip, opinions. They kept strictly off the personal. After a while Doyle decided he was ready for another drink. Bodie had one too.

Doyle eyed it. "Are you supposed to be on alcohol?" It was the first reference, however oblique, he had made to Bodie's week-old injury.

"Sure," Bodie answered easily, "I'm off drugs now." Doyle had breached the wall; he supposed he was also freed from constraint, and so he continued, "I hear you made Hilliard less of a man." Nasty what Doyle had done to Hilliard.

Doyle took a gulp of whisky. "He never was a man to start with," he said, with deep, controlled violence. "More of a rat."

Bodie began vaguely to sense the source of the immediate problem. "Good job I had you with me, mate. If --"

Doyle cut him off, getting up and going for the whisky bottle. "Oh yeah. Fine bloody job I made of protecting you, didn't I? A whole CI5 agent all to yourself delegated full-time to your protection, and you fucking well end up with a bullet *that much* away from your bloody heart...."

"Look, Ray...."

Doyle rounded on him, spilling some of the whisky suspended over his glass.

"And you're not much better! Inside -- *I warned you* Cowley said it might be inside, and what happens?" He positively hurled the words out at Bodie standing narrow-eyed and cool. "A prime suspect turns up in the right place at the right time waving a gun around, and what do you do? You only *welcome* him, that's all; spread your arms and present him with a perfect target area -- " He paused for breath; a wild dramatic figure waving a dripping bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, eyes staring out in blazing anger.

Mindful of his carpet, Bodie stepped over to rescue the bottle. Doyle wouldn't let go of it. They both hung on, forgetting it, staring at each other.

"Okay," said Bodie at last, "I made a mistake. Let's cool down." He finally wrenched the bottle from Doyle's unheeding grasp, set it down, took the glass too.

Doyle stayed where he was, staring at Bodie's silk shirt. "Lemme see it."

"What?" Bodie followed Doyle's eyes, understood. Doyle was a little insane tonight. Maybe he was, too. Takes one to know one. They had to be insane, in this job.

Without speaking, he began to unbutton the shirt one-handed -- the left arm was still stiff. Impatient, Doyle brushed his hand aside and did it for him, jerking the buttons free of the holes in a way that made Bodie wince for the safety of the fragile material, pulling the shirt down and away to bare Bodie's left shoulder. As Bodie's unhurried breath touched his face, Doyle stared at the smooth skin, raking the curve of the shoulder, the delicate wing of the jutting collarbone, and between them, the rough purple-black puckering where Bodie's flesh had cleaved, and painfully reknit. Bodie just stood in Doyle's hands, unmoving, instinctively knowing to allow him whatever he wanted; needed. He didn't even move when Doyle, his face set and absorbed, traced a steady finger around the very edge of the ugly scabbed wound.

Finally Doyle let him go, turned away. "My fault," he muttered.

"Yours? Nah, mate," said Bodie, determinedly cheerful as he shrugged his shirt back on. "Mine, like you said. I should've smelt a rat when Hilliard sprouted from the shrubbery."

"Yeah. You should," said Doyle, his angelic devil's features arranged in a muzzy scowl. "But when you didn't in your sweet naive trusting way, then I should have blasted his hand off so fast his fucking gun was blown away." He paced around the room, angry and restless.

Bodie took after Doyle, brought him back, pushed him onto the settee and sat down beside him, leaning forward to pour more whisky. In this mood Doyle would be better off asleep; he seemed locked in a cycle of maudlin self-deprecation, brought on, Bodie decided reasonably, by alcohol and a partly-justified sense of failure. He'd have one more try to talk him out of it; then it would just have to be a case of getting more whisky down him until he dropped.

"Look, mate," he said firmly, "I'm happy to settle for the compromise. Okay? I'm not dead, thanks to you, and Hilliard's had his just rewards for being a bent little bastard. Cowley's happy because I got my evidence safely down for the Hess trial and the whole caboodle were convicted and locked safely away last week. I'm happy because I'm still alive and still beautiful, and you can be happy because in three weeks when I get this damn shoulder loosened up I'll be back with you all ready to take on the rough and tough of the streets again, okay?"

It was a long speech for Bodie, who tended to favour the clipped laconic approach. Doyle stared at him, still frowning. Bodie couldn't tell whether he'd taken any of it in or not. He smiled again, thumped Doyle on the arm, and got up to draw the curtains -- it had gone dark, they'd been talking so long -- shutting the black night out. He went around fixing the lamps to make a nice soft glow; maybe the atmosphere would mellow Doyle up a bit. When he returned, he sat next to the hunched form of his partner again; in case Doyle started waving the bottle round again, he told himself.

"Have another drink, mate," he said amiably, and passed him his glass. Doyle took it but didn't drink, staring ahead in a moody silence, Bodie wondering what to do; how to put things right. Even if he'd known what to say, he wasn't sure he could express it. He too sat in silence.

Doyle broke it. "You remember what we were talking about? Before Hilliard broke cover?"

"Yeah," said Bodie, tight-lipped, making no pretense of amnesia. He remembered. Often.

"You really make it with blokes?"

Bodie looked at him. There was a sort of fascinated revulsion on his partner's pale face; the flawed cheekbone more pronounced than usual. Revulsion was the word that mattered. He forced a thin smile.

"Yeah well, not that often. Not lately, anyhow."

"Who with?"

It really seemed to be bugging Doyle. His glass was twirling endlessly in his hands, his lips were tight, and his stormy eyes would not meet Bodie's.

Bodie turned truculent, his nostrils flared. "No-one you know," he said in a monotone.

"*Why?* Why do you do it?"

"Because I sometimes want to!" yelled Bodie, his patience at an end. "Keep your bloody nose out Doyle, if it offends you so much."

Doyle ignored him, pressing. "Do you like them?"

Bodie swung his head around, his pursed lips emitting a single, growled word, "What?"

"Do you *like* them? Or is it just a quick sordid grope? In the lavs maybe, doing the cottages?"

The words came tumbling out of Doyle. Bodie, angry and miserable, reached out to grab his wrist. Doyle tried to jerk it away, but Bodie hung on.

"No. It's not like that. Look, I'm sorry I ever told you. Just forget it."

"How can I forget it?" demanded Doyle. "How can I?"

"Why does it make a difference? What's it to you?" asked Bodie in return; though he thought he already knew, and that he could not, morally, bring that knowledge to Doyle, hurt and embittered him more than anything he had ever felt. Doyle had to realise it himself, if he was to know at all.

"Just tell me who," Doyle said, white-faced. "Who you fancy in CI5?"

"In CI5?" Bodie, on this moving narrow path of unpredictable dangers, was diverted. "Cowley," he said, grinning to avert the peril.

"Don't play games," Doyle hurled at him.

Bodie kept grinning, though there wasn't any humour in him; made his voice light and easy. "Christ, Doyle, I like your interrogation technique. They'd have you in the KGB. No wonder you get such good results. You're in the right job, mate."

He held on to Doyle, eventually forcing him to look, his puzzled desperate eyes meeting Bodie's dark half-smiling ones, until he felt Doyle relax, the rock-hard tendons in his wrist gradually loosening.

"You're overreacting," said Bodie, softly.

Doyle took his hand away, buried his palms hard into his eyes. "Is it Murph?" he said, muffled.

"Murph?" Bodie laughed quietly, to conceal his surprise. "Murph's okay. But I'm not daft enough to get mixed up with him that way."

Funny that Doyle should have picked on Murph. Bodie had often traced the lean body of his colleague with a lazy eye, and wondered what it would be like to make it with Murph. Hard and violent, probably; the way he liked it. The only way he liked it, with men. Bodie knew his man too, knew the signs to look for, the half-signals of cautious interest; Murph wouldn't say no. But Murph was a professional too; he knew the risks; and Murph hadn't asked.

Bodie needed to be asked. Always.

He eyed Ray Doyle again, the pale tough-guy who guarded his back in fights. Two chances. He could turn this aside with equal belligerence and fast talk to match and counterpoint Doyle's, and it would pass off, go away as if it had never existed; it was easy, he'd done it before when Doyle was in some emotional trouble Bodie didn't want to get involved in, just make sure it got smoothed over. So had Doyle, when Bodie was the one with the unresolved inner unease. No commitment -- that meant no real help; just be there to be shouted at, aid the patching over until one's own inner responses recovered from whatever battering they had taken and took over.

This was different. For one thing, he was already involved. It was a mutual problem.

The other choice meant giving more of himself than he'd ever allowed anyone to have; and even though the person might be right, he wasn't sure the time was. Doyle wouldn't ask, Bodie thought angrily to himself; he's giving out all the signs, making all the talk, he's *fishing*. Is it possible that he doesn't know what he's doing? That he's still deluding himself about the whole thing, truly believes that what he's feeling is just shock that his partner's macho image suddenly took a self-confessed dent a week ago? Or is he just resentful, can't take the discovery that he's not alone any more and doesn't want to try to be? All that hard-won independence, it was gone. For them both.

Maybe -- they might as well face up to it --

He waited, irresolute, half-turned on the settee to face Doyle, his frowning dark gaze unconsciously raking him up and down, trying to think. He was waiting, not for Doyle to move, having assessed that was impossible, but for some decision to come from within himself. Just as he had reached it, Doyle took matters out of his hands.

He smiled, rakishly, and reached out to touch Bodie's chest. "Come on then. You'd better show me."

His words were very slightly slurred. Bodie found himself saying stupidly, "Show you what?"

"Show me what to do," said Doyle impatiently, as if the whole turmoil and indecision had taken place in Bodie's imagination alone. He looked relaxed and very sweet-tempered. "*I* don't know, do I? Not my scene, before. Told you that." His hand went to his belt; he began to slide it free of the buckle.

Bodie paused. "Doyle --" he began in an annoying, patronising tone, as if Doyle was proposing some outlandish, totally irresponsible plan of action in the face of a situation that needed careful thought; but Doyle cut him off again, struggling out of his T-shirt:

"Can't have you wasting it all on Murph."

So.... He hadn't had to ask....

The moon was here, in his hands, and he could not make it real. His heart was jolting and his breath was tight and his throat, and it was very tempting to take the line of least resistance, simply to reach out.... His eye caught the whisky bottle, half-empty on the table, and his mind made rapid calculations even as his senses impatiently urged the total abandonment of caution -- maybe four, five singles before he arrived, two since --

He drew back from Doyle, grinning with difficulty. "Not while you're drunk, sweetheart," he managed, between a shaky laugh and a gasp. "Come on -- sleep it off, eh sunshine?"

He reached forward to pull his partner to his feet, meaning to put him to bed; Doyle drunk usually offered little resistance. Instead, a steely hand fended him off, and he gazed, startled, down into the unshadowed, wide-awake eyes of Ray Doyle.

"I'm not drunk, Bodie," he said clearly. "Don't play so hard to get."

The hand on Bodie's turned from resistance into a caress, running up Bodie's arm; steadily he drew Bodie down. He was warm and pleasant to the touch. Bodie had the sudden, last minute thought that maybe this was kind of a mad thing to do. But it was already too late; Doyle had called his bluff and changed the run of things at a stroke. Already, in the seconds that had passed, he was no longer just another bloke, not just a mate who meant more to him than some because he was Bodie's working partner, the one he had learnt to entrust his life to; with one move he had

become -- a lover. Someone Bodie had to discover anew, in a totally different light from the one he was familiar with; he had to find how he felt and how he tasted and how he liked to be touched, what gave him pleasure....

It was a minefield, full of traps.

For a moment, he panicked, but as Doyle, lost in his own thoughts, his own purpose, bore him to the ground, his doubts swept away. He felt a strange sensation in his guts, a sweet melting tenderness that Doyle should want to do this; the alert tingling of arousal, and something more: a release that was almost mystical; he didn't have to fight any more. He was aware of the dim lights to one side of him, the softness of the carpet beneath him, the constriction of his clothes, the warm heavy body covering him, and something else, more directly classifiable --

"Be careful," he said, again half-laughing because at last it had come right for them, "I just got put together courtesy of the NHS -- "

Doyle withdrew instantly, rolling off him, lying there on the white carpet staring up at Bodie, eyes unfathomable, very passive, his clothing disarranged. It made an attractive picture. Bodie finished undressing him, kneeling over him carefully, half afraid to touch, drawing clothes away with infinite care as if any moment Doyle might scare like an ungentled animal.

"Come on, Bodie," whispered Doyle, watching him through half-closed eyes. "Come on. Don't be so bloody half-hearted. Do it...."

Doyle didn't seem to have any hang-ups about being naked under Bodie's scrutiny. He simply waited, in a suspension of calm, for whatever Bodie wanted to do next. It was Bodie who was suddenly full of inhibitions. Bodie drew a shaky hand through his own hair, as he stared down at his partner. He was -- beautiful, bare but for one silver identity bracelet, a silver chain resting against the hollows of his throat. Bodie stared at the polished sheen of skin stretched over the symmetry of bone; the silky hair of chest, arm, groin; the tight elegant line of his pose a sculptor's dream. Or Bodie's. He was having trouble dealing with all of this; too many sensations crowding him all at once. Doyle, watching him, saw the problem. He removed his arm from where he had propped it behind his head, and reached out to undo Bodie's shirt, for the second time in less than an hour.

"I thought you knew how to set about all this," he said in a voice that was only slightly ragged. "Me, it's a first. But I'd lay ten to one that at least we *both* have to have our clothes off...."

Bodie, trained to overlook pain, was only slightly awkward because of the injured shoulder. Carefully, without finesse, because he was too bemused for a clever campaign, he just let his body sink onto Doyle's, felt the meeting of soft-hard flesh, warm skin on skin; he pressed himself gently into Doyle, all Doyle's mysterious, sweet sensuality there to receive him and make him welcome. Astounded, he buried his mouth in Doyle's hair and squeezed his eyes shut, tight, tighter....

Through the gentle hazy throb of receding pleasure, he felt Doyle pushing at him -- "Get off,

you're squashing me --" Sighing, he rolled over and glanced at Doyle, seeing the glistening stickiness on Doyle's lower belly and its reflection on his own. He made a little, contented sound and gave Doyle's sweat-streaked face a Bodie grin.

"How long?" gasped Doyle, his breath scarcely yet back to normal, stretching his cramped limbs. Bodie's pleasantly solid body weighed a ton -- not that he'd noticed, at the time.

"Dunno, wasn't timing it." Bodie was bursting with happiness and triumph, and trying not to show it. But the irrepressible curve of his lips, the unfamiliar spark of delight in the cool, dark eyes gave it all away.

"I meant, how long till the next time?"

Bodie's eyes made a long meaningful wander over the damp and obviously sated condition of their relaxed bodies. "Give me a chance, mate," he murmured, "Can't get enough of me already, can you?" He gave Doyle a smug, cocky grin.

Doyle gave him a quelling look, and continued, "Not much to that, was there? There's gotta be more to it than that."

"Not much...?" Bodie thought it had been the most delightful, uncomplicated sweetest pleasure he had ever experienced in the whole of his turbulent life; from the slow tense start, through the sudden eased-into discovery of a gentle slick rhythm, to the sweet, astonishing bursts of sharp melting pleasure that had taken them both by surprise.... "Put it this way, mate," he said casually, considering his simile, "you were like suddenly making the perfect rallying circuit -- after a hell of a lot of trial runs."

Doyle's lips quirked, at last, into a smile; and he glanced over at his mate lounging all over the floor. "Yeah...but there's more. We gotta try the rest." Doyle the ex-copper was a thorough man.

"Any time you're ready," said Bodie, tipping his head back on the soft carpet. He looked as if he were already half-asleep.

Doyle reached out, covered Bodie's heart with his hand. Its beat was slowing from the fast pace he had felt thudding touchingly against his own chest; as he held his hand there it began to pick up speed again. Bodie's eyes flicked open.

"Try me," said Ray Doyle; and a slow smile of invitation began to curve his lips as he settled back once more and waited for Bodie to come to him.

This time, Bodie knew what he was doing, and he was no longer shy. Freed from the dazed urgency of his own need, he could put it to one side and seek out Doyle's. He pursued Doyle's pleasure single-mindedly, with all the skill he knew -- or, fired on by this new, fragile love, could improvise. He kissed Doyle's mouth softly; one hand twining gently in the curly tangle of Doyle's hair; then fiercer, suddenly assaulting him with lips, tongue and teeth, searching the inner softness of his mouth; then gently once more, soothing the tender abused flesh with

penitent licks. He caressed Doyle's skin with his fingertips, gentle as a bird; and rubbed his tongue slowly around Doyle's nipples, letting his teeth close gently there, feeling Doyle shiver. He talked to him, low, telling him he was beautiful here, and here; yes, he was beautiful; that it was arousing to touch him like this; it was exciting for Bodie to do this to him. He laid a delicate trail with his mouth along the tender skin of Doyle's flat belly, to his hip bones; back again to the soft relaxed flesh of his parted thighs, totally absorbed in the wonder of it all, at Doyle's allowing him to do this.

"Bodie...."

"Hmm...?"

"Do you think -- Cowley's -- watching us?" gasped Doyle, his eyes on the ceiling.

"How?"

"Concealed camera -- in the room --"

"Well, if he is --" Bodie blew, gently, on Doyle's genitals, watched him quiver, admiringly -- "he'd have to be enjoying it."

As his mouth took Doyle in, drew him in, Doyle gave a sigh, his lashes wavering, then falling shut; and his hands moved to hold Bodie's head close to him, his fingers making gentle wanderings in the feathery dark hair.

Bodie was asleep. He'd dropped quite suddenly, in the end. Of course; he was only a matter of hours away from the hospital. Mind you, he'd seemed to have plenty of energy when he'd needed it. Bodie was tough; he'd have taken no harm from this.

No physical harm. Ray Doyle, wide awake and totally sobered, every muscle in his body relaxed, contented and at peace, was unable to bring the same tranquillity to his mind. After the hesitant start, it had all seemed to be so simple for Bodie; having made his choice he seemed so sure of what he wanted and how to deal with it. He watched Bodie sleep, there on the floor in the low-lit room, all the hard lines of his aggressive fighter's face softened. Killing the threatening burst of sentimentality before it got half-way, he reached out and touched his partner's skin; cool. Doyle got to his feet, quietly went through to the bedroom, pulled a blanket from the pristine bed. He draped it over Bodie, who didn't move. Bodie, whose last waking words had been 'I love you'.

Or would have been. Doyle had clamped his hand over Bodie's treacherous mouth, cutting the words off. "Don't say it," he had said, savagely. "Don't ever say it...."

It was getting chilly in the room; the central heating must have switched off. He checked his watch -- 0325. Six hours. From the scattered heaps of clothing he extracted his T-shirt and pants, put them on, padded into the bedroom for another blanket, switched off the last lights and settled down on the sofa, listening to Bodie breathe deep and regular.

0630. Far-off, the doorbell rang. Doyle cursed dozily and shrugged the blanket further over his face. But, with the anaesthetic of sleep broken, slowly various little discomforts began to impinge themselves on his dawning consciousness. Such as, a) he was cold, deep-through shivery cold under a too-thin covering; b) he was lying on something hard and unyielding in the wrong places; c) he needed desperately to pee and d) the doorbell was still ringing.

Groaning, he pushed himself off the settee, nearly fell over the sleeping form of his partner recumbent on the floor, pulled on his jeans and walked soft-footed to the front door.

He applied himself to the small spy-hole. In miniature and terrifyingly distorted stood a dapper man in a beige raincoat, his hugely looming eye fixed, it seemed, unerringly on Doyle.

"Just a minute, sir," called Doyle, now fully awake and not finding it a comfortable sensation, pelting off before he could hear Cowley's reply. He kicked at Bodie, who still hadn't stirred; then bent down and shook him on the uninjured shoulder, hissing into his ear -- "Get up, Rip van Winkle, the old man's at the door--"

It wasn't the first time he had had to wake Bodie up. Bodie, as always, made some indistinguishable noises deep in his throat, rolled over and looked up. He focused on Doyle's face, and without warning his sleepy features were lit by a sweet, dazzling smile.

It both melted and terrified Doyle. He grabbed at the reaction he could deal with. "For godsake get up Bodie," he snarled, jerking himself away, and went to open the door.

Cowley, neat as a pin and unnervingly clear-headed, eyed his two top operatives, who were half upright, distinctly unkempt and bleary-eyed, dressed -- or rather covered by -- an assortment of unwashed clothes, with a decidedly unmellow eye. He refused a seat.

"Doyle," he said with marked asperity, "you are not off duty, as far as I know. You are supposed to be available to CI5 24 hours a day unless I give you notice otherwise, is that not so?"

Doyle agreed that it was so.

Cowley pressed on. "Then why, when I require your services, are you neither in your flat, nor have you an R/T, nor have you left word as to your presumed whereabouts? Why is this, Doyle?"

"Dunno, sir," said Doyle in a monotone, studying the floor morosely. There were times when Cowley was manageable and charmable -- about as manageable and charmable as a rattlesnake, true, but this morning he could see was not even one of those.

Cowley regarded him with his head on one side, and swung around to Bodie, whom he'd expected to catch grinning, and who wasn't. "And you, 3.7, have a great deal of money and time - - CI5 money and time -- invested in you: you are less than 24 hours out of a stay in hospital to patch up a wound that could have been avoided if you and 4.5 hadn't managed a series of bungles between you -- and you choose to spend your first night home carousing around --" His eyes

swept around the room expressively; the curtains still drawn, the bottle and the unwashed glasses, the tangle of bedding on the floor and the settee.

"Not carousing, sir," Bodie hastened to put in, with an injured look. "Just a quiet evening with Doyle here."

"Quiet, no doubt, but for the sound of bottle upon glass?" He made an exasperated gesture. "Really, 3.7, 4.5. The pair of you must shape up. CI5 is not some kind of joke circus with you its star clowns. A sloppy attitude often harbours sloppy thinking. You have ten minutes, Doyle, until your new partner arrives to collect you -- and I suggest you use the time to make yourself a little more presentable." Doyle was gone, the door to the living room, then the bathroom slamming. But not very hard.

Cowley didn't watch him go. "Bodie -- you have two hours to pack. A car will come for you at 8.30. I hope you are sensible enough to profit from your time with the army --"

"The -- army -- ?"

"Indeed," said Cowley, expressionless. "The army rehabilitation camp at Sapperton. An excellent place for the recovering of your skills; they're used to small gunshot wounds. A hard man, Major Jennings, old friend of mine. Don't let me down. I shall expect you back on duty when he sees fit to release you."

Doyle was in the shower. He had locked the door.

"Well?" bawled Bodie through the rush and splash of water. "Was he only pretending to be really annoyed? Or was he really annoyed?"

The water slowed to a trickle and stopped. From under the door leaked a trickle of soap-scented steam. "You heard him," came through the door. "I've got ten minutes --"

"Can I come in?"

Silence. Bodie was enraged. It was *his* bathroom, after all. He pondered a shoulder charge at the door; decided against it. His razor started up.

After a minute more Doyle emerged, one of Bodie's towels around his waist, his damp curling hair framing the marked angel's face. Bodie decided he looked good enough to eat. An irrepressible surge of happiness rose in him again, and he reached out as Doyle passed, caught him around the waist and hugged him.

Doyle struggled free, furious. "Try that again and you'll never lift another rifle," he stormed, and pushed past Bodie into the tidy bedroom. "Oh yeah," jeered Bodie, lightly. He propped himself against the door jamb and watched as Doyle rifled through his drawers at speed, pulling out clothes in a hurry; shirt, pants, socks. He finally wrenched open the wardrobe, hustling himself into a pair of Bodie's trousers and Bodie's second best leather jacket.

"Look, I know. Why don't you," said Bodie, loading on the sarcasm, "borrow some of my clothes?"

Doyle, satisfied with his dress, swung in front of the mirror and dragged a comb through his hair, with no noticeable result. As he came toward Bodie, the taller man blocked the door.

"Stop playing around," snapped Doyle.

Bodie only cocked him a cheeky grin, tantalisingly.

"I've only got one minute, Bodie --" Small chance, expecting Bodie to be reasonable.

Bodie launched himself at him. For one brief, outraged moment, Doyle found himself held tight against Bodie's chest, and Bodie's lips on his cheek. He sent Bodie, who wasn't expecting it, flying.

Bodie was winded, staring up from the bed where he'd landed. "Doyle --" he said, hurt.

"I haven't time, goddamnit." Doyle was retrieving his personal effects from the living room. Bodie appeared there, too.

"Last night --" All the euphoria had gone flat, minutes ago. Now it was turning sour, too.

Doyle fixed him with a cold glare. "I have to go and work. You remember work, don't you?" he said with sarky emphasis. "We haven't time to discuss it now."

"We have to discuss it," said Bodie. Now he too was deadly serious, watching his partner with cold dispassion. "You know that, Doyle."

Doyle whirled on him, at the edge of his patience and beyond. About to let fly, he looked at Bodie, saw the hurt, the confusion there, all coldly masked over because of pride. Heedless of the sudden blast on the doorbell, he dropped his face into his hands.

"I'm not sure I can handle this, Bodie," he said, muffled.

It was a breakthrough, after the blocks, dodgings and hedgings of the short morning. In two strides Bodie was there, pulling him close. Warm and reassuring and strong.

"Of course you can," he said very quietly, with absolute confidence. "You and me? Anything."

"Maybe you could. Me -- I'm not sure --"

For one precious moment he rested there, against Bodie, felt Bodie's strength, his courage; and believed for too short a time how easy it would be.... Then he pushed him away, but gently this time. The doorbell went again, a longer blast.

"Give me time to think," he said, only adding, "Look after yourself."

Bodie reached out, but Doyle was gone. Alone with his loss, Doyle's doubts shedding a deep weight of dark thoughts all around him, Bodie took a deep hard breath, his fists balled, staring at the space where Doyle had been; and then he turned slowly away to make the necessary arrangements for leaving. He was a professional.

It had been a bloody day. Despite what he had told Cowley, he found Armstrong hard going; basically still wet behind the ears, he was unnervingly conscious of Doyle's reputation, of Bodie-and-Doyle as a kind of CI5 legend; that he himself was maybe a poor second best. Potentially a good man, it was becoming obvious that this was the wrong pairing for him; constrained by the need to match up, he was stifling all his natural initiative and talent. Doyle reflected on the bad management they'd made of the day's assignment between them and winced, inwardly. He took a shower, poured himself a drink, and wondered what to do with the evening.

The telephone rang.

"Doyle."

"Hello." The low voice, 100 miles away, came across to his weary isolated ear like an answer to a prayer. Without replying, he picked up the phone, cradling the ear piece under his chin, and moved phone and drink to a table beside his armchair.

The delay put Bodie on edge, imagining all kinds of reasons. "Are you busy?"

"No," answered Doyle, settling back. "Just getting comfortable. You okay?"

"Apart from a ten mile run -- nine-tenths of it uphill, it's that sort of landscape down here -- an hour in the physio-room with a bullet-headed sadist, an afternoon discussing combat technique in a room full of blank-eyed textbook charlies -- yeah, fine. Why bother with the South of France; I'm going to book my next holiday in here. How was *your* day?"

Doyle laughed, with insane relief. Home. Bodie's ironic, plaintive tones brought him home. The gloom of the day lifted, and he grinned down the phone. "Similar. Surprised to hear Cowley'd packed you off to Sapperton."

"He thought," said Bodie bitterly, "I deserved a little treat to set me up again." There was a little pause. "Are *you* okay?"

Doyle knew what Bodie was asking. "Suppose so ... where are you ringing from?"

"Major's office."

"It's a bugged line," said Doyle, with confidence.

"I know that." Bodie's tone came across aggrieved.

Of course Bodie would know. Bodie was the army man. Doyle relaxed the tension he hadn't known he'd got and settled down to enjoy the call. Some bored operative would be listening to every word, meaning firstly that Bodie couldn't ask him questions he wasn't yet ready to answer, and secondly, that he saw the chance to put Bodie on the spot.

"The Major a soft touch then? Letting you use his phone. Bet you're his blue-eyed boy, him being a friend of the old man and all," he said with deliberate, happy provocation.

"Naughty Doyle," came Bodie's low sexy voice, reacting to it. "Nothing like that. The Major's a good and flexible man. He understands that I have to check in every day."

"What are the women like?"

There was another pause. Bodie's voice said: "You remember Sue Jones."

"How could I forget," said Doyle, with verve.

"-- thick blonde hair, big blue eyes, long legs ...?"

"Mmm...." Doyle approved, passionately.

"The women here are along the same lines --"

Doyle grinned, knowing his Bodie, and waited for it.

"... they have big blue lips, thick legs and short blonde moustaches," finished Bodie's grim filtered voice.

That was so -- Bodie. "Charming," said Doyle, through a chuckle.

This was fun.

"How's your baby Armstrong coming along? Looking after you okay, is he?"

Doyle read the real note of concern. Bodie, no less than he, knew the penalties of an out-of-tune team. "Fine. He's much, much better than you. He does everything I say without question."

"Must be good for your ego. Can't be too good for Cowley's nerves, though."

"How's the shoulder?"

"Surviving. Look, Doyle --"

"Yes," prompted Doyle, after enough time to swig at his Scotch, twice.

"Nothing. Have to go. See you mate."

Life stretched on. Three weeks. He used the time to think, only to reach the same old dead-end conclusions that led to more doubt. It didn't help to know that Bodie was having no such uncertainties. *One* of them had to do some thinking.

Bodie rang every day. They could say nothing; though they talked a lot. Doyle was glad of the breathing space; but there came a time when it paled. In the second week, Bodie asked Doyle to check his flat over; thereafter he found time to do so nearly every day, wandering round the rooms that smelt of Bodie, looking at the little things -- the talc he favoured, the treasured Hi-Fi - that made the place his.

One time he was there, he had to answer the door. It was a girl, blonde --

Recognition hit him much later than it did her. Trouble.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Detached duty, love."

"Look, I've not seen him, he doesn't answer the phone and the only time the door gets opened it's by you --"

He nodded understandingly. "Must be confusing --"

"I'm not joking!" she said angrily. "Look, who *are* you? And don't give me that nurse business, I knew that was phony from the start."

Her long blonde hair was dishevelled; pert little face angry with red pouting lips, she made quite a picture.

"No," he confessed, sadly. "I'm given to fantasizing. Tried to control it, but --"

"Be serious," she snapped. "I want to know -- *where is Bodie?*"

As requested, he became serious. "I told you, he's on detached duty. Out of reach. I tell you what, love, you give me your number, I'll tell him you're waiting to hear from him. That's all I can do."

He couldn't feel any pity for her, though he appreciated her situation. But she was pretty enough; there'd be other Bodies for her.

She stared past him into the empty flat, suspecting abduction, kidnapping, or worse. Doyle got the measure of it, laughed and came clean. "Not me, love. You read much pulp fiction, do you? I'm his partner. Ray Doyle. Bodie's quite safe, couldn't be safer, and I'll tell him you called."

Okay?"

The last piece of this frustrating puzzle slipped into place for her; she was relieved of worry. She knew Bodie was in a rather secretive job and was quietly impressed. "Ray Doyle -- of course, Bodie's mentioned you."

"Yeah well, that's all right then, isn't it?" He was keen to get rid of her now, but she was into introductions.

"Did he mention me? Diane Kingsley."

"Yes; yes, he did."

You and Ellie, me and Diane.... It seemed so long ago.

Those days were gone.

He badly needed to talk to Bodie.

He recounted the meeting to Bodie when he called that night, without elaboration and without emotion. Bodie sounded unmoved and practical. "Okay. I'll take care of it."

"She seemed pretty worried about you," Doyle felt bound to say.

"Yeah, well we'll introduce her to your Armstrong. He sounds as if he needs someone to worry about him. The old man keeping you busy, is he?"

"Too right. Not the big-time stuff. He's savin' that for you and me. Bodie --"

"Yeah?"

"They ever let you out of there? Been thinking -- I could drive down one night, tomorrow if I knock off early enough. Pick you up, have a pint or so, catch up on the news, and I could be back here in time for a few hours' kip."

130 miles each way. He'd worked it out.

"You'd do that?"

"I'm," Doyle told him, "missing your sweet face." He said it with the lightest touch of irony.

"Me too, sunshine," said Bodie, after a pause. "Be glad to see you."

Doyle swung the Capri into the visitors' reception area at the army camp at Sapperton; he didn't have to confront the DO because Bodie was there waiting for him, fit and trim in green army fatigues. He was pale-faced and serious; this came as something of a surprise to Doyle, who'd

half expected his mate to make some daft Bodie gesture and kiss him, or something.

"You can drive," he said, throwing him the keys and shunting over to the passenger seat. He'd been driving nearly all day; any more and he felt he'd freeze permanently into the position. Bodie swung the car off without speaking.

"How far?"

"Five minutes."

Doyle stared out at the pretty green lanes; quite a change not to be on the lookout for tails, villains, narks, punters and life nasties.

"Told Cowley I was coming."

"Why?"

"I had to, didn't I. Look funny if I *hadn't* told him, he wanted me on a job tonight, and I had to explain that actually I'd just nipped out to see you. As if a 300-mile drive in an evening was the most natural thing in the world --"

Bodie turned the car into the courtyard of an ivy-covered hotel. "So? How did you persuade him it was the most natural thing in the world?" He killed the engine and turned to look at Doyle.

"Told him I thought you were in a bit of a decline. Depressed."

Bodie thought about it as they got out. "How did he take it?"

"He gave me a bit of a strange look. Didn't make any objection, though."

"Lounge or bar?"

"Bar. I suppose I ought to grab a sandwich."

The bar turned out to be a mistake, since it was full of off-duty army in a mellow mood, who hailed Bodie with rapture, clearly having accepted him as one of the boys. With difficulty, he waved off offers of a drink and managed to establish himself and Doyle at a tiny table by the window. While Doyle got down to a cheese sandwich, Bodie addressed himself seriously to a pint, seemingly disinclined to open the batting.

The sergeants at the bar who had tried to absorb Bodie had broken into loud song. "You made some nice friends already," said Doyle sarcastically. He stuffed the last of his sandwich in and washed it down with a draught of cool lager. It tasted wonderful to his dry mouth after the long hot drive.

"Some of them are real jerks," said Bodie gloomily. He cocked his head up, suddenly unable to

believe his bad luck. "Like this one -- trouble...."

A stocky red-haired corporal was making his way towards them, with a mate. Doyle assessed them quickly -- no chance -- glanced once at Bodie and settled to wait.

The corporal had a recent bruise on his cheekbone. "Well, if it ain't Superman," he said in a sneery sort of way to his friend. "This 'ere bloke really fancies himself; thinks 'e's a real hot shot, 'e does. Comes from some fancy nark outfit, and he's been sent to us to learn 'ow to 'old a gun the right way up."

Bodie ignored him, saying smoothly to Doyle, "Red Adair here hasn't taken to me. It's because I outshoot him on the rifle range."

Doyle slid effortlessly into the groove, the old double act they used with villains, informers and jumped-up army boys alike. "That right, mate? What, every time?" He eyed Carrots up and down with dispassionate pity.

"No contest," Bodie confirmed sadly. "It's unnerving when you think the defence of our country's in the hands of a little sapper like him who only hits a stationary target six times out of ten."

"He'll be a bit confused when they start running around and shooting back, too," agreed Doyle.

Carrots had gone bright pink and all his freckles were standing out. It was unfortunate for him; but he ground his next words out in a reasonable facsimile of nonchalance. "See what I mean, Len? An' now it's *two* right smart alecks. He's found himself a boyfriend.... Whaddya reckon?"

"I reckon we take 'em outside. If they 'aven't wet theirselves," rumbled his mate. He looked heavy.

"Any time you're ready," promised Bodie in a voice Doyle recognised. It was Bodie's nonsense keen-to-get-on-with- some-action voice. He groaned, inwardly. He didn't feel in the mood for a fight.

He grabbed Bodie's arm, preventing him from getting up. "You can't hit him, Bodie," he said in a totally reasonable tone. "Wouldn't be fair. A little guy like him? Play straight, mate."

Bodie pulled himself free, stared narrow-eyed at Doyle. But after a second he changed his mind and relaxed. Doyle felt the situation instantly defuse.

"They're chicken," jeered the heavy.

"Cluck, cluck," parodied Carrots.

Bodie and Doyle, apparently forgetting all about them, carried on drinking as if nothing was happening; they looked around, or straight through the two men, they exchanged quiet small-

talk. They could keep up this kind of obliviousness forever.

After a while the corporals gave up, disappointed. Muttering, they disappeared back into the throng.

"For godsake Bodie," snapped Doyle when they were safely out of earshot. "I didn't drive 130 miles to get involved in a barroom brawl."

Bodie was deeply disappointed. "It would have been a glorious fight...just knew it would be."

"Nah. With those two? All over in ten seconds. Anyway, you can have it tomorrow. By yourself; it'll even up the odds a bit." He cast an exasperated glance around. The bar was even more crowded, absolutely milling with green-clad servicemen. "Look, we can't talk here. Let's go."

The lounge was quieter, but just as crowded, with a wedding party clad in morning suits clinking long-stemmed glasses.

"Could go for a drive around," suggested Bodie.

"I've seen enough of the inside of a car for one day. Go for a walk."

Bodie, unenthusiastic but unable to come up with anything better, complied. They walked through the hotel foyer, past the booking desk, through the door all covered with stickers -- Egon Ronay Just a Bite, LVs, Travellers Fare -- under the sign showing Vacancies --

Used to thinking together, getting the same ideas, they stopped as one and looked at each other.

"I'll fix it," said Bodie, through tight lips.

"An' I'll lock the car up. Your army pals look a peculiarly moralless lot."

"They don't have morals in the Army," Bodie tossed back over his shoulder. "Just motives."

The receptionist was not at first particularly enthusiastic about Bodie since he was dressed in army gear, but she was female, and by the time Doyle arrived the fatal Bodie charm was in full flow and she was checking the books.

"-- here he is now." He turned to watch Doyle's approach. "They can do you a single with shower, mate, that suit you?"

"Yeah." He signed the form the lady gave him, produced his wallet. "I'll pay now love, okay? Might have to check out early." Earlier than you know....

"Do you have any baggage?" she asked, pleasantly enough; though Doyle thought he heard something behind the question.

Bodie answered for him, easy. "He's just down for the evening, love. But there's a bit of a party going on -- he might need to sleep it off, first -- long drive back --" Leaning near her, he made a pint-in-hand gesture; and she smiled, involuntarily, at the captivating dark man who gave off such an aura of strength and virility.

The room was very pleasant, in blues and greens. There was a single bed with a fringed tapestry cover; a writing desk, an armchair. Doyle flung himself onto the bed and shut his eyes; hoping Bodie couldn't misinterpret the gesture. He really was very tired, and they didn't have much time.

It presented a very appealing picture to Bodie. Ray Doyle lying flat out in shirt sleeves rolled up to reveal his fine strong forearms, his eyes closed. He moved nearer the bed. "This better, mate?" he said in a low, warm voice.

Doyle answered without opening his eyes. "It ought to be. It's costing enough."

Dampened, Bodie said, "I'll pay --" and began to rummage in his pocket.

Doyle opened one eye.

"-- half," said Bodie firmly, and dropped some notes onto the table. He hovered.

"I'm knackered," Doyle said, with truth.

Bodie withdrew instantly, and dropped into the chair; every last trace of hopeful warmth disappeared behind a cool Bodie mask. "And you've got a headache; yeah, I know."

Doyle watched him, and said presently. "Look, we need to talk."

"So talk," deadlined Bodie. He pulled a sheaf of headed hotel writing paper off the desk and stared at it. "It's free, this. Don't forget to take it with you."

"Oh yeah, and where am I gonna put it? Down my sock?" returned Doyle, with sarcasm.

"Yeah. And don't forget the little bar of soap."

Deadlock again. Doyle had known it was going to be like this. He sighed. The bed was soft and comfortable; it would be much easier to go to sleep than try and thrash this out with his truculent partner.

"We shouldn't have done this."

"Done what?"

"You know what I mean," said Doyle, exasperated. If Bodie was going to hedge about with moody rhetoric all evening, it was all going to be a waste of time and money, and he'd be exhausted tomorrow with nothing resolved; he might just as well not have bothered.

He tried again, dropping right in the deep end. "All this -- it isn't us. It was all right the way it was. We were partners...."

Bodie's head had come up. He knew this was business, and now he wasn't mucking around. His nostrils were pinched and his lower lip jutted dangerously. "Yeah, and then it changed. You can't go back. You have to face up to it."

"It shouldn't have changed. No," said Doyle, thinking, "that's not right. We shouldn't have *let* it change."

"Couldn't help it, could we," muttered Bodie with morose fatalism. He met Doyle's eyes with angry defiance. "Look, Doyle; what do you think this is all about? Not one lousy act of sex. We could forget it if it were just that, write it off if that's what we wanted."

"I know that," said Doyle after a pause. Did Bodie think he was telling him anything new?

"Then why the guilty inquest?" demanded Bodie.

"I'm not feeling guilty," said Doyle impatiently. At Bodie's continuing frown he added, gently pushing, "'Lousy'...?"

Bodie's face changed abruptly, remembering.

"I thought I was the perfect circuit --" mocked Doyle. "Or was that just one of your post-coital lines?"

"No," said Bodie, with dark intensity. "It was true." He looked embarrassed, suddenly.

"What are we fighting about? I didn't come here to fight with you."

"You were bloody pugnacious enough the morning Cowley came!" Bodie's face twisted with angry remembrance.

"Yeah, I know. But I've had time to think since then."

"And what did that masterly mind of yours come up with?" jeered Bodie, being unkind because he was on edge; on a very short fuse right now.

"That we've got problems. Maybe we should have seen it coming and killed it. But we didn't; and we can't go back, as you say. So we have all sorts of things to sort out --"

Bodie took time to take it in.

"You mean you want to go on with it?"

"No choice," shrugged Doyle. "Can't get you out of my head."

Bodie's face was a picture. "Bloody hell, Doyle," said Bodie, expressionlessly. "I thought you were coming here to finish it."

"Finish it," said Doyle. "It's hardly started, mate."

Bodie took a long breath, held it; expelled it very slowly. He'd been knocked for six; now he was sailing over the boundary into unknown, possibly dangerous territory. He had the feeling that Doyle, from the look of him, had something up his sleeve. "Well, we're thinking together so far," he said cautiously.

"Yeah, well we'd better *stay* thinking together. I'll spell it out for you. If this is going to be one of your bloody reckless bursts of enthusiasm that you can't drop fast enough as soon as you've had a few goes, you can forget it. If all you've got in mind is a quick no-strings sexual romp, well, I can get sex in a helluva lot less complicated ways than from you, Bodie. Clear?"

"Clear...." agreed Bodie, not yet sure that it was.

"So you'd better lay it on the line, mate. You're an unscrupulous moralless bastard and lying comes natural to you, I know that. But you won't get away with it with me. I want the truth."

Doyle was propped up on one elbow, gazing at him. Bodie spread his hands, meekly. "You got it."

"Don't be facetious," Doyle said coldly. "I'm perfectly serious. Do you think we've got a chance, or not?"

"Chance of what?"

"Making it work. Think of it like a marriage. If you were thinking of getting married you'd bloody well have a good long look at the prospects first, wouldn't you?"

Bodie flicked him a cautious glance. Doyle didn't *look* as if he'd gone round the bend. "You mean, I should be thinking like I was considering marrying you?"

"That's it," Doyle approved. "There's a difference, of course. If we could do it officially, we'd have much more incentive to make it work. All those papers to sign; a certificate for the file, and two years of lawyers and a divorce to go through if we wanted out. We can't have any of that. What I want from you is some assurance that you've got that same incentive to put some work into it."

Bodie studied the carpet. "You want that kind of relationship? That much commitment?"

Doyle rephrased it for him, calmly. "I don't want all the complications that are going to turn up if we *don't* have that much commitment. C'mon now, Bodie. Think about it. Can we do it?"

Bodie opened his mouth, thought again, shut it. "Yes."

Doyle nodded, as if it was what he'd expected. "Yeah. I reckon we're a good match, you and me. Same age more or less, same interests; same job --"

"You *have* been doing some thinking," drawled Bodie. "Hurt, did it? You got it all worked out like Computa-Date."

Doyle's voice cut across him like ice. "I haven't finished. First off, I want a definite decision. Are we going into this or not?"

Bodie stared, winded, shaking his head in disbelief. Ray Doyle! He hesitated, had one final look around his doubts, then pushed them aside forever. He'd always known he'd be hooked one day. It happened to everyone in the end. He looked across at his partner, who was looking very serious, very correct. His features formed into a slow smirky smile and he wrinkled his nose. "Will you marry me, sunshine?"

Doyle was disgusted. "Be *serious*, Bodie."

"I," Bodie told him, crossing the space between them in one stride, "was." And he kissed him, pushed his mouth arrogantly onto the cool cupid's lips of his partner, taking one wrist in each hand and pinioning them above his head. He looked down. "I could eat you. I will, if you ask me nicely."

Doyle smiled up, a shy sensuous smile that lit up his face and melted Bodie inside. Then Doyle brought a knee up and jabbed it into his groin.

Bodie folded, gasping.

"Lay off, Bodie," said Doyle, lazily watching his partner's silent display of agony with an unmoved eye. He'd not aimed the blow to hurt. Much.

"I still haven't finished. I want to get it all straightened out so I can go home to bed. Listen mate. We'll have to tell Cowley."

All the writhing on the floor stilled. Bodie's head poked up. "Now I know you're off your bloody rocker," he said, with conviction.

"Look mate. We work for CI5 -- *CI5*," he said with emphasis. "Not down some fucking fairground where they don't give a damn who screws who so long as the roundabout keeps on turning -- Cowley *has* to know, don't you see that? We try to keep it one big furtive secret and we're hanging ourselves; laying CI5 open to ridicule, even blackmail. And I think we owe it to the old man to be honest."

"He'll kick us out," said Bodie flatly.

Doyle gave a fatalistic shrug. "Okay, so he kicks us out. We'll join the mercenaries. Think how much *harder* he'd have kicked us out then, if he'd found out from someone else. Which he would. Anyway," Doyle frowned, "I don't think he'll kick us out. He's an old sod, but I trust him. Why should he care? Long as we keep the team up to scratch. Which we will."

After a long moment, Bodie conceded the point. "But *you* can tell him," he said glumly. "Preferably when I'm a long way clear."

"No, it'll come better from you." At Bodie's lifted eyebrow, Doyle elucidated: "He knows *you're* insane. Less of a shock. And he's got a soft spot for you."

"Cowley? A -- *soft spot*? Don't make me laugh. Titanium, through and through."

"You're going to tell him, Bodie. I'll be right there behind you, ready to catch you when you drop." Doyle sounded as if he would brook no argument whatever. Bodie began to get the feeling that this relationship was not going to go all his own way. It was not altogether a pleasant realisation -- but then again, not altogether *unpleasant*. Doyle would give as good as he got; and yes, Bodie liked that. But he vowed to himself privately that he'd soon set about making Doyle understand that Bodie, too, could hand it out when he felt like it. Plenty of time....

He liked the sound of that.

Plenty of time. All their lives; however much, or little, they had left to them.

"Well, that's settled then." Doyle swung his legs over the edge of the bed, came upright. "We can sort out the little things later; like whether we live together or not --"

"Whether?" Bodie, still lounging on the floor, stared up. "Of course together. No point otherwise, is there?"

Doyle didn't sound particularly bothered. "Oh, I dunno. Might be useful to keep two places on."

"Not likely. I want you where I can keep an eye on you. And," said Bodie, very practical, "we'd save a lot of money."

Doyle snorted. "What do we wanna save money for? Not our old age. We won't reach it." He stood up. If you worked in CI5 you faced that fact early.

Bodie unclosed a lazy hand and fastened it around Doyle's ankle. "Where are you going?"

Doyle planted the foot Bodie held firmly to the ground, kicked his wrist with the other. Bodie let go, in a hurry. "Are you always so rough with your lovers?" he gasped, pained.

"I," said Doyle calmly, "am going home."

"Now?" Bodie couldn't believe it. He pressed his palms into the floor, sprang to his feet. "You serious?"

"Yeah, always." Doyle stifled a yawn.

Bodie checked his watch. "It's only 11. We can't leave now. They'll think we only wanted the room for a clandestine bout of sex. It does happen, you know," he said hopefully.

"They won't know we've gone, the way we're going." Doyle jerked an eye at the window. He'd already checked it out: it was at one side, with a convenient drainpipe. "And I know it happens. I used to nick people for it." He put on a prim copper's stare. "It's illegal in a hotel room."

"Sex is?" Bodie was amazed.

"Homosexual sex is. Hotel room -- public place," Doyle told him laconically. "Who's going first?" He began to hitch up the window.

Bodie was there, behind him. "Don't go yet," he said, very low.

Doyle could feel his breath warm on his neck. "Have to."

"I --"

"Look, mate." Doyle wheeled to face him. "I know *you* get a lie-in and a doddle thereafter. *I* have to be smilin' joyously at Cowley by 8."

Bodie put his hands on Doyle's hips, drawing him steadily closer. "I want you," he murmured, mournfully.

Doyle let a wide smile spread slowly across his face. If Bodie's women had fallen for that one, he'd been lucky. "If you're randy, mate, you know what you can do. Go fuck yourself."

Bodie considered him through narrowed frowning eyes, head on one side. Deep in his throat, his upper lip curling away barely enough to let the words out, he growled, "Tried it. Wouldn't reach."

It killed Doyle. Try as he might, he couldn't stay in control, and Bodie was getting him to the bed. Giving in, he let himself be pushed down, choking on laughter. Bodie's hands were gentle on him, and his voice was intense as he whispered, "Let me. Let me do this...."

Once again, Ray Doyle found himself on the receiving end of Bodie's warm, passionate attentions.

It wasn't unpleasant; not at all.

They lay in the dark, close together on the narrow bed. They hadn't spoken. Doyle checked his

watch: 11.30. It hadn't taken long; Bodie had been conscious of the need to hurry. Now though, paradoxically, neither of them felt inclined to move.

Doyle resting his head in the curve of Bodie's arm, was feeling dissatisfied with his own participation. So far he had let Bodie make all the moves; just lying there and accepting Bodie's mouth and hands on him. Bodie had so far asked very little of him in return, seemingly content with the mere pressure of Doyle's body against him. Doyle had the feeling that Master Bodie was accounting all this up and would one day spring a heavy claim. Doyle had no intention of letting that happen. Bodie had a few surprises coming.

"Doyle," Bodie whispered into his hair.

"Yeah?" They had to be very, very quiet.

"When did this start?"

Doyle gave it brief consideration, not caring much. Reminiscence, of the first look, the first date, came later on in Doyle's book, when the first flush of passion was no longer enough. "When you nearly died down by the docks. Grahamstown. Your bloody gun jammed. You kept looking at me after that... different."

"Did I?" He felt Bodie's lips curve against his hair.

"Didn't take me long to figure out what you had in mind."

"Why did you turn me down?"

Doyle ran back over it all briefly. "Didn't. I came round to the idea quite quickly."

"In the lodge...."

"In the bloody lodge," Doyle said, carefully, "I gave you every opening I could think of. You turned each of 'em down flat. All you could talk about was how you were getting your fuckin' share."

"I *asked* you." Bodie raised himself on one elbow, affronted. "I asked you, and you said you weren't interested."

Doyle tuned in on the memory, isolated the error. "I said I hadn't been interested before. Then you dashed out intent on a bloody martyr's death. I didn't feel inclined to stop you."

"Failure," decided Bodie, thinking it out, "to communicate."

In the dark, Doyle lifted his eyes heavenwards. "I gotta go." But he didn't move.

"I couldn't figure you out," Bodie continued to muse aloud. "You didn't come to see me in

hospital --"

-- aaahhh..." sympathised Doyle.

-- then you turned up at my flat looking as if you wanted to bruise something into a pulp --"

-- you --"

-- then you banned the door to my girlfriends --"

"You ever get round to ringing her, in the end?"

"Then you hark on and on about why I let Hilliard shoot me --"

"Cowley got there pretty quick. He had a CI5 tail on a few CI5 agents."

Bodie, diverted at last, stared at him. "And tails on the tails?"

"He's sharp, old Cowley. You gotta hand it to him. You'd think he'd be getting a bit senile. But he got it figured out quicker than me."

Bodie had been enjoying the previous line of conversation more and returned to it quickly.

"Then you start accusing me of screwing Murph --"

"Do you?" Doyle asked idly.

Bodie continued unperturbed. "-- *fancifully* accusing me of screwing Murph, so my bet is you're jealous; and I'm just about to make a pass at you when you start ripping your clothes off crazed with lust. And..." he lay back, satisfied at last. "The Rest is History."

Doyle said for the umpteenth time: "I gotta go."

"Stop saying that." Bodie tightened his arms, playfully.

"I mean it. An' you better believe it, if you're happy with that arm in one piece."

"A little moppet like you? Not a chance," said Bodie lazily.

"I mean it, Bodie." That note snapped instantly into Doyle's voice; a warning note that even Bodie respected.

"Nah, you don't." But Bodie let things rest. He wasn't about to take Ray Doyle apart tonight. Although -- he recognised the little thrill of tension that jolted through him at the thought -- it might be an idea. For the future.

Doyle rearranged his clothing, rattled his car keys. "Get moving. Unless you fancy a nice long

midnight stroll?"

Bodie considered, swinging himself up and off the bed. "Am I allowed to say it yet?"

"Say what," answered Doyle, going to the window in preparation for his second attempt on it that evening.

"What you said I wasn't allowed to say," said Bodie wistfully.

Doyle stopped. He turned. The moonlight shot off his belt-buckle, and off his eyes, glinting ferally in the dim light. Bodie waited.

"You," said Doyle ferociously, "You know what you are? You're a sloppy, sentimental slushy, pink-ribboned Valentine. Get out of that window. Or I'll throw you out."

Halfway down the wall, Bodie looked up at Doyle's face, suspended above him like the moon. Every muscle of his body was busily engaged in defying the laws of gravity, but you wouldn't have known it. He stared up, his head tipped defiantly back, his mouth mutinous. He said with great dignity:

"I just feel you ought to know. I do."

There was a pause.

"Yeah, I know," said Ray Doyle.

"Doyle!"

Doyle turned at the door.

"A word with you," said Cowley.

Doyle hesitated, thumped Armstrong between the shoulderblades. "Go, mate. I'll catch you up."

Cowley looked piercingly at Doyle, not missing the signs of sleeplessness; nor the other, less obvious marks of some recent upheaval written in his young operative's fallen-angel face. Doyle was alert and intelligent enough this morning: his mind moving in the no-nonsense, intuitive way that had served Cowley so well in the past. But when he had not been talking, his eyes and his attention had instantly slid to another vision, more distant and more personal.

"Is everything well, 4.5?"

"Yes, sir." Doyle looked faintly, politely puzzled; they'd just been through it all and it really was quite a straightforward job.

"I meant in your personal life."

Doyle regarded him without unease. "Got it all sorted out now, sir."

"That's good," murmured Cowley, believing him. He changed to another tack. "And how was 3.7? Depressed, I believe you said."

"I think I sorted him out too, sir," said Doyle, deadpan.

Bodie was coming back. A week early. Doyle drove down to collect him.

"I hope," he said severely, "you are 100%, mistake proof fit."

Bodie looked fit, all right. "I," Bodie informed him, "am in perfect physical shape." He settled back in the seat, pretty pleased with life in general.

"Why the early eviction order? Or don't I want to know?"

"I was an embarrassment to them," said Bodie without a trace of modesty. "You can set standards too high, you know. All the little greenies were dropping out discouraged and running back into banking."

"Yeah, well, you're back in CI5 now. All of us are perfect too."

"Where are we going?"

"We're stopping off to eat. Then we're going home."

Home. Bodie liked the sound of that, after days on a camp bed and the misery of communal bathroom facilities. Home is where the heart is. He said it, aloud. He was in love.

"Home is where the heart is."

Doyle was giving all his visual attention to the road, swinging the Capri out to overtake a lorry; bringing it in again swearing when a Rover threatened too close behind.

"Look at him," he said disgusted, watching it streak past. "Must be doing 90, at least."

"Haul him in," suggested Bodie lazily. "If it makes you happy."

Doyle was only briefly tempted. "Nah. I got his number. Might report him to the traffic boys. If he smashes himself up that's his bloody fault. But there's kids on the roads. They don't ask to be there when that lunatic screams up and panics some driver doing the legal limit into a mistake."

"Ray," said Bodie, "you're the most moral person I ever met, you know that?" He meant it. The odd hard streak of purity in Doyle frequently infuriated him. Right now it struck him as just another mysterious, appealing quality of this man who had given himself to Bodie.

Their lifetime together was beginning today. He took a deep breath and smiled.

"Where are we going? Where," elucidated Bodie, "is home?"

"You said you knew."

"With you," said Bodie seriously, half shy.

"Your place," Doyle finally allowed.

"Why mine?"

"I dunno. I like it, I suppose."

"Did you move your stuff in?"

"Yeah."

Bodie finally relaxed. He'd been half afraid, after days of muted phone calls, that Doyle might have changed his mind.

They ate in a forgettable service station and reached Bodie's flat around seven.

Bodie walked around it, checking. It was much as he remembered -- only now, Doyle's clothes hung beside his in the wardrobe, and two drawers had been carefully cleared out and were taken up with Doyle's underclothes. "We don't need this," he called to Doyle, who was fixing drinks and lights.

"What?"

"Separate drawers. Just wear whatever comes out first -- if it fits."

Doyle appeared at the door. "You like togetherness?" he said expressionless.

Bodie looked at him, at the young man in shirt and jeans, hair all tousled: saw his mate. His mate. The word took on a whole new meaning. "With you?" He took Doyle in his arms, stared down into the beautiful, flawed face. "Yeah, I like it."

And he knew coherently for the first time the joy of Ray Doyle holding onto him, kissing him back, his mouth equally demanding.

They watched television: Doyle totally relaxed in the curve of Bodie's arm, his head on Bodie's shoulder. They each held a can of beer, taking occasional pulls at it. Bodie was thinking deeply. Now Doyle was his, he was concerned to keep him.

"You remember when you got shot."

Doyle made an elaborate, headscratching pretense at amnesia. "Wait a minute, oh, yeah, the heart job you mean? Vaguely recall it, yeah, why?"

Bodie was not lighthearted, not at all. "You weren't fighting," he said savagely. "If you'd died, do you know what I'd have done?"

Doyle considered his answer, drank from his can.

"Yeah," he said at last. "Resigned."

"Nah," said Bodie, "what would that have solved? I was gonna stay in CI5 and give the bastards all I got till they got me back."

Doyle understood, though he made a face. "Offer yourself for the suicide runs? Not very rational, mate." He turned his face into Bodie's shoulder, rubbing his cheek there slowly, staring into space.

"I," said Bodie tightly, "am not rational about you. I was angry with you. Bloody mad."

Doyle shifted. "Yeah, well, perhaps now you know how I was feelin' when you were daft enough to let yourself in for this." He touched the shoulder lightly.

Bodie took it in, finally made a tiny nod of his head. He didn't speak. He felt tight inside, knotted up with a helpless anger and fear. Unconsciously, his arm tightened around Doyle, remembering the pale, vulnerable figure who had lain silent and motionless through hours of worrying. He lived the nightmare again, shutting his eyes, bursting into Doyle's flat: the first, terrible moment of seeing him there, lying like a wounded quivering animal in a pool of his own blood; the desperate fear and anger and frustration that had followed. Then, even, then, he had wanted to snatch up his frighteningly fragile partner and keep him, somehow, safe. He remembered telling Cowley, over and over, "he'll make it." "He'll pull through," repeating it in desperation to make it come true, because the alternative was not believable, his mind rejecting it because he could not take it.

"I couldn't get through to you!" he shouted, angrily.

Doyle lay very still against him. The TV chattered on unnoticed in the background; he stared unseeing at its shifting images. "Yeah, well it won't happen again. Got something to live for now, haven't I. Makes a difference."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yeah. And when we go, we go together."

Bodie's hands gripped him hard, bruising the flesh. "You don't say things like that," he said with

terrible intensity. "Not unless you mean it."

Doyle twisted free. "Look, Bodie. You want a suicide pact, you got it. It's the only way. You think I don't know the risks as well as you? *This* is why they warn you off it. I died with you twice these last weeks, and it's gonna happen again. We can't --" he stopped, breathing hard, and began again. "Just because of this, we can't let our reactions and the way we go into things be fucked up because we're too bloody scared of being left alone at the end of it. We gotta stay sharp, stay cool -- do the bloody job the way we always have. We can't let it make any difference. And it won't if we know, if we accept that one day it'll happen. Maybe when we're 90. Maybe tomorrow. But when it does -- it will be both of us. Because no one else is ever gonna have you. And because suicide'll be a bloody sight easier than hanging around looking at you dead."

Bodie let out a long breath. "That's settled, then."

"Yeah," said Doyle savagely. "That's settled." He tossed his empty beer can away, dragging his hand over his lips, and turned.

Mouth met hungry mouth. Doyle fought fiercely, tearing away clothes; he searched Bodie desperately, struggling to find the way to make Bodie part of him, to merge himself with Bodie in one savage, conclusive union. He threw Bodie onto his stomach; found the way, and did it. With one hard, quick thrust he slid into the warm recess of Bodie's body, and they were one.

Lying on Bodie, listening to their erratic, pounding heartbeats, the rushed panting breaths, he stayed quite still. Bodie turned his head to one side, his face tight, his eyes open and sightless. "Ray," he whispered, pleading with harsh raggedness, "Don't let it ever end. Don't let it end...."

Doyle wrapped his arm around Bodie's throat, squeezing him tight. The vicious arousal gripped them both, insistent, demanding that he move. He fought the urgent desire, held it off. Just a little longer.... Beneath him, joined to him, Bodie shivered, his fingers twining tightly into the carpet. Quivering with tension, sweat running from his face, Doyle pushed it into Bodie's hair, whispered fiercely, "You're mine. You're mine, Bodie. No one'll ever take you from me. Even death, Bodie," he squeezed the words out, gritting his teeth, "Not even that."

Bodie went rigid beneath him, fighting his own battle not to move, not to do anything that would hasten the end. Their every reaction, every thought was perfectly attuned to the one goal: the yearning need for this to last forever. Desire without hope: a war whose outcome of defeat was inevitable from the start.

He couldn't hold it off any longer. Breathing hard, he pushed his head and shoulders up and away from Bodie's body, staring down at the dark head pillowed in his arms, the curve of the spine, down to the pale rounded buttocks. His whole body tensed. He began to destroy Bodie viciously, taking Bodie with him as they pushed themselves on, and on, towards oblivion. He was barely conscious of Bodie's voice, hissing: "Come on, you bastard, harder -- do it harder --"

It could make no difference. One savage jerk, one final thrust. Burying his teeth in Bodie's neck,

Ray Doyle came, spurting fire deep within Bodie's guts.

He lay there, eyes closed, resting on the warmth; not thinking. When the dark head stirred, he rolled off, and lay on his back with one hand over his eyes. He felt someone touch him, wiping away the thread of saliva that hung from his mouth.

"Well, what a little firecracker you turned out to be," murmured Bodie's lazy voice, and behind it there was a deep burr of contentment.

"Fight fire," he murmured dazedly, "with fire...." Because it seemed ironically, surrealistically apt.

"Look at me."

Doyle opened his eyes. Bodie was kneeling over him. He raised one hand to brush away the sweat from Bodie's forehead, his fingers lingering in the moisture there. A drop fell, landed on his face; he blinked. He brought Bodie's face down, rubbed the salty damp off temples, eyes, with his tongue, slowly. For a long time they remained close.

Finally Bodie eased himself away. "I," he told Doyle, wrinkling his nostrils, "need a shower. And so do you." He looked disdainfully over Doyle.

"Don't be so bloody squeamish," drawled Doyle. He needed time to recover.

Bodie stayed there, looking down. "You're one hell of a surprise, Doyle," he remarked, shaking his head.

"Why? What were you expecting?"

"Saw you making out with a woman once," said Bodie succinctly. "Very different."

"You're not a woman, are you." On second thoughts, he opened his eyes, looked Bodie over. "Did I hurt you?" he said brusquely.

"Let's just say I'd be very careful of you when you were feeling brutal. I mean," said Bodie ironically, "if you were ever in a *really* macho mood."

Doyle looked suddenly tense. Bodie thumped him gently on the shoulder; he hadn't meant to make Doyle feel guilty. "Nah, mate. S'all right. I like it rough. Turns me on."

"You got me all wound up," said Doyle, low. "All that about us dying. But I could have hurt you."

Bodie interrupted. "Yeah, but you didn't. C'mon Ray. It was good. The best. Tell you something."

"Yeah?"

"Sex with you gives me the biggest charge I ever had."

Doyle looked up at him. "True?"

"Yeah. Anyway you want to play it -- hard, soft: *whatever*, sweetheart. I'm right there with you."

Doyle studied his face, half-frowning. Bodie gave a tiny wry smile, kept steady. Doyle shut his eyes. Bodie was there, holding him. "It's all right. You're all strung up, that's all; but everything's going to work out. It'll work out," he murmured into Doyle's hair. "You're beautiful, sunshine. I love you."

Doyle rested against Bodie, breathing him in.

"Bodie," he said, without opening his eyes.

"Yeah?"

"We got our first problem."

"Nah," said Bodie, ready with easy reassurance. Doyle's unexpected violence really seemed to have shaken him up. It had shaken Bodie up too, and then he had been swept away by the same flood.

"Don't mean that."

"What, then?" said Bodie, prepared to be tender and reasonable if it took all night to sort Doyle out.

Doyle's eyes came wide open. He stared Bodie directly in the face. "I asked Cowley round for a welcome-back drink."

Bodie's jaw dropped, but he hung onto his cool. "Why, has he been away?"

"I said ten pm," continued Doyle, remorseless, "and so we've got ten minutes."

Bodie sprang into action. This was serious. He mock-punched Doyle in the stomach, hauled him to his feet, and hustled him off to the bathroom, one hand in the small of his partner's back, the other with a choke-hold on the chain around Doyle's neck.

When the doorbell rang, this time they and the living room were clean, spruce and well-prepared. Bodie ushered their chief in, smooth and smiling; Doyle was waiting by the drinks tray.

"Your usual, sir?"

"Thank you, Doyle."

"Pleasure, sir," said Doyle, adding mischievously, "-- it's *his* booze."

Bodie held out a chair for Cowley as Doyle brought him the glass. "It's on expenses anyway," he said cheerfully.

Cowley cocked up an alert ear, frowning. "It had better *not* be, 3.7."

"Only joking, sir...."

Cowley watched Bodie and Doyle exchange an amused glance and raised an eyebrow to himself. They seemed back on form, thank God. He wondered if he'd ever get to know the reason for all the unvoiced tension that had been flying around these past weeks. He settled back in his chair to savour the smooth malt, unconsciously noting details with a careful eye. Bodie's long living room was looking pleasant tonight; very tidy. His men, too: Doyle looked relaxed and easy, in white jacket, jeans; breaking often into smiles at Bodie's patter. And Bodie, Bodie whom they'd nearly managed to kill between the three of them, showing no trace of it now, dressed in an open-necked shirt and slacks, trim and fit and -- happy. That was the atmosphere here tonight, Cowley mused: happy. It was there in Bodie's gleaming black eyes, in Doyle's ready smile.

If those two were happy, Cowley wanted to know why.

"And how was Sapperton, Bodie?"

Bodie looked distant. "You don't want to know, sir."

"Oh, but indeed I do, Bodie. I want to know that you have confidence that you're perfectly fit again."

"Yes, sir. Full of go," Bodie assured him, and promptly made a face at Doyle that had that half-abashed, half-pleased smile creeping irrepressibly across 4.5's features yet again.

"Doyle said you were depressed."

"Well, you know, sir. All that army discipline got me down a bit." Bodie's mouth turned down at the corners.

"Yes, I can imagine it would, 3.7," said Cowley dryly. "There's nothing wrong with discipline; it's an essential part of an efficient life."

"You know," Doyle joined in, jibing away happily, "I've always thought you were too undisciplined, mate."

They exchanged a look. Bodie curled his lip.

Cowley was opening his briefcase, extracting papers. "I'm arranging for your new partner, Bodie."

As he had guessed it would, that killed the horsing around.

"My new what, sir," queried Bodie. He flicked a glance at Doyle -- and then back again. Astounded, he saw from the dawning recollection on his partner's face that Doyle knew what this was about --

"4.5 had the notion that it would be difficult for you and he to readjust after the separation," said Cowley, breezing on.

"Did he, sir," growled Bodie. He gave Doyle a look. A long, long one.

Doyle had genuinely forgotten all about the interview. "I wasn't -- quite myself at the time, sir," he said hurriedly. "Forgot all about it till you mentioned it."

"Had you, Doyle? I remember it quite clearly." Cowley continued remorselessly, really digging it in: "'Find someone else for Bodie' was your exact term."

Bodie was looking at Doyle, absolutely disgusted. "Well, thanks very much, mate."

Doyle ignored him. "Can we erase that from the record, sir? It was -- a mistake."

"A mistake." Cowley mused to himself, staring down at the papers he held.

"*Definitely* a mistake," put in Bodie.

Cowley threw the papers down, took off his glasses, surveyed them both. "3.7, 4.5: just what *is* all this?"

Silence. Bodie studied the ceiling; Doyle the floor.

"I want an answer," rapped out Cowley. "The pair of you have been acting like -- like a pair of star-crossed lovers these last weeks! First you're hardly speaking; then you, Doyle, work flat out desperately fabricating a reason to be granted leave for nursemaid duty --"

"*Fabricating*, sir?" This from Doyle.

Cowley fixed him with a look. "Oh, I quite agree. Your fortunate piece of detection led me onto the right path. But it was quite by chance. Did you know it was the right path? No, Doyle: you wanted an excuse and you found one."

His agent was quiet, and did not meet his eyes.

"I never knew you did that," muttered Bodie, giving Doyle a quizzical sideways look. Doyle

shrugged.

"Then," continued Cowley, inexorable, "I hear you aren't speaking again: that having saved Bodie's life, Doyle is refusing to visit him in hospital. On the contrary; he's requesting a new partner and presenting an ill-tempered front to the world. When I need him for a job one morning it then turns out that he just happens to have been spending the night at 3.7's flat. Then there's the little matter of the mercy dash across the country to rescue Bodie from an apparent decline into depression --"

He made a little pause.

"And now I find you together, sitting on some clearly amusing secret, wearing foolish grins and telling me you have to stay together after all. I think you'd agree -- it's not unreasonable of me to demand an explanation, is it?" He reached for his glass and drank, his attention never leaving them for a second. They traded glances. Tell him, said Doyle's.

Bodie swallowed. "You're not going to like it, sir."

Doyle threw his eyes heavenwards, jumpy with tension. Cowley snapped: "I'm sure of it."

"What you said -- star-crossed, and all that --"

Doyle put his head in his hands, giving up. Cowley scowled, not with it.

"What I mean is, sir," muttered Bodie, determined to go through with it, "that we may have let our relationship veer away from the strictly professional."

The glow of lights softly illuminated the room. Darkness had long ago fallen, and the noise of the traffic moving below had slowed, so that now one could pick out the passing of individual cars. No one said anything.

Until -- "May have done?" enquired Cowley, very precise.

"Have done," clarified Bodie.

Cowley sat in a long silence. He set his empty glass down. He fiddled with his spectacles. Then he looked up, sharply. "And if I asked you to put an end to it? If I *ordered* you to?"

The two men took time to take it in. Doyle gave a brief shake of his head, staring down. Bodie said, very quiet, "If you made us make a choice between ending it and leaving CI5? Is that what you mean, sir?"

"Yes."

Bodie said, "If you felt it had to be that way sir.... We'd be sorry. We don't want to give up CI5. But we *couldn't* give this up. It isn't possible. It's too important to us."

It might be the end of all they knew. They waited quietly for Cowley's jurisdiction, ready to accept it.

He picked up his glass. "Dry house, tonight?"

Doyle was up in a bound, returning with the bottle. He poured a shot, thoughtful. His whole concentration seemed to be on the act of getting the liquid carefully into the glass. He said nothing; but he met Cowley's eyes.

"I can't pretend I like it," said Cowley at last. "It makes for complications." He took a drink. He needed it.

"We've talked it out," said Doyle. "We think we can handle it."

"We can't say it'll make no difference," added Bodie. "But we'll try to see it makes no difference to *you*."

They had never let him down before: not once. He sat, thinking. They were on a tight fuse, all the time, unrelenting: they had to learn to give perfect trust to the one man who stood beside them all the time: they had to live with the fact that they might die tomorrow. Maybe it took a degree of difference, of unconventionality to be considered for CI5: and to agree to join it. They saw things, did things no human being should have to view or perform -- on his orders. No wonder they sometimes broke out in unconventional ways.

Way out in a place Cowley couldn't reach....

He took a deep breath. "How did it happen?"

All at once, he was no longer just their boss, someone to defend themselves against. He was, all said and done, someone they trusted: someone who would have been a friend, if circumstances were different.

Doyle said, frowning: "You get to a point where you need someone."

Bodie said instantly, "I didn't need anyone. I just fell in love." He shrugged, feeling a fool, and looked across at Doyle, helpless. Doyle's frown melted into a smile: he shook his head at Bodie's confusion, feeling very good, very cared-for.

Watching them, Cowley thought without envy that they were lucky. He had not been so lucky; and regretted it often some silent lonely nights neither these two, nor anyone else, would ever know of. They were so alive, so young, so -- hopeful: how could he have the right to interfere, in the face of such courage, such optimism?

"Do your jobs," he said harshly. "That's all I ask. I know you'll give it. Anything else -- that's your affair." He drained his glass, looked about him, stuffed the forgotten papers back in his

briefcase. "I must go."

As he reached the door, he paused a moment. "I wish you luck."

Alone again together, the two CI5 agents stared at Cowley's retreating back.

Bodie was the first to speak. "Luck. He wished us luck." He shook his head, amazed.

Doyle was in there fast. "What'd you expect? Red roses?"

Bodie smiled. He put an arm around Doyle's shoulders: it felt right there. Together, they bolted the door and shut the world out for the night.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

After Ojuka

Sebastian

A reviewer once not-too-unkindly said 'what's there to say about this story - we can all see Sebastian's just been on a first-aid course!' She was absolutely right - I did go on a first-aid course, and while there my mind wandered as it was wont to do during those exhilarating years, I began to think 'what if....' and before the course was done the story was written, at least in my head.

Despite not having my mind entirely on tourniquets and transfusions, like our boys - I passed :)

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"How would you feel if you'd let them get 'im?" Bodie demanded of his boss, who regarded him for a moment, following the line of his gaze, then turned away without a flicker.

"Oh, I think he'd have borne up quite well," Doyle muttered sourly, looking down at his wrists. "I screwed that up, in one big way, and don't tell me 'e 'asn't noticed."

"Look mate, you shot like an angel back there." Bodie's eyebrow lifted towards Ojuka, departing unscathed. And his lady wife, looking out at them with big, sombre dark eyes, on another journey entirely.

"Bitch," Doyle snapped viciously from the side of his mouth, turning away. "I knew it, knew there was something wrong when she showed up at the hotel. And yet I let them get in—!" He shook his head in disbelief at his own stupidity; he had been careful, just not careful enough. What counted all those years, months of the highest day-to-day training if at the last minute he was going to blow it with one stupid mistake?

Lives got lost that way.

“What’s it matter now, anyway?” Bodie said, determinedly cheerful: after all, the job was done, they lived and breathed again.

Doyle was looking at him in an unfriendly way, eyes like chips of stone. “Well, nothin’. Not to you. Or to me, or Cowley. Another job crossed off and a bit more unsung glory for CI5. But— that girl back there at the hotel—”

Bodie only shook his head, looking down at the ground. “We’d best get on our way, mate.”

Through no fault of her own—

All she had done was be there. When he and Bodie, just by driving up to the door, had drawn her into someone else’s war.

“Some angelfish we turned out to be,” was Doyle’s one, bitter comment as he swung himself into the passenger seat of Bodie’s borrowed car.

“You coming out for a pint tonight?”

Doyle turned to stare out of the window as Bodie started the car. “Think I’ll get an early night.”

Bodie’s face twisted. “Ah, c’mon, mate. Just a quick half.”

Doyle’s head came around, his stare burning like acid though his voice was quiet enough: “I said no, Bodie.”

Bodie kept his mouth shut after that. His partner was best left alone at such times: throw in too many sweet words of comfort and you were likely to find yourself bitten to the bone. Doyle smelt of gunsmoke and of sweat: he kept his head down and studied his wrists, wincing from time to time as he shifted position. Always made a fuss about small injuries did Doyle, although when it came down to it he presented himself fearlessly to bullets, terrorists, bombs. Trusting his swift reactions and his perfect aim to save himself, no doubt.

And me, reflected Bodie, remembering Doyle’s bullet whining past his ear to take out the man threatening Bodie behind, Doyle’s eye as he sighted it in clear and cold and merciless. *Both have an extra hole or two by now, I reckon, without Doyle’s speed and timing.* Was that only yesterday—? Seemed like a lifetime ago.

He stopped outside Doyle’s flat to let him out. Barely a grunt of thanks floated back his way. He sat there a moment, hand on the gearknob, watching Doyle running up the steps, hand on the bannister, hunched over slightly, blue jeans dirty. The white jacket was dirty, too, looked like a bloodstain or two here and there.

Oh, Raymond. A white jacket. Not the best thing to wear on a shootout, was it?

No backwards look. The door slammed.

Bodie put the car into gear and drove off. Pity about Doyle turning on to guilt-trip mode: would have been nice to hang around with him tonight, unwind a bit after the tensions of the last few days. But that was Ray for you: he could switch from the matey grin to the look of ice at the drop of a hat. At one time Bodie had been sure Doyle disliked him; he hadn't cared one fig, Doyle could like him or loathe him as he chose just so long as they worked well together.

Which they did, right from day one.

And sometimes—

Sometimes he fancied an attraction between them that went beyond friendship, a sexual thing, electric and alive as hell. Whether Doyle felt it too he couldn't say and wasn't going to ask, but occasionally there were clues. "So if you don't mind sharing?" The look Doyle had exchanged with him in that narrow hotel hallway had been pure innuendo, shared, instantaneous.

Bodie sighed as he pulled the big car around the corner of the Oakham Court Road where his current apartment was. Pity about the girl. Pity about Doyle, too.

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Next morning, bright and fresh and early, Bodie was presenting his ID at the entrance to CI5.

"That's not you, is it?" said the girl on duty, peering closely at the picture.

Bodie was affronted, and peered at it with her. "Good mug shot, that is. Tall, dark and handsome devil, isn't he?"

"That's what I mean," she said, and Bodie swatted her on the arm for cheek, and sailed in through the narrow corridors to the recce room. He located Doyle at once, over in the corner. Cream shirt, clean jeans, brown boots, reading something that wasn't Playboy from the look of it. One lift of the eyebrow was all the acknowledgement he got, but then again it was all he needed.

"Didn't do so bad yesterday, I hear, 3.7."

Bodie turned around, grinned. "Didn't do so bad yourself, Murph. Hear you copped a vanload of hot goods along the way. You wanna watch that, mate, you'll be landing yourself a post back in the Force."

"An' I hear the Cow's got the two of you on report—"

“Wha—?” and then he saw the twinkle in Murphy’s blue Irish eyes.

“Wasting too much ammo, Bodie. One bullet per one body, you know the rules. But Doyle’s got his eye in, I hear.”

He’s a beauty,” Bodie acknowledged. “Can’t miss. I reckon, take out Towser’s brain, whirl it round on a string, Doyle could it at sixty paces.”

“No kidding?” Murph marvelled. “Put it back afterwards?”

“Why bother, who’d know the difference.”

Murph stood with his hands on his hips watching Bodie push his way through the cluttered chairs and tables and agents to get to his partner, then he shook his head gently and went off to study some maps in the obs. room.

Bodie made a face, waved his hand around to disturb the haze of blue smoke around Doyle, who also grimaced, not looking up from the papers he held. “Yeah, I know, can’t breathe in ’ere can you? Go out for a minute?”

“Yeh, okay.” Bodie bounced on the balls of his feet. Business as usual.

In the cool fresh air of the corridor Doyle leaned against the wall. “Wrists okay?” Bodie said, remembering; he took Doyle’s hand in his own, turned it over, examined the skin where it was shiny and puckered in places. “Tried to barbecue yourself, hmm?”

Doyle retrieved his hand, ran it down the outside of his shirt; his thoughts seemed far away. Bodie tracked the absent fondling with his eyes; Doyle’s hand got as far as the waistband of his jeans, then travelled up again to where his nipples must lie before he took the hand away and shuffled the papers he held, eyes downcast.

“What you got there then?” Bodie wondered, cheerfully enough, and he thrust his chin over Doyle’s shoulder for a look. Doyle didn’t exactly hold it out for him to see, but he didn’t hide it, either. It was a double sheet of A4 printout. Bodie scanned the top quickly: Personnel Data Request/ CI5/4.5/10.10.82. Davies, Virginia Sophie, DOB 12.9.60.

Date of death, 9.10.82, presumably; for Bodie guessed at once that this must be the girl from the hotel, a little souvenir Doyle had called up for himself the better to flay himself with. “Virgin for short, but not for long, eh?” he said, and knew at once from the look in Doyle’s eyes that no amount of black humour was going to sort this one.

“Bodie.” Doyle said it with a kind of weary disgust, and Bodie’s mouth twisted wryly.

“Okay, okay, not a joking matter.” He took the sheets of paper away, gently. About eighty lines, he reckoned, to sum up and dismiss her: birth, school, job, bloke, death. Not much time. Never

enough time...

He put his hand on Doyle's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself, Ray."

"I was there," Doyle said, eyes screwed up as he ran the memory one more time. "She was terrified—squawked like a fuckin' chicken—and I couldn't do one fucking thing to save her."

"All right. But it wasn't you that shot her. Not you that pulled the fucking trip on the gun. It wasn't your fault."

"No," said Doyle, his eyes cold and set and hard, "it was that bastard Parker."

Bodie touched one finger to the split at the corner of Doyle's mouth, the little swelling there. "Wasn't very nice to you either, was he?"

At that, a peculiar little smile crossed Doyle's lips. "Oh, I think he wanted to be — far too nice." Bodie stared at him. "Did he come on to you?"

Doyle smiled, looking him in the eye, tipping his head back a little. "In a way."

"I'd have killed him," Bodie said, a flashtide of anger giving him a sudden adrenalin rush. "I'd've ripped his cock off and made him eat it."

"Oh yeah, he'd have loved that all right." At least Doyle was grinning now, amused by his violence. Bodie was leaning in over him, actively protective, looking down at him, darkly troubled. A little cluster of agents were approaching and going past them; Doyle caught the curious backwash of their gaze. He kicked Bodie away from him. "Can't keep meeting like this. People will start to talk."

"What?" Bodie was still hard with anger, not with him at all.

"By the time that one gets back to the recce room, it'll be you giving me a quick one against the wall."

"What are you going on about?" Bodie realised he was crowding in on Doyle, moved away. They began to walk together, side by side, down the beige corridor towards the coffee machine, but before they reached it Cowley's head popped out of his office like a tortoise out of its shell. The same glare, the same discontented mouth.

"Bodie! Doyle!"

Thus summoned, exchanging a look they entered Cowley's inner sanctum.

"Well, the Ojuka situation is now resolved," Cowley said without preamble, and Bodie's lips wrinkled smugly.

“Just doing our job, sir.”

Cowley glared at him. “There’s no room for complacency, Bodie.”

“No, sir,” they chorused. “We’ll spend the day training if you like,” Bodie added: he quite fancied a day spent in smooth physical activity, shooting and diving and competing with Ray.

“Since when have I needed you, Bodie, to arrange my schedules for me?” and Bodie muttered something, abashed. “There’s such a thing as being overtrained, you know,” Cowley continued; and from the peevish tone of his voice, the hard glint in his eye, you would never know that in fact he was pleased with these two, very pleased, and in mind to reward them with a word of praise; ‘good men’, or the like.

Then his mind shut close on it and he glared at them again, standing there confident and cocky and sure. They knew they were good men. No need to gild the lily.

“I’ve just had a reminder through,” he said, favouring them with a nasty smile. “Someone’s on the ball in Records. You’re both of you long overdue for a refresher First Aid course.”

Bodie and Doyle met each other’s eye. Doyle rested first his elbow, then his head, on Bodie’s shoulder and hid his eyes. “Off you go now and collect the details from the office.” Cowley waved them briskly away.

As they left the office gloomily, Bodie said: “You’d think he might have said something. Nothing too heavy.” He adopted an upper class accent. ““Not bad, chaps’. Would’ve been enough, wouldn’t it, Doyle?”

Doyle spotted a can, skittered up to it, aimed it for goal, and kicked. It scored against both walls. “I suppose you might say this is his idea of a day of rest,” he offered, not very sure.

Bodie muttered, thinking of Avery, “Wish I had some dirty money in Africa. I’d take a very long safari.”

“Oh yeah, you, well, closest you ever got to dirty money is that 10p you dropped in the mud out running.”

“Yeh—and I couldn’t be bothered to search around for it.” Bodie clapped an admiring arm around his thrifty partner, leaning in close to his ear. “You could though, couldn’t you, Ray? What did you do with it—just out of interest?”

“I’m savin’ up, aren’t I? Maybe you’ll get a birthday card this year, after all.”

This was more like it, Doyle’s blues leaving him like clouds off a mountaintop, leaving only the clear sky of his eyes. Bodie reached over while the going was good, took the folded sheets of paper out of Doyle’s top pocket.

“Don’t hurt yourself with this, Ray.” He dropped it into the nearest bin to lie among the crumpled cans and frag-ends. “If anyone could have saved her, you would have.”

The truth of that reached Doyle at last, and he stood still for a moment, thinking about it. “She lived with her mother. On her own. D’you think I should go and see her? Try and tell her—”

“Tell her what.” Bodie shook his head. “Whatever could you say, Ray; you didn’t even know her. Leave it be.”

In his urgency to reassure, he had moved very close to Doyle again, backed him to the wall. Brooding green eyes locked with Bodie’s steady dark gaze, he brought one hand up to Doyle’s shoulder; he could see the throb of pulse in Doyle’s throat, the little jump of muscle beside his mouth as he swallowed. Doyle waited, fascinated by the intensity of Bodie’s attitude, the resolute set of his jaw. For a moment—

A long, long moment. Then Bodie took his hand off Doyle’s shoulder, hit the wall beside him lightly, and turned and walked briskly off.

“Thought you were going to kiss me,” Doyle said to him, catching up with no apparent effort.

“Murph, Peters,” Bodie acknowledged, lifting a hand in greeting as they passed. He said without looking at Doyle: “Did you now? Relieved, or disappointed?”

“Whaddayou think, flower,” Doyle camped, fluttering his eyelashes, and seeing the look in his eye Bodie began to run, dodging, just in time.

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The First Aid course took place in a chilly little church hall in a shabby London backwater. There were eighteen other learners, from young women to old women, but all of them women.

“You wanna watch that. I think she’s beginning to enjoy it,” Doyle yawned, as he watched Bodie’s rhythmic compressions on the pink plastic chest of the doll he was resuscitating. Bodie made a face at him as he lowered his mouth over the doll’s open one and blew into her airway, once, twice. Then back to the compressions again.

“Oh no, you won’t enjoy it,” the instructor’s voice startled him from behind. “Mouth’ll probably be full of vomit. Snot all over the place.” A relaxed, confident woman in her thirties, she had the tilted nose and dutch-doll looks of a Mary Poppins, except for her striped jersey and tight jeans and a liking for shocking her pupils: one girl had turned green and had to go out while Jo cheerfully related the story of a man with a severed finger which his dog then ate.

She moved Bodie’s hands slightly, a hairsbreadth. “You do it there, you might break his ribcage.”

“Guy’s dead anyway, isn’t he?” Bodie said ironically, annoyed. “He’ll forgive me a broken rib or two, probably use his first breath to thank me for saving his life.”

“Oi,” Doyle said in Bodie’s defence, “I bet he’s done it more times for real than you’ve done it on a plastic dummy.”

She sat back on her heels and regarded him with interest. “That so? What are you - ambulance men brushing up on your skills?” She grinned, brushing a dark lock of hair off her face as she gave him the once-over, taking in the tough beauty of him, the tight jeans, leather boots, open shirt.

Sensing interest, Doyle grinned back. “Something like that.”

Bodie was worn out with his effort. He checked grimly for breathing. “Nah, still dead as a dinosaur. See if you can work your magic on ’im, sunshine,” Bodie said, sitting back and wiping his mouth, watching as Doyle knelt on one knee beside the life- sized doll and waved away the antiseptic tissue offered him for the purposes of wiping the doll’s lips.

“Can’t stand the taste,” Doyle said, speedily and efficiently performing the checks: airway clear, not breathing, no pulse—

“On your head be it,” she said briskly. “You might catch something, y’know.”

“Anything he’s got, I want it,” Doyle drawled, and he leaned over and applied his mouth to the doll’s pink plastic orifice. Bodie’s stomach tightened for some reason, finding the sight perversely erotic, pretty mouth Doyle had, too pretty for a man.

“You’ll ’ave to watch him,” he said to Jo. “He might forget what he’s here for, he’s got a doll just like that at home y’know.” Doyle managed to backheel him in the foot without breaking stride. The pit of his stomach still fluttered as he watched what Doyle was doing, the line of his thigh in faded jeans, thin, muscular forearms taut as he leaned onto his linked hands to compress the chest. The silver link chain he wore slipped down his wrist, prompting a comment from the sharp-eyed Jo:

“You’d take the bangle off first, of course?” but the scattering of laughter from the onlookers at Doyle’s expense died out as Doyle looked up at her, flint-eyed, and said, “Oh yes, darlin’. An’ I’d ask you to hold it for me,” and Bodie felt another shiver inside himself: what was wrong with him today? Something was different: that all his instincts were responding to Doyle as someone he wanted to know more, and differently, than he should.

They moved on to blood loss. Shock. Internal bleeding. Gunshot wounds.

Their lady leader had her own way of dealing with hecklers, and cast around no more than a second for her volunteer to demonstrate various body parts and manoeuvres. “Oi! One of you two,” she pointed peremptorily, “the Ambulance Men. Come and lie down for me,” and Bodie,

who disliked exposure, thrust forward Doyle, who thrived on it.

There was quite a lot of good-natured laughter from the female audience as Jo pushed Doyle to lie on his back, unbuttoned his shirt for him and parted it, drew a line from his nipples and bisected it to demonstrate some nicety of anatomy. She invited everyone to feel his carotid pulse, rolled up his sleeve as far as it would go and called upon two victims to try to find his brachial pulse: and raised a laugh in indicating the general area of the major pulse in his groin, archly announcing that she was not expecting anyone to search for *that* one. She folded him into the recovery position where he lay obediently unconscious while she showed them how to search for possible fractures, frisking him thoroughly from head to foot. Then she released him back into Bodie's care for everyone in the class to have a go at bandaging a partner's broken arm.

Doyle stood patiently as Bodie unwrapped a large sling practically and efficiently: in his vivid past he had dressed more wounds both small and large than either Jo, or Ray Doyle, or possibly the Surgeon General. As the others struggled with uncooperative lengths of sling Bodie was even able to look at Doyle's face as he tucked in the bandage, drew up his arm, knotted it neatly behind his neck. Doyle's eyes were distant, distracted, his breathing a little faster than usual, a light sheen of sweat on his skin.

"That got to you all right, didn't it?" Bodie said, half amused, half envious: maybe he should have volunteered after all. Mind you, he wouldn't have been such a pretty sight as Doyle, lying there with his tight jeans and his boots, his shirt undone, having some strange woman all but play with his nipples. The bruises which littered his broad but skinny ribcage seemed only to add to his pathetic charm. Probably everyone in the room wanted to mother him by now.

Doyle's half-slitted eyes came wide open and he stared Bodie full in the eye. "I'm gonna ask her for a date."

"Why, does she grow palm trees?" and he fainted backwards as Doyle punched him. "Oops, there goes my collarbone. Still, I'm in the right place." And he presented himself to Doyle for bandaging, which he proceeded to do so efficiently that he was singled out to demonstrate the technique to the rest of the class. Teacher's pet, already.

After Head Injuries, the next item on the agenda was Choking; bending Doyle over his arm and banging him on the back five times. And Doyle so ungrateful, too, complaining with a series of plaintive coughs that Bodie had gone about it with far too much enthusiasm.

"It's supposed to be more slap than tickle, y'know," Bodie defended himself vigorously.

Jo overheard him, and clapped her hands for everyone's attention: "What this gentleman just said is quite right: to be any use at all the slap has to be both hard, and direct. You're aiming to force the obstruction up the trachea by compressing the trapped oxygen. You two *have* done a bit of this before, haven't you?" she added, dropping her voice as she wandered over to them, grinning as she pushed a hand through her hair. "What line of work are you really in — police? Army?"

“Something like that,” Doyle said deeply, hanging over Bodie’s arm, with that devastating half-smile.

The look she gave him was speculative, searching. “Well, a bit of First Aid’s going to come in very handy to you, I should think. Split lip, extensive bruising to the ribcage, minor abrasions everywhere, old scarring—you lead an interesting life, don’t you?”

“Bit of a troublemaker,” Bodie said, tutting sadly behind her. “Very nasty piece of work,” but they both ignored him.

“Oh, very interestin’ . Would you like to hear about it?” Doyle opened wide both eyes, sweet, dangerous, seductive. She tilted her head at him, hands on her hips, and gave him a look.

“Promisin’ ,” Doyle said as she walked away, and he rolled up his sleeves, cackling. “Very.”

Bodie had to agree with him.

If the backslapping failed to dislodge the offending object, the next move was apparently the Heimlich Manoeuvre. Doyle was beckoned out to the front again, held lightly in Jo’s capable arms against her chest while she clasped her fists under his sternum.

“—apart from just finding the correct position, never, never try this out unless someone really is choking,” she admonished. “—why?—well, because,” and all the time she carried on talking Bodie noticed that she wasn’t in a hurry to release Doyle, keeping him right there as if she had forgotten she held him; finally, after several moments, releasing him with a pat on the shoulder.

“You wanna watch it, mate,” Bodie muttered. “In danger of becoming an older woman’s plaything, you are.” Doyle looked very, very pleased with himself, as well he might, having just endured five free minutes of an attractive female’s embrace. “We’ll have to do one of these more often, now I know why it’s called a refresher.”

Time to practise the latest topic: and it was Bodie’s turn to hold Doyle in the Heimlich position. When they reversed their roles, Bodie could feel Doyle’s body, warm and hard, pressing into his back, and something, some instinct of repulsion made him pull away.

“Sorry,” Doyle said wryly, understanding; one hand rubbed the side of his face as he looked at Bodie, waiting.

Bodie patted his hand. “Don’t be embarrassed, mate. I’m just happy you’re enjoying yourself so much.”

But the fun was at an end: the rest of the session was taken up with a written paper of multiple choice questions. They both found it very easy, getting perfect scores— “’e marked his own paper, mind you,” Doyle pointed out loudly.

It was 2PM. As the rest of the class gathered together pencils, paper, coats, and made their

chattering way out, Doyle sauntered over and offered to tidy up. An exercise which ended in Doyle and Jo leaning on their elbows by the wall, engaged in a long, deep conversation, while Bodie grimly stacked every one of the twenty-four chairs himself.

Then, “Oi! You coming?” he jerked an eye towards the door, and Doyle turned his way.

“Oh. Right. Yeah.” He strode out towards Bodie. Turned at the last minute. “Hey. How about comin’ for a drink? Thirsty work, savin’ lives.”

A deep long dimple flashed in each cheek as she checked her watch. “Why not?”

And Bodie watched in disbelief as the two of them pushed past him laughing, and made their way to Bodie’s car, and stood there chatting, waiting for Bodie to open the doors for them.

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“Much as,” Bodie leaned nearer, “I love you, I hope you won’t take it too amiss if I go now.” He nodded at Doyle and stood up, jangling the car keys in one hand.

Doyle considered him over the rim of his pint pot. “Gonna abandon me, are you?”

“Well, you’ve got enough there to keep your hands full, haven’t you? And, it may have escaped your notice, but we *are* officially on duty.”

“Only standby. Do me a favour, Bodie—”

“Yeh,” Bodie said resignedly.

“Tell the Cow I’m takin’ two hours of my overdue leave, will you?”

“Ten minutes not enough?” Bodie marvelled.

Doyle leaned near him and winked. “Can’t rush these things. I reckon she’s going to turn out a peach. She’s married—”

“Bad news.”

“But her husband’s very understanding—”

“Still not good news. I’ve heard that one before.”

“Thing is, they’re into all this wifeswapping stuff. He likes to watch.”

Bodie remained where he was, eyes wide open, fixed on Doyle.

“Yeah, I know, tres kinky.” Doyle’s wry, expressive eye met his as he took a smacking swig of his lager.

“And you like the idea.” Doyle had that look about him; someone had thrown his switch and there was no stopping it now, countdown all the way to the end.

Doyle shrugged. “I dunno. Just, I reckon she’s going to know the game all right.”

Bodie couldn’t care less about Doyle’s plans for Jo, but the sudden introduction of a voyeuristic husband threw a whole different light on the matter. “As long as *watch* is all he does. You wanna be careful, sunshine. Sounds like deep water to me.” Not that Doyle was likely to listen to him, or take his advice if he did. If Doyle wanted to get into a sexual threesome with two people he hardly knew, or did not know at all, then he would, and that was an end to it. Doyle was old enough to know what he was doing; could look after himself better than anyone Bodie had ever met. Not a spare inch of flesh on him (except where it counted, Doyle assured him), smallish too, and yet he had the strength of high-tension steel and the nature of a mink. Exotic, but violent.

“Well, just make sure you tell me all about it afterwards.”

“I will. Now push off, will you, Bodie?” Jo was wending her way back through the chairs and tables. “Two’s company and all that.”

Bodie gave him a meaningful look. “Ah. My point entirely.”

“Husband’s away at the moment, anyway,” Doyle added, rising with grace to let Jo back in again behind the table.

“I’m off then,” Bodie smiled at them both, a blaze of blue-eyed innocence. He leaned down and murmured to Jo: “He’ll be putty in your hands, love. Just send him back in good working order, will you?”

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Bodie worked on the Ojuka report all afternoon, finally dropping it into Cowley’s in-tray by 5PM, where it was to cause the CI5 chief some surprise: the first ever on-time report from his best, worst agents 3.7 and 4.5.

Bodie was restless, various disconnected thoughts or feelings chasing round in his mind which he could not pin down: just the vague sense that he was not entirely happy about the way the day had gone, though backtracking it over and over did not result in enlightenment.

Well: in one sense he supposed it was all quite simple. It had aroused him, watching Doyle this morning, exposed and played with before a crowd: what that said about himself he did not know

or care, but for whatever reason, it had turned him on.

Doyle, similarly afflicted, had immediately taken steps to deal with his own sexual tension, while he, Bodie, was still here wrestling with his. So. Simple.

He would ring up Louise — or Diana — fix up a date for this evening, and that would take care of that.

The expectation did not fill him with wild excitement, but it was the best he likely to get. He could, after all, hardly go off and screw Doyle instead.

Though sometimes he reckoned Doyle might not say no.

But that was not good enough reason to go for it. Lead to all sorts of trouble, would a romantic fling with Ray Doyle. Half the reason he and Doyle were so good together was that extra edge, some superfine tuning of awareness, the attraction alive and strong between them. A dangerous attraction, it had to be said.

His R/T went off as he was cruising back home: he picked it up and held it close to him as he steered the car onehanded in and out of traffic. “3.7?” The peevish voice of his boss crackled at him.

Alpha One. Where’s Doyle, Bodie?

“Following a lead, sir,” Bodie said. “Someone had something he thought he could use.” He shut his eyes for a split second.

I’ll want you both in at seven tomorrow. Don’t be late.

Bodie exhaled with relief. “Are we ever, sir?”

And Bodie — get that partner of yours to write the report as usual next time. His punctuation’s marginally more by the book.

A wry smile crossed Bodie’s lips as he flipped off the channel; old man never missed a trick, he really never did.

He decided to call round at Ray’s on the way home, for no particular reason, see if he wanted a pint perhaps before Bodie’s date. He could ring Louise from Doyle’s flat: she worked till ten anyway, and with any luck she’d come off duty very tired and only too ready to fall into a warm and welcoming bed.

About to press the buzzer at Doyle’s flat, a little message all prepared on his lips, ‘priapismic’ being the operative word—Bodie noticed with a rapid chilling sensation that the door was in fact slightly ajar, hardly noticeable really, just that the catch had not quite snicked down when someone pulled it to.

Ray, in a tearing hurry to get the girl, whatsername, to bed?

Or — ?

Trouble flicked on in his mind; one hand diving inside his jacket to wrap around the familiar, comforting shape of his gun he gently nudged the door open with his foot, and listened. His heart-rate was picking up, beginning a drumroll in his ears, a prickle of danger raised all the hairs on his skin. No sounds.

He kicked the door wide and open and burst in, gun fixed and ready. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dim hall light, but his senses told him there was nothing there and nobody waiting. He rose from his kneeling position and shut the door quietly behind him. Still wary, gun still drawn and ready, he listened, then nosed the Browning's barrel round the kitchen door, and then the lounge—nothing.

That left the bedroom. And at once, all notions of trouble left him as he approached it along the passage, because he could hear them as he drew near, sighs and murmurs and moans. Still, Doyle?

He stuck his head around the door. The room was darkened, just one light on beside the bed on which two bodies surged, making wild and passionate love.

Bodie grinned to himself, walking noiselessly over the carpet. Doyle deserved this. He really did. It wasn't funny, crack CI5 agent leaving his door open. To any passing madman.

“Got you,” he said softly, appearing beside the bed. Ray Doyle was lying on his back, the woman astride him, both naked, writhing. Bodie took time to admire the full swell of pointed breasts, huge dark nipples, the way she had her head thrown back, the loud, rhythmic way she was panting — “Yes. Oh. God. Yes.” Doyle had his hands on her hips: his thumbs dipped into and caressed the cleft of her body near where it was joined to his, and that seemed to increase the pitch and crescendo of the cries.

Doyle was quieter, his pelvis rocking up, and down, and up again; his head had turned to one side and he had, unlike Jo, taken in the fact of Bodie's presence, with just enough breath to whisper, “What the fuck are you doing here,” a choice of phrase which amused Bodie.

He laid the black mouth of his gun tenderly at Doyle's temple. “You left the door open, Ray. Very careless.” He leaned nearer Doyle's ear. “Bang bang, sweetheart,” he whispered. “You're dead.”

“Shove off, Bodie,” Doyle gasped at some private, exquisite pang; he shut his eyes and whimpered.

“Oh, I dunno. Might as well stay now I'm here, mightn't I?” remarked Bodie, spinning the gun and stashing it safely away. He leaned back against the bedhead and regarded the action with a

desultory eye.

Jo was grinding herself down on Ray's body now, meaning business. Doyle had his eyes shut again; his skin was flushed with sexual heat. His body was withdrawing itself from hers and spearing into her again, such timing, a boat tossing up and smacking down to meet the sea. They must be getting close. Ray certainly looked as if he couldn't hold out much longer, his forehead creased, his mouth parted, his breathing swift and sobbing as if he were enduring the limits of pain. Bodie smoothed his hair back for him, then let his hand wander, warm skin, damp curls of hair on his chest. He ran his fingers through it lightly, Doyle so distracted he thought he was beyond noticing, until he glanced again at Doyle's face, saw the sultry haze of his eyes alight and watching him. Lightheaded, Bodie smiled at him, and his fingers found Doyle's nipple, pinching it lightly.

Doyle winced, eyes closing, and cleared his throat.

"Kiss it," he murmured, his voice rough, rasping.

"That's naughty, Ray," Bodie whispered to him, eyes bright and hot with his own desire. "Too far gone to care, eh?"

Doyle's eyes followed his lips as they grazed softly over moist and silken skin. Watched Bodie open his mouth, take his nipple in and suck, sweet and strong; nuzzle it with gentle lips, suck again. And as Bodie's eyes lifted up to his face Doyle gasped sharply, his whole body convulsing as he arched violently upwards; and Jo shrieking, highpitched, once and then once more. As she threw herself forward onto Doyle's chest Bodie moved back; through hard, slitted eyes he watched Doyle come, and come, trembling all over his body. And when the fuss and the fury was over Bodie got up and walked out of the room to leave them alone.

In the kitchen he took the kettle off the gas ring, filled it from the cold tap, replaced it and lit the gas under it.

Then he stood by the window, staring out, though whether the view was the Clapham Road allotments or the pyramids of Egypt he could not have told you.

When a noise behind him startled him he had whipped around with his gun drawn and ready to fire before he had time to think—

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered throwing up one hand in apology, tucking the gun away beneath his arm.

Her eyes were wide and her pose frozen. "Edgy, aren't you?" she said sarcastically.

The kettle began to whistle. "Cup of tea?" he asked her.

"Please." She was fully dressed, back in her old jeans and stripy sweater again. "Well, it's been an *interesting* afternoon....."

“Have fun, did you?” he enquired pleasantly, stirring a spoon briskly around. “Doyle up to scratch, was he?”

She looked at him without smiling. “What do you think? Look, I’ll leave my number, in case he wants to call. Daytime’s best.” She accepted the mug he handed her and sipped at it in silence, exclaiming through a mouthful, “God, will you look at the time. Must be off.” She set down the mug on the drainer. “Thanks for the tea.” Hands on hips, she winked at him. “And the rest.”

“Did you *get* any rest?” Bodie enquired, interested. And she laughed delightfully, moving for the door. At the last minute she turned, dark hair swinging, and gave him a dimpled grin.

“Almost forgot.” She reached into her back pocket, took out two pieces of paper. “You both passed,” she said with a straight face, and then she slapped Bodie on the arm and walked out chuckling.

Bodie set the certificates on Doyle’s mantelpiece, one at each end behind Doyle’s horrible Chinese dogs. It was time for him to go: he did not particularly want to see Doyle again before the morning. By the morning they would both be—just as they usually were, and they need never think about what had happened. But he had already left it too late.

“She gone?”

At least he didn’t pull his gun on Doyle, appearing now in the doorway, rumpled head emerging through the neck of his shirt, mouth distorted by a huge yawn.

“Yeh, gone.”

“Didn’t hang around,” Doyle said, not questioning, just commenting; he stepped towards the hob, intent on a reviving drink.

“She left her number.”

“Did she?” Doyle said, spooning instant coffee into a mug. “Want a coffee?” he indicated the mugs with a trigger finger.

“Already had one.”

Doyle eyed Bodie over the rim of his mug, not missing the dark, brooding gaze, the sulky droop of his mouth. Bodie just stood there, leaning on the drainer, arms crossed, eyes trained on the floor; they flicked up, expressionless, to meet Doyle’s, then down again.

Trouble of some sort. Doyle could see it in the blaze of Bodie’s eyes and feel it in the air, charged with Bodie’s tension. He mentally shrugged it away. Bodie would tell him if he wanted to, and if he didn’t, Russian torture wouldn’t make him open his mouth. He swooped down to look in the fridge.

“Want something to eat? Eggs. Fancy an omelette?” He got to his feet, precariously holding four eggs in one hand. “You know your trouble, don’t you?” And his eyes homed in on Bodie suddenly, sharp and penetrating, too fast for Bodie to look away.

“No,” Bodie said, very quiet. “Think you do?”

Doyle gave him a cheerful, lopsided grin. “Bottle it up too much, you do. Look at you, all tensed up. You should have asked Jo for a massage. She was an expert.” He shrugged a shoulder experimentally, the one Parker had twisted behind him yesterday.

“Oh, I’ll bet she was.”

“Pity she had to rush off,” said Doyle, reminiscent, and at last, from somewhere, Bodie found the will to smile.

“So help me, Ray, don’t tell me you’re up for it again.”

Doyle winked at him, scratched his chest, broke the eggs into a bowl. “You know how it is. Just need a bit of time to build up me strength again.” He whisked away with energy.

Watching him, Bodie stirred himself to move away from the drainer at last. “Yeah, well, I think I’m in danger of forgetting. Can I use your phone?” He was already moving towards it.

“Who’s it going to be?” Doyle asked, intrigued. “That nurse — Louise was it?” Well, she should give a good massage if anyone can.” He tipped the eggs into pan and ignited the gas. “Look, Bodie. I get the feeling you’re in a mood with me. Are you?”

That stopped Bodie in his tracks. He looked over at the downcast head and said to Doyle’s hunched back, “Why should I be?”

“I dunno. Well, I dunno,” Doyle said inelegantly, turning to face him. “Wish it had been you with Jo, is that it?”

Bodie faced him out squarely. “Well, what do you think? I’m not made of stone, you know,” and a wide, considering grin spread across Doyle’s face.

“I knew it.”

“Psychic, aren’t you?” Bodie observed, not sweetly.

“These eggs are done,” Doyle said, peering into the pan. “More scrambled than anything.”

“Like your brains, then.”

“You could have had her,” Doyle said, head down. “Why didn’t you?”

Bodie's heart picked up speed again. Doyle seemed to have lost his appetite, ignoring the plate Bodie was holding out to him. Bodie took the pan himself, tipped the contents onto the plate.

"She looked 'appy enough with what she was getting from you. Same to show her what she was missing."

Doyle looked at him, amused. Bodie was wolfing the eggs down, waste not, want not. He held out a forkful for Doyle, watched as Doyle swallowed it absentmindedly, opened his mouth for Bodie to feed in more, eventually taking over the fork and finishing the plateful.

"You never made your phone call."

Bodie shrugged. The urgency of his mood had fled him now, leaving him nothing so much as tired; he turned away from Doyle, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "Think I'll just go home, okay?"

"Stay if you want," Doyle said. "Quick beer, anyway," and Bodie nodded, might as well. Doyle was going ahead of him into the lounge, spotting the twin certificates behind the china dogs and chuckling as he examined them.

"Worked hard for these, didn't I?"

"Hey, who was her star pupil?" Bodie reminded him, affronted. "You just volunteered for extra stretcher duty, that's all."

Doyle laughed, a rich, dirty chuckle. "And this was Cowley's idea of a day of rest."

"Day of—? Oh. After Ojuka, you mean." Bodie sat down heavily on the settee and waited for Doyle to bring him a beer, which Doyle seemed in no hurry to do; he was wandering around, peering out of the window, drawing curtains, switching on lights, the telly. Very cosy and domestic.

Yesterday, Doyle had nearly died.

The day before, Doyle had shot within an inch of Bodie's brains to save his life.

What a bloody life.

"About time," he said, taking the cold can Doyle was holding out to him, but his partner was paying attention to the news, which was focussing on a bomb which had exploded at an army barracks in Northern Ireland. Bodie watched Doyle instead, the curve of his rounded cheek, the cool sculpture of his mouth. He was wearing jeans with all the colour washed out of them, still tight, the lean line of his thigh pressing next to Bodie's. Bodie swallowed some beer, and on impulse he slipped an arm around his partner, squeezed his upper arm tight, feeling the thin strength of it, the way the rockhard muscle tensed to meet his grip.

Doyle was taking no notice of him, incensed by the carnage in Derry— “I mean, I ask you, they were just doing their fucking job.”

“Misplaced concern, Doyle. Don’t waste your breath.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“I mean,” Bodie said, “try looking a bit closer to home.”

Doyle shrugged his arm out of Bodie’s grasp. “D’you mind? I’m black and blue as it is.”

“Nearly lost you yesterday, you know. And you were just doing your fucking job.”

Doyle grimaced. “Don’t remind me.”

“But there’s still tomorrow.”

“Bodie.” Doyle turned to face him, exasperated, inclined to be annoyed, but his irritation faded out, the look in his eyes deepening in answer to what he saw in Bodie’s face. He went on, more quietly, “All right. Point taken. But do we have to think about it tonight?”

Bodie’s lips twisted wryly. “Reckon you ’ave to think about it sometimes.”

“It helps?” Doyle challenged.

Bodie sucked some more beer out of his can. “Makes you realise — better make the most of every day you get.”

Doyle’s expressive face twisted again. “Can’t say I didn’t try today.” He glanced over at his partner; in an oddly pensive mood was Bodie, dark eyes midnight-shadowed, fringed by downswapt lashes as he studied the can turning over and over in his hands, the twist of his mouth sardonic, violent even.

“You should have phoned Louise, Bodie,” he said with sudden perception; he himself had passed beyond the post-danger blues, nothing like a good workout to do it, everyone knew that.

Bodie stirred a little beside him, eyes flicking to his with a flash of mockery. “Yeah, well, maybe I’d just as soon be here with you.” And his sudden, savage smile had a devil’s taint to it.

Doyle took that on board with outward calm, though he was considering what it might mean: nothing more than Bodie in a difficult, provocative mood, possibly.

On the other hand, Bodie had been very gentle to him lately, *angelfish*, and the like. All the grittiness, one-upmanship, violence, he now reserved for people other than Doyle: Doyle seemed to walk inside a charmed aura at Bodie’s side, the two of them together against the world.

Yeah. You let me in, didn't you....

Took a long time, god knew how many perfect shots across his line of cover: he had risked his own life time and time again to save Bodie, and Bodie had done the same for him, no thanks expected, never count the cost. But there was of course a cost: both hard, both unsentimental, first had come respect, that was all, and then another feeling which had a life all of its own, out of control now and pushing them out to the limit.

He knew how Bodie felt. Goddamnit, he ought to: he had been to the same places, seen the same things, lived and died and lived again a thousand times and would again if their luck stayed in, if Bodie's eye held, and his own.

Deep thoughts, deep water. His hand strayed to his midriff, caressing it lightly; yesterday had been hard, and the beating from the sadistic Parker rather more severe than he had allowed Bodie to know.

“All right?”

“Yeah, just tired.”

He saw Bodie's sharp, hungry eyes range over him, but he did nothing. “Get us another beer, will you,” was all he said. “Or maybe we need something stronger.”

When Bodie returned he put his hand out for the tumbler of amber Scotch, shut his eyes, tipped his head back.

“Didn't it get you all worked up, watching us like that?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“Maybe,” was the only reply he got.

The liquid fire of the Scotch burned sweetly down to his guts. “Would've done me.”

Bodie made a little sound beside him, sneer or smile. “Yeh, well, you. Not all like you, y'know, mate. Some of us have great self-control.”

Doyle grinned, lip lifting away from sharp, uneven white teeth. “Never seen that as much of a virtue.” His eyes snapped open, catching Bodie's burning into his skin; his heart was racing, fear or excitement, both. Because Bodie in this mood was volatile, dangerous; anything could happen.

Bodie watched Doyle's elbow lift, long fingers raking through his own curls; his shirt was clean, smelt sweet from the washing line, but beneath his armpit was a fresh, damp patch of sweat. The cuffs were rolled back, as always, almost to his elbow, his forearms honeybrown from outdoor shoots. He had not fully buttoned the shirt, and as he moved one nipple was plainly visible, also the crease in his flat belly; the hair went all the way down from his nipples to below his navel and, presumably, beyond.

Bodie watched him with one desultory eye. There was silence for a while.

Then: “She was a find, wasn’t she,” Doyle yawned.

“I wouldn’t know, would I?”

“Lovely little mover,” Doyle said, and he wriggled reminiscently.

Bodie moved sharply. “Don’t keep on about it, Doyle.”

Doyle was all malice as he said, “Sorry. Keep forgetting you didn’t get off today.”

Bodie’s mouth twisted, caught unawares by the harsh whisky sting. “Yeah, well, keep on bringing it up and I just might be desperate enough to make a pass at you, Doyle.”

Doyle flicked him an enigmatic look. “Yeah?”

“Well, it has been known, you know.” Bodie threw himself back, closed his eyes. Now it was Doyle’s turn to look, unobserved; his partner was wearing a cream shirt, black cords, black shoes. He still wore his gun, banded on a worn webbing holster. Probably the last thing he took off at night. His chin was faintly shaded with blueblack stubble, his profile lazy, handsome. Bodie had all the dark tough beauty of a fighting war-film hero.

“I got kicked yesterday,” Doyle said, quiet. “Want to see?”

“Oh yeah,” said Bodie bleakly. “Can’t wait. That’ll be a real thrill for me, Doyle.”

Doyle undid the last button of his shirt and pushed it off his shoulders. Arching his back a little, he began to unbuckle his jeans.

Bodie’s eyes flashed open at the sound. “What the ’ell—”

“Look at this.” Doyle unzipped his fly, pulled down the band of navy underpants to show Bodie Parker’s footprint, etched in black. Bodie spared it hardly a glance; his eyes, hard and dark and angry, were on Doyle’s face.

“I’d be careful if I were you. I’d say you were flirting with me for all you’re worth.”

There was a curious, offbeat stillness in the room, one man’s tension a feed for the other. Doyle met his gaze, unblinking. “Would you? Well, you know me best, Bodie.”

Bodie said softly, darkly, “Some people might say you deserved all you got.”

Doyle’s face twisted, abandoning pretence, his patience at an end. “Ah, come on, Bodie. Look, you’re obviously desperate for it. The vibes ’ave been comin’ at me all evening,” and this was

suddenly desperately dangerous: they had arrived at last at the closed door.

Bodie was, he could see, under control, the terrifying control of anger, but only just, a pulsebeat leaping in his throat as he said, slowly, “None of your damned business, Doyle.”

Doyle hooted. “Oh, that’s rich, that is. You made it my business, comin’ here this afternoon. Watching us — touching me —” He lay back, one hand pushing his shirt out of the way, shoving down his underpants a little more, revealing the pinkness of his sweetly curled cock. “Well, now you can touch me some more. I’m here and your girlfriend isn’t. Do it to me, Bodie.”

Bodie’s eyes dwelt on him, from here to there, angry, hungry.

“Come on,” Doyle said again, urging, coaxing, “come on, Bodie. You’re so hot for it you won’t even notice the difference. I promise you.”

His throat tight with fury, Bodie tapped him on the cheek with one finger, the only touch he allowed himself, the blaze of his eyes disturbed and violent. “Very touching offer, mate. Thank you. It’s at times like this you find out who your friends really are, innit?”

Doyle turned this aside with a sound of exasperation. “Don’t try and pretend with me, Bodie. Playing cool till you freeze up. I know you, Bodie, and I know what you want. Your eyes...you’ve been bleeding for this, all fuckin’ night.”

“Not for you,” Bodie said, deep and low. “Sweet as you are...what have I ever done that makes you think I could possibly want you, Ray?”

Doyle saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Bodie’s arm was shaking. He sat up, with an involuntary wince of effort, and reached over to begin undoing Bodie’s shirt buttons. “Didn’t say you did, did I? Don’t make a big deal of it: you’re in the mood for it, just bloody look at you, and I’m willin’. Shut your eyes.” And as Bodie did nothing, adding with more violence, “Shut your eyes, I could be anybody, damnit. Pretend.”

To hell with it: Doyle had happened on the perfect excuse. No big deal, two mates together, a little drunk: they need never talk about it, not ever. He would not and he knew Doyle never would.

He closed his eyes.

Lay back.

Forced himself to be still as Doyle’s hands, quick and light, moved over him, sorting through layers until he reached the man inside: he was hard, of course, as he had been on and off all day, forever, and he could not help, not with the strongest will in the world, the thrill that raged through him at the first cool touch of Ray’s hand.

He must have made some sound, some betraying word, perhaps, *‘oh Ray please’* because he

heard Doyle answer him, very far away, and he knew they were in deep trouble, because he could not stop himself now, he wanted it too much, more than anything he had ever wanted.

When he opened his eyes at last to stare down at the long fingers ringing him, the flexing of Doyle's slender wrists as he worked on him, quick and sure and hard; oh such skill, Doyle, you could sell it. He must have practised on himself, to get this good, some lonely nights, the lights turned low: now wouldn't that be a sight to see...

Doyle murmured to him something, his name, and then: "yeah, you like this, don't you," and then his name again. Helpless, tender, Bodie reached out a hand to him, and in quick understanding Doyle nuzzled his fingers, turning his cheek against Bodie's palm over and over again; he kissed it, and his belly, and then he looked up. His eyes were very bright; "Is this what you want, Bodie?" he whispered; and Bodie watched through slitted eyes Doyle swallow the tip of his cock, wicked tongue flickering, the wet heat shocking; it sent him sky-high, right out over the edge. He twined his fingers in Doyle's hair and dragged him off hard, his cock shooting, the quick white spurts flying away from him while his whole body convulsed in the sweetest, sharpest pleasure: he heard himself cry out, like a man gutshot, the cruellest of deaths, and the most certain.

=====|||=====

It was very late now: midnight, or soon after. They had lain this way for a while; perhaps they had slept, Doyle had lost track of time and couldn't be sure. Bodie was awake now, anyway. Doyle could sense the movements of his eyes looking out over Doyle's head. At least Bodie had held him afterwards, Doyle's head on the smooth warm planes of his chest, the hardmuscled circle of Bodie's arms loosely around him. Once or twice he had felt Bodie's fingers slip through his hair, smoothing it, in what was surely a caress. And that was more than he had expected.

He didn't want to move, not even to speak, knowing that to break the spell would mean the end of things—perhaps forever, but at last he found the courage, lifted his head away from Bodie's heart and spoke his name.

Above him Bodie sighed, a little waft of cool air stirring his bare skin. "Yeah?"

"All right?"

"Yeah." Bodie pulled away from him now, not in an unfriendly way, but gently, and sat up. Doyle watched him look down at his white shirt, wet through to his skin in several places: he wondered what was going through Bodie's mind.

"Should've let me go the whole way, sunshine," he said softly. "I would have done."

Bodie looked at him briefly. "Didn't want to choke you. Or whatever."

"Oh, cocky," Doyle murmured, and gave him a slow, beautiful smile. After a moment Bodie

smiled back at him, enigmatically, the feeling in his eyes too deep to read.

“Must say, you did that as if you were born to it.”

“Was quite a sight. You comin’ silver bullets everywhere. Would’ve seen off any vampire.” He was chatting for the sake of it, seeing Bodie reach for his holster, begin to strap it on over the stained shirt.

“You goin’?” he made himself say.

Bodie’s reply came as a relief to him; he had had some idea that Bodie might be angry with him, or with himself, but angry, anyway.

“Not much point now, is there — Cowley wants us at 7. Don’t mind if I stay, do you?”

Doyle shook his head. He reached out for Bodie’s hand, took it in his own, squeezed it very hard. Neither of them said anything for a moment. Doyle was gathering all his courage for the next question, almost but not quite the hardest of all.

“Well? Was it good — or not?” he demanded, with cheeky bravado, and after a moment Bodie smiled, one of his rare, sweet smiles, a warmth beginning around his mouth and softening it, lighting up his eyes as he looked into Doyle’s. *Don’t let the cat get at ’im.....*

“With you? Ah, mate, you don’t need to ask, do you? Better than I ever dreamed, okay?”

“Then why do I get the feeling you wish I hadn’t done it?” Doyle sharpened up his tone, though he almost wished he hadn’t as he saw the light die in Bodie’s eyes as he looked outwards, away from Doyle, though when Doyle pushed against him, demanding, his arm went around Doyle and stayed there, easy, as if it belonged there.

“I dunno...superstitious? Or something.”

“How d’you mean?”

Bodie’s face turned towards him again: it wore an expression of absorption as he pushed Doyle’s shirt aside, began to trace around his nipples with one squaretipped finger.

He spoke very softly, looking at his own hand, not at Doyle’s face. “I wouldn’t lie to you, Ray, there’s been times before I’ve thought about this. Thought about you like this. I shouldn’t have, I know, but—”

“Ah, come on. You know I’ve thought about it too.”

Bodie went on as if he hadn’t heard, “I always thought, better that we never let it get off the ground. Never let it get a hold on us. It was always there, but—as long as we never did anything about it, I had the feeling we’d be okay. We’d be together. Nothing would go wrong—”

“A lucky charm.” Ray Doyle laughed, quite harshly; and he grabbed back Bodie’s hand, laced his fingers through it and brought it to his mouth for a kiss. “You’re mad, Bodie, you know that. What difference can it possibly make—?”

“I dunno,” Bodie said, and looked into his eyes, a look so sweet, so searching it got to Doyle and stabbed him to the heart. “Never change a winning game, they say. And now we have.”

“Well, at least we’ll die ’appy,” Doyle shot back at him, but he saw this was not funny for Bodie, and he sobered quickly. “What do you wanna do then?” Suddenly he had arrived at it: the hardest question, and he was already feeling an angry premonition about the answer. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, jumped to his feet. “How does this sound then? Can’t undo it maybe: but—” He shrugged. “—we got a bit drunk one night, a bit carried away, I blew you—not that big a deal, is it? And now we forget it.”

He began to move, blindly, towards the dark archway of the bedroom. Bodie was there with him in an instant, sliding arms around his waist and pulling him back against his own body, nuzzling at his ear.

“Ah no, you got me wrong there, mate. I don’t want to forget it. I couldn’t forget it.”

The lightest touch of Bodie’s lips against his ear was sending shivers all through Doyle. Hunger vanquished anger and ignited desire instead; he tipped his head back against Bodie’s shoulder and let Bodie kiss the side of his throat.

“Could do the Heimlich Manoeuvre on me from here,” he whispered.

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t be top of my list.”

Bodie’s hands slipped around to the fastening of his clothes, began to unbuckle his belt and unzip his jeans. All willingness he pressed himself back against Bodie, felt the hard dagger of his thrust against him, aggressive, all power. It scared him and thrilled him and made him hard and ready, to struggle with Bodie, to give in to Bodie, he didn’t care which.

“All the way this time,” he whispered as Bodie threw him down on the bed; and Bodie looked up from between his thighs to meet his eyes, to share a moment of perfect, perfect understanding.

Madness.

They were mad to do this.

But they were going to anyway.

End

Zeropanic

And No Passes!

"I'll have to hurry you." Doyle frowned piercingly over the rims of his tinted glasses and Bodie squirmed uncomfortably in the black leather seat.

They were, of course, playing Mastermind. Doyle was not in the Chair, but he **was** wearing his little hat named Inquisitor -- scrawled on the fabric with a purple felt-tip, he had spelled it phonetically.

"I'm tired of this game, Doyle," Bodie said abruptly. "Tired and sick. You always win. I never get to ask the questions."

"That's only because you can't do an Icelandic accent," Doyle was quick to point out. "Okay, we'll give up. I've something to discuss with you anyway. It's about Cowley's Half-Dressed Appreciation---"

"Shuddup!" Bodie howled, leaping up, hands pressed to his ears. "Shuddup, shuddup, shuddup!" He could be **so** unoriginal.

"I've started," Doyle said between clenched teeth, "so I'll finish. Look, you know I'm Treasurer."

"Trust you. Never one to resist the lure of the peso, are you, Doyle?"

"Have you met the ruddy Chairman? An' you're the Secretary, and the point is, there isn't any lure of the peso as you so crudely mispronounce it, because we've only got one member."

"One's enough, innit?" said Bodie in surprise.

"Not for Cowley. He weeps constantly. Night and day, he weeps, sifting through all the blown-up posters of himself he had done with the special nipple-tint that no one wants."

"Who is this lone member anyway?"

Doyle consulted the Roll of Membership. "Someone called Walsh."

"Means nothing to me."

"What we need is incentive. To draw in new members."

"We could give away little plastic figures," Bodie suggested. "Like cereal."

"Nah. Look, Bodie, these people whose subscriptions we're tryin' to solicit, all they're interested in is pure male beauty, animal lust, the power of the naked masculine form---"

"Not naked. Half-dressed."

"That's my idea. We'll propose a special New Member Folio. Kind of advertising gimmick, prominently featuring *more* photos of the alluring male form, half- dressed."

"I don't think Cowley would," said Bodie doubtfully. "He's a bit off posing ever since his waist developed another big, white, spare tyre to go on top of the other one."

Doyle winced at the image. "Not Cowley, leaden-lobes. Us."

"But they'll know it's not him," said Bodie with powerful intelligence. "They wouldn't join a Cowley appreciation society if they wanted pictures of us, would they?"

Doyle unveiled his master stroke, with a flourish. "They *won't* know -- not if we photograph the other half."

"Whaddya mean?"

"Cowley *half-dressed.* So far, the big publicity shot is Cowley half-dressed from waist to knee. But we," Doyle declared, "We'll be half dressed --- from *neck to navel.* Cut our heads off the shot. Shirts to the waist. The rest as nature intended. How will they know that's not Cowley? Especially if we stand side by side."

"That's brilliant, Doyle."

"I'll ring the Chairman now."

She approved the plan.

End

Zeropanic

The Anniversary

Sebastian

Reflective and rather poignant. Swans mate for life... Years later I remembered this line when asked to sew a square for a slash-fans' quilt: I designed a little scene of two swans side by side, one eye midnight blue and one sea-green. I even managed to embroider it and send it off to be sewn into place. And it may be that the stitches have unravelled by now, but the timeless love of our heroes? never...

=====|||=====

The banqueting hall was vast, timbered with huge beams, the vaulted ceiling so far above it made Bodie dizzy to look up at the massive crystal chandelier hanging there, shimmering with points of light.

The table was seventy feet long; at one end, the furthest from the CI5 lowlies, was a shorter table set perpendicular to make the whole an elongated T-shape. Here sat Cowley and the dignitaries. If he leant forward and peered, Bodie could just see the sandy wisps and broadtoothed smile of his chief, who was apparently having a good time at this celebration of CI5's longevity, his glass lifted high.

Well, somebody had to be enjoying themselves.

Bodie was utterly disenchanted.

He had hated the fussy over-sauced food, the array of solid silver cutlery, the shirt and tie he had had to wear which was tight around his throat, making him fidget. He hated the silly curly candelabras dripping pink wax onto the starched and scratchy tablecloth. Hated the flower floating in his fingerbowl, and the napkin supposed to look like a rose stuffed in his twisty-stemmed wineglass.

Hated the fact that he was sitting between Williams (MI6) who was a wet blanket of the first order, and Anson, who was okay, but who smoked relentlessly between courses and who kept treading on Bodie's foot, Bodie long ago having ceased to try to determine whether Anson intended some covertly meaningful message by this or whether it was just Anson's innate clumsiness.

Give me a takeout from McDonald's, any day.

Spaced out on alcohol and nervous tension, he was ill at ease and edgy, longing for the ceremonial dinner to be at an end although even that would only mean the speeches were about to start. 'Well gentlemen, I'm sure you're all hopin' this will be brief - ' the chummy smile, the pause for the ripple of approving laughter, and fuckin' 'ell you're more convinced than ever you'll be here till midnight listening to the old stuffed shirts rambling on about other old stuffed shirts.

He stuck a morose fork into his cheesecake.

Prefer the packet kind anyway.

Williams was rather drunk - he was just the type to get overly dignified on two pale sherries - and was telling Bodie about his fiancée Daphnis and the plans for their wedding in two weeks.

Bodie had not been listening for the past hour.

Instead he had switched off to inside himself and was surrounding his psyche with little comforts, such as the day off tomorrow to drive home, he and Doyle together sharing both the miles and profane and pithy remarks of their impressions of this, the preceding night, which would wipe it all out and make it all okay, just another thing to laugh at once it was all in the past.

'Do you remember - '

Yes, they had a lot to remember, he and Doyle: they went back a long time.

" - married?"

Like a timeslip, the words spoken loudly in his ear shot him back into the as-yet awful present. He was staring straight into Williams' clouded owlsh eyes, courteous interrogation carefully plastered onto his doggedly-concentrating choirboy's face.

"What? Sorry, I missed that?"

A timely explosion of laughter further up the table lent credence to the excuse. Williams repeated it, slurring less this time. "You any plans to ge' married?"

Marikka chased briefly across the shadows in his mind, and was blotted out.

"No," Bodie answered, "No, that's something I don't need."

Patient and witless, Williams waited for more.

Suddenly detached from it all, Bodie shrugged. He gave Williams a smile, swift and careless. "Got all I need," he said, throwaway, and Williams looked away and reached clumsily for his glass, suddenly uneasy, his fuddled mind clutching back for the cause but all it came up with was Bodie smiling, and it passed forever forgotten as the waiter at his elbow poured coffee.

Bodie's eyes traced idly over the guests; he was looking for Doyle, suddenly needing to see him. If Doyle hadn't been here, Bodie wouldn't have come. Just knowing Doyle was here in this unfamiliar nerve-racking situation immediately eased the tension, not least because he knew Doyle would be suffering as he was, perfectly in harmony.

Sentimental. You got very attached to your partner, everyone knew that. Bodie'd been told as much on joining CI5 but never really believed it until it happened. He grinned across at Doyle, who had turned away from his neighbour - Murph, who was feeding on grapes, reaching forwards with absurdly delicate finger and thumb to pluck the choicest - and was looking back over his shoulder right at his partner.

Telepathy, again. Must be; it happened far too often for chance.

Wrinkling his nose, the obscenity Bodie had been about to mouth never formed.

With that meeting of the eyes, the link between them deepened, enclosing them as if everything else had been switched off. Doyle had an odd expression on his face, a flying feyness lighting his eyes, a little smile on his mouth; he had days when he looked ugly, and days when he -

Bodie's guts knitted in response, his breath catching. Doyle continued to look at him, eyes gleaming a little; he tilted his head slightly, his curls shining bronze-tipped in the erratically dancing light of the candle and chandelier. Not knowing what else to do, Bodie smiled at him, quite an impersonal smile, then looked down at his plate.

Christ.

His heart was kicking fast and furious at his ribcage. He scythed the remaining cheesecake into wedges with his fork, then pushed it aside.

"Drink your bloody coffee, 3.7," boomed Anson, leaning towards him and exhaling a noxious grey stream of smoke his way. Unprepared, Bodie stayed unflinching in the full blast of it.

He drank his coffee in enormous, ungentlemanly gulps. When he next looked up, Doyle's curly head was leaning away from him, up towards Cowley's end.

The speeches were beginning.

Bed was dormitory style. Three by three, almost like the Ark, counted off from the dining table as they left. Anson, Williams, Bodie, nearest the door. He lay, strangely unable to sleep though he was bonetired and dizzy on drink and overload.

The speeches buzzed in his mind; the clatter of cutlery, the scrape of chairs, people talking, talking; the scent of meat juices, spilt warm cognac.

Restless, he rolled onto one side and stared into the darkness. Anson sighed and coughed in his sleep. Williams twitched and muttered, one leg thrashing at the sheet. Daphnis! you lucky, lucky girl.

Not for me.

'Got all I want.'

And yet, he had nothing.

Sod it. He thumped the pillow with a fist, pounding it back to plumpness. Go to sleep. Sleep perchance to dream.

Lying on his back, one hand stroked down the smooth skin of his chest to drift in dense curls. Anson coughed again, shifting. Abruptly, he took his hand away. Bloody, bloody hell.

Can't sleep.

Angry for no particular reason he threw back the covers and got out of bed, not caring if the floorboards did creak.

The fifty or so agents were housed largely in the servants' quarters and up here there was no sign of the luxury that had invested the dinner with such sickly opulence. Bodie was happier here, on the scrubbed bare boards of the corridor, lit only by moonlight through dormer windows, the air cool from numerous draughts here at the top of the house; the plain bathroom he eventually came to complete with the original bulky white prewar plumbing. Everywhere seemed quiet: when he used the facilities it sounded like Niagara starting up. He shook himself, tucked himself back into his pyjamas, and turned to leave.

Doyle was there, outside the door.

Pressed against the wall, he looked like some wild creature of the night, hair riotous, untouched by light, only his eyes gleaming. Bodie stopped in shock. Doyle's arms reached out, dragged him close, and locked their mouths together.

Teeth clashed coolly, startlingly harassed beneath the softness of lips; then instinctively their mouths eased around into comfort. The kiss was savage, and wholehearted, full of the passion Doyle was throwing into it with every atom of will at his command.

Now Bodie knew he was dreaming. In the silent rays of the moon, locked against his partner, feeling the warm hard suppleness of him through thin cotton: yes, this was the stuff which fed dreams, Doyle drinking from his mouth with the desperation and singlemindedness of an infant suckling.

It was darkly, sweetly erotic, to have Doyle's tongue inside his mouth. But something weird would happen in a moment, Bodie thought, like he turns into Betty and I come and then I wake up with a wet belly and a very peculiar sexy dream behind me -

Hey Doyle, guess what I dreamed last night.

Doyle would show no surprise. He knew that as surely as he knew the touch of his partner holding him, Doyle's hand beneath his armpit, the other gripping his upper arm; the thin fingers dug. He drew back then and Bodie gazed into the flawed, shadowed face, taking a deep breath as if to speak.

And then suddenly Doyle was gone, elusive and tricky as nightlight; no word spoken.

Dazed, Bodie made his way back to his room, almost stumbling; the tenderness of bruised lips was real and he knew whatever else it might have been, that savage, desperate little struggle in the dark while the giant house slept had never been a dream.

How, then, to sleep now....

He lay awake, fists clenched in the dark, his mind in a turmoil.

The scent of Doyle was pressed onto him, the familiar subtle fragrance that clung to Doyle even when he was sweating. The clothes he took off always carried it: at home in Bodie's wardrobe was a shirt of Doyle's he had left there once and Bodie was always forgetting to give it back. Okay, so it must derive from something quite prosaic, like a brand of soap he always used, but still.

What the hell was Doyle playing at?

Capricious as only very attractive people can be, Doyle always had had a tendency to be flirtatious with him, when the mood was on him.

Him, too - "send someone in to scrub your back - " and Doyle, arch, looking back, hands on his narrow dirty-jumpsuit-clad hips....

Like his beauty, icy coldness flitted in and out of Doyle and when he turned on the charm it was therefore all the more compulsive, light flooding over dust, picking out highlights here, and there, so that you could no more drag your eyes away than sweep it all into dullness with one scudding flash of a broom.

Bodie's insides ached.

I want

What did he want?

Someone: on this lonely night of too many nights, he wanted someone for his own.

Doyle must have been feeling that way too. Be asleep now, reassured; even comforted in some strange way, as Bodie had been just to see him across a crowded table when they were, for one moment, alone together. They should have put us to sleep together, he thought; it's only natural, always paired off in CI bloody 5, they expect us to die together for chrissake so why not sleep together?

Jesus Christ.

Something was wrong with tonight.

How the hell could he be lying here seriously agonising over being split from Doyle for one night, and moreover, trying to rationalise it as if it were a normal reaction?

You're a mess, 3.7. Need a session with our Kate, you do. God, she'd have a field day over this. 'Well, doctor, first our eyes met across a crowded room. Then I couldn't sleep for thinking of it so I went off for a pee. Then he came along and kissed me - yes, I did say kissed me. After that I was worse than ever.'

You're not kidding, mate. Sleep. Now.

The bed was hard. It smelt of camphor and mildew. He closed his eyes, tried fantasy, something warm and nubile against him, soft, feminine illusions -

He could not make them real.

He threw back the covers with such force they fell to the floor and stalked from the room with mad eyes, just another ghost with a vengeance, a sorrow to share. Or perhaps he was a warrior, scouring the night to find his companion in honour, scything obstacles in his path.

For all that bravado, he was shaking when he entered the room where Doyle was. Only two beds in here, and one huddled form in a sleeping bag on the floor. Red hair - Linsey. One bed contained Murphy, snoring loudly; the other, crammed in between a dressing table and an old sewing machine, Doyle.

Bodie didn't know what he expected, standing by the bed with cold feet on bare boards, chest too tight to breathe. Bloody stupid - sanity drenched him like a snowfall, but before it had time to chill Doyle's hand reached out and took him gently by the wrist. His heart storming thunderously in his chest, he slid in under the sheets, into a different world. It was strange and sweet and

frightening; he was terrified of being found here, of his own feelings, and momentarily of Doyle himself. But Doyle had come close, fitting into his arms as if he had been there before, close to Bodie's heart like now: he knew Doyle was awake, his eyelashes kept fluttering softly against Bodie's chest.

This bed didn't smell of mothballs, nor mildew; it was warmly, headily permeated with his partner and the faint perfume of his aftershave. Shifting a little, Bodie's hand accidentally brushed his chest, got snagged in dense folds of cotton. Doyle was wearing his pyjama jacket. Not up till now prepared to face up to this as an openly sexual encounter, Bodie suddenly became very aware; of the nakedness of Doyle's skin beneath the thin pyjamas, the warm bare feet touching his calf. A surge of triumph, joy rose up in him, a vague yet defined sense of, oh yes, that's the way, this is the answer.... A whole new world, and just one step away, just one, across the chasm.

Tacitly waiting for something to happen, he brushed the back of his hand down Doyle's cheek, and stilled it. Onehanded, Doyle began to undo the buttons of his own jacket, parting it, also waiting. Bodie slid both hands around him, thumbs stroking him strongly, rippling the thin fleshed skin over ridged bone. One touched a nipple and Doyle sighed against his throat; intrigued by the rough puckering Bodie dropped his head and touched his mouth to the other.

It was nearly the undoing of him, because in his wildest sexual fantasy he had never come close to the sensations the taste and feel of Doyle's nipple against his tongue gave him.

Oh, beautiful. He wanted to talk to him, tell him about the excitement, the tenderness set loose and coursing through him alongside the fierce arousal, but Doyle's gentle fingers touching his hair told him that he knew, anyway. He slipped his hand down Doyle's front, rubbed his navel with the palm of his hand, Doyle so warm and pleasant to every sense that even so innocent a touching was nearly enough. Doyle was quiet, still, giving him freedom to explore; but suddenly and unaccountably shy, Bodie left his hand where it was, fingers just dipping beneath the waistband of the trousers, one fingertip on an intriguing prickle of hair. His other hand travelled on over the sharp upthrust of the hip, slipped down the material to bare Doyle's rounded rump. Dark and shielded by covers, his mind supplied the images transferred from his gliding palm; Doyle swathed only partly in material, most of him free and bared, and excitingly, beautifully naked. Bodie lingered, exploring him with the flat of his hand, and then fingertips, which dipped into the cleft there which opened for him, dark and slickly velvet.

I need -

Doyle's hands urged him on, and carefully, almost clumsily, Bodie moved so he was lying on top of his smaller mate, pressing him into the bed, his lips against the warm skin of Doyle's throat. Just daring to touch and be touched in this way, the newness of it all; so close in this very sexual, oddly innocent way: it took no more than that. After a few moments Doyle arched, his body taut, trembling; and there was a sudden wet warmth, spreading between them as Doyle muffled his whimper against Bodie's cheek, and Bodie clenched his eyes shut very tightly and let it spill out, let his own warm seed pulse from him in warm waves of soft, easy pleasure so sweet he wanted to cry out but Doyle's mouth was there, stopping his lips....

Warm, and comfortable; Bodie was half-aware of being tensed for the aftermath rejection so characteristic of nearly every woman he had bedded, dashing to the bathroom to wash his private precious wetness from them as if it were dirty: but Doyle was quiet, just letting him be there, accepting him; Doyle wet and sticky with their moisture but not fussed about it, content to let it lie on his skin.

They had shifted so Bodie was lying between Doyle's thighs; lean and muscular they pressed once around his own legs, a gesture of reassurance; it's okay, I'm here, I'm okay. Doyle's pyjamas being still tangled down around his calves, Bodie's thigh was pressing against the tender softness of Doyle's sticky genitals; Jesus Christ but they were going to be a sight in the morning, Doyle covered in dried white streaks from belly to groin. Bet it's all over his pyjama top as well.

The morning.

He stirred; Doyle pulled him closer. "Better go back," Bodie whispered into his ear, the first words they had spoken.

A fingertip traced a line around his mouth: a murmur in his ear.

"Oh stay. Stay with me."

And he stayed.

It was nearly dawn when Doyle woke him, a blurry undignified scramble in silence, sliding like a wraith through bleak corridors to a cold, clammy bed. Anson was awake when he got back, but said nothing. Bodie lay there awake, scarcely believing it all, remembering every tiny, earth shattering detail down to the last, furious kiss shared in silence before Doyle had let him go out into the cold. Ferocious, Doyle had been, in his loving as in everything else, singlemindedly giving all he had even in that limited struggling room which was all they had had for that first sweet fierce coupling -

Bodie didn't sleep again.

He recognised the signs in himself with delight: he had not felt this way for years and always before it had come to nothing, but this time - perhaps not. There was that little heightened awareness, looking for a glance, a secret smile; conscious every second of the other's presence, butterflies in his stomach, a warm wanted feeling that was all too alien to Bodie to go unnoticed.

Breakfast was served in the great hall. Only the rabble seemed to be there; presumably the worthies, including Cowley, partook of breakfast in bed. Bodie ate heartily, every nerve pricked waiting for Doyle, scarcely conscious of McCabe's chattering as he uncovered delicacy after silvertopped delicacy: kippers, buttered eggs, porridge.

And suddenly he was there, sliding into a seat opposite Bodie; sweet the sight of him warm and alive and near, though he didn't look sweet, not at all.

Unshaven, with grey-blue stubble marking out the rounded willful chin, the wanton mouth perhaps a little fuller than usual, pale skin, greyish eyes heavy-lidded. He scowled at the toast as he pulled it towards him as if to eat it would merely be a way of sinking his teeth into something. He looked used, abused, sullen, and as sexy as hell.

Bodie grinned, delight and absorption and sheer goddamned happiness lighting up his face. "I think I'm in love," he said aloud, and nobody took any notice because Lucas was regaling them all with an account of his dream, which was long, crude, and embroidered, one suspected, with anything that popped into his head as he went along.

Doyle heard though, and the scowl left his face, upper lip unwittingly curling away from sharp teeth as he gave Bodie a smile, acknowledging the remark. They watched each other's faces attentively for a moment, curious, discovering.

"Ere, stop gazing into his eyes a moment," and Bodie's elbow fell off the table as Lucas rammed it cruelly with his arm. "Listen about this afternoon - we got a boat race planned, across the lake -"

Bodie groaned; looking away, he met Anson's curious gaze on him.

" - without the boats," Lucas delivered the coup de grâce with triumph.

"Why didn't the Oxford Women's University crew win the boat race this year?" enquired Doyle of no-one in particular; he wiped a marmalade-streaked hand down his lapel.

"See you have oars, right, but not actual boats -"

"No cox."

Doyle was looking at him to see if Bodie was going to laugh at his joke, since no one else would. Bodie raised a smile, but he felt self-conscious now, and certain of one thing.

Anson knew.

He needed to be alone with Doyle, even if just for a while. The fifty agents were assigned to four bathrooms between them, so ablutions en masse inevitably took some time. Doyle didn't wait for one to fall vacant; he took his coffee through to the small lounge on the first floor. He was still clad in his pyjamas, though Bodie, none better, knew just why Doyle was so casually careful about keeping his bathrobe close around him.

His heart leapt at the thought, then dived. Doyle, watching him over the rim of his coffee from across the room, raised an eyebrow.

"My stomach is turning cartwheels," Bodie managed. Doyle was probably just as keyed up. Both hands on the window ledge, he leaned out, gazed at the calm country estate unrolled before

his gaze: an exhibition of topiary, green trees shaped into an arbour of giant peacocks; a lake, the dappled mutable green of Doyle's eyes, with lofty white birds serenely atop it. He felt Doyle's breath on the back of his neck and would have turned, but the door behind them opened and clattered shut.

"Whoee, babes," it was Linsey, and Woods, in skittish moods; Murph behind them, and others. The moment of peace erupted into babble. No one was taking any notice of them, all full of the plans for the day. Bodie met Doyle's eye, made an almost imperceptible motion of his head towards the door and they exited, Doyle to the bathroom and Bodie to pack. When he had filled his own case he packed Doyle's, neatly and speedily, knowing exactly which of the scattered garments, combs, shavers among the others belonged to his partner. He had just finished when Doyle arrived in the doorway, one towel over wet curls, another tucked around his hips.

"Eager to get going, are you?" he asked, indicated the cases. It was customary to stay for the Sunday, but not obligatory; they had decided before setting out to break off the first moment possible, both having a current hot girlfriend to attend to in every spare moment though of course all that had changed now -

Had it?

Bodie knew a moment of uncertainty; what, if anything, had changed? What if Doyle saw things differently?

"Yeah," he muttered shortly, not looking Doyle's way as his partner dropped both towels and began to dress.

"Let's go for a walk first," Doyle said, briskly zipping up his jeans and pulling his belt tight.

"A walk?" Bodie did look up at that, amazed.

"Yeah, in the grounds."

And outside, under the benevolent gaze of fifty mullioned windows blinking benignly in the sun, the yellow stone of the mansion a safe distance away, it was easy.

"Do you remember last year," Bodie said at last, indicating the maze of privet on their right, "on the Sunday we had a treasure hunt in the afternoon."

"Only there wasn't any treasure," finished Doyle, remembering, "but you and I won because we lied the most about having actually spotted it - "

" - before the giant albatross swooped down and carried it off. Yeh, and the year before that was the archery contest, in fancy dress - "

"Whaddya mean, fancy dress," said Doyle affronted, "I always wear the William Tell hat when I'm arching, 's only good form, innit?"

Bodie grabbed him then remembered the serpent had entered their garden, and checked all around quickly; they were quite safe, shielded on one side by the bare shining expanse of water, and on the other by the wall of privet. It was funny, he was thinking, I'll never be able to hold him again, touch him in public; always be wondering if anyone's noticed, if there's a kind of difference in the way I hold him -

And it was true; the relaxed way Doyle was leaning on him, looking up at him with unblinking cats' eyes, had changed.

Doyle said: "Why did you come to me last night?"

"Because you wanted me to," he answered, adding, "because I needed you."

"We'll go home, then," Doyle said.

"Yeah." Bodie found, absurdly, he was patting Doyle's hand over and over. Silly, sentimental fool; but Doyle was smiling at him. He thought about telling Doyle about Anson, but did not. Wait a while. Give Anson's guesses real substance.

There was a sudden splashing sound behind them. Bodie whirled to see two white swans settling majestically into the water, folding their wings close to their bodies, curved necks held high. The smaller of the two turned to preen her feathers with a long black beak. The male ignored them loftily.

"Swans mate for life," said Bodie, staring across the water, "did you know that?"

"Everyone knows that," came Doyle's gentle voice behind him. "Dumb crud."

And Bodie nodded, contented. He slipped an unobtrusive arm around Doyle as they walked together along the bank, the swans keeping pace with them. Doyle broke the silence.

"It's been worth it."

"Worth what?"

"That godawful dinner yesterday."

"Oh, that." Bodie had lost sight of it already in the larger events.

They walked on.

"What the hell do we have this for, every year?"

"What?" Bodie was rapt in his contemplation of the future which had all, unexpectedly, fallen into place today; he wished Doyle would stop chattering.

"This. What the hell's it the anniversary of?"

"Oh." Bodie stopped and thought, drawing Doyle with him, away from the lake into a leafy avenue of the privet. "I dunno," he finally conceded. "But - " with infinite care he threaded fingertips into the curls framing Doyle's face, just before they kissed - "I know what it'll be the anniversary of, next year."

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Army Games

Sebastian

A very early story indeed, possibly the second I ever wrote. It's short. It's sweet, B and D in playful mood. More of a little nibble than a full-blown banquet, but sometimes that's all we have time or stomach for.

=====///=====

"Bodie?"

An incoherent murmur was all the answer he got. Doyle shifted onto an elbow, squinted over in the near-dark. All he could make out was a vague mounded form a foot away.

"Move your bloody bag closer," he hissed in an irritable whisper, and began to hump his own over the ground. "I'm fuckin' perished."

Bodie groaned - but quietly, they were surrounded by presumed sleepers on either side - and complied. He felt the heavy wriggling weight of Doyle encased in padded nylon push against him and wondered rather fatalistically if his comfort-loving partner would be satisfied now.

He was right. He wasn't.

Only seconds passed before Bodie was prodded viciously in the ribs. Bodie opened one bleary resigned eye to see a very close, very cross face inches from his.

"s not helping," Doyle whispered, "at all. We'll 'ave to get in together, nothing else for it - "

They had to whisper because of the circumstances, which were not such either man would have

chosen for a Friday night. Cowley, apparently in one of his more malicious moods, had packed the pair of them off for a weekend survival course - with the army. They had been no more pleased to join the army than the army seemed to be to have them, and they had tramped miles over rough terrain with gritted teeth, swung from ropes like grim yodel-free Tarzans, scaled obstacle courses and swum rivers muttering expletives constantly to themselves. They were both absolutely knackered.

And the relief of bed-time was now turning out to be a decidedly qualified blessing, since accommodation had proved to be a few square feet of hard ground in what seemed to be a pig-sty. It seemed to be a pig-sty for two reasons. One, the light waist-high partitions punctuating the wall, allowing room for two sleeping bags to be placed between each pair. The other reason was assailing Bodie's nostrils that very moment. He was not the happiest of men: every bone in him was aching, every muscle protesting, every nerve crying out for sleep; and here was Ray being bloody awkward. Still, he knew from past experience that Doyle had to be warm. He had to be or he wouldn't sleep a wink, be up all night moaning about it, and whose was the nearest ear?

"You can get thrown out of the army for this sort of thing," he muttered, shaking his mate none too gently out of the layers of slippery nylon.

"Sounds wonderful. Why did we leave it till now?" came the moody reply. They were doing their best to keep quiet, but there was no way they could conceal the deafening rasp of metal zips grating together - Bodie gritted his teeth and did it in one long smooth movement. There was a mumbling and a stirring from the next stalls, but nothing more.

"You 'appy now?" he grunted as they slid into the now-double bag. God, but the smell of pig was strong. There was also a trough running behind their heads. Bodie sighed, offered up a quick prayer to the Lord appealing for a puncture for Cowley while driving through a midden tomorrow, pulled the covers up over their heads and buried his nose in Ray Doyle instead.

Yeah, that was better. He snuffled a noseful of Doyle-scented curls.

"What the bloody 'ell are you doin'?" came a vexed whisper, very close.

Bodie sighed. "No pleasing some people, is there?" he observed pointedly. Doyle had wrapped himself around Bodie like an octopus and was warming his hands on Bodie's neck, the only bare skin available. When he'd cooled that area down beyond further usefulness, he shifted impatiently, pulled Bodie's shirt free of his trousers and stuffed his icy hands under Bodie's vest.

Bodie yelped; but the surrounding folds of nylon muffled the sound. Resigned, he let Doyle soak up his warmth like a predatory leech. "The things I do for you," he hissed into Doyle's ear as Doyle kicked restlessly at his legs. "I hope you flippin' well appreciate it."

"Oh I do, 'm crazy about you," came the unfeeling answer. The bag was twitching and moving as if it had life of its own. "Do something else for me, will you?"

"Bonk you on the 'ead so we can get some sleep?" suggested Bodie hopefully, suffering.

"It's me feet - god, Bodie," Doyle murmured mournfully, his breath tickling Bodie's cheek. "They've gone numb - I reckon gangrene's settin' in -"

"Frostbite, you mean - " With horror, Bodie felt a cold, clammy object touch his own foot, sliding over it, insidiously seeking warmth. Swearing under his breath, he grabbed Doyle firmly to put a stop to the wriggling, and caught Doyle's chilly extremities between his own warm ones, rubbing the smooth cool skin awkwardly until a tinge of warmth began to suffuse between them. Then he kicked Doyle's feet away, worn out.

He wrapped his arms around his mate, very firmly. "Now can we get some bloody sleep? It's a six am start, and I heard talk of a nice refreshing twenty-mile run over uncertain terrain, so much as I'm enjoying this cosy midnight chat we're having, I just think it might be a good idea if we got our 'eads down for some kip, okay?"

"Yeah, in a minute," came Doyle's drowsy murmur, right into Bodie's ear. "Nice an' warm - comfy - lemme just enjoy it a bit longer - can't hurt - might be the last fun we ever have, when you think about tomorrow - you're so warm, Bodie - "

He yawned, immensely, and stretched - Bodie felt the tense of muscles resist, fleetingly, his own encircling arms - then huddled close to the bigger man, moving gently against him, a gentle night-time ride, taking them all the way to an easy oblivion -

"Bodie."

Bodie was startled awake, eyes flying open - he'd been just about to tumble over the edge into beautiful sleep. "What now, for godsake - "

"Wish you'd do something else for me," Doyle's whisper very close, a hint of wistful mischief in it.

"What?" Bodie was instantly suspicious: Doyle's voice had that mournful, wanton-urchin tone to it he always used when he was after something. Bet he wants a bloody drink, Bodie decided; and if he's expecting me to drag myself up, pick my way through all those bloody bags in pitch darkness and go to the outside tap, well, he's got another think coming, that's all. No way. Doyle could do his own fetching and carrying; he had Bodie on enough of a string as it was, not good for him...

"All right, all right, I'll go," he heard himself hiss.

Doyle gave a throaty little chuckle, prevented Bodie's intended drawing away. "Don't want you goin' anywhere, mate - no, for this I need you right 'ere - "

"What the hell are you on about?" demanded Bodie, but almost inaudibly. He could hear hefty snores from either side of them and had not the slightest desire to wake anyone up, probably be debugged or worse; he and Doyle weren't exactly popular as it was.

Doyle sighed again, and pressed himself very close. "How would you feel about lovin' me to sleep?"

"What?" enquired Bodie, sure he must have misheard, but he was left in no doubt as to what Doyle meant the next moment, when Doyle took his unresisting hand, opened it with a flick of his thumb and pushed it open-palmed down his chest, over his belly and belt, and onto warm denim.

The night changed colour.

Bodie leapt a mile.

Or would have done, had it not been for Doyle's swift, restraining arms. "Sssh!"

Bodie pulled the cover over his burning face, wriggled furiously down in the bag. "No way, mate," was the first thing he could manage. "You want to play those games, you play them by yourself." Strange, he felt very odd: kind of light-headed, very wide-awake all of a sudden.

Doyle gave that little chuckle again, deep inside the bag. "What, all by myself, with you right next to me?" he whispered, very close, dangerously close. "Might 'ave to, if it comes to it, but - be more fun, nicer... if you did it - "

He was leaning up, the cover right over his head and Bodie's too so neither could see a thing, but Bodie knew his mouth was a bare centimetre away; he knew it was nonsense but he had the strangest feeling that Doyle's body was live - an electric current sparking through it, and if they touched they'd light up.

Just as he was about to panic, he felt Doyle move away, turn leisurely away and onto his back; he felt Doyle's elbow bumping him as his hand travelled down his own body...

Tight as a wire with tension, Bodie waited, scarcely able to believe this was happening. Only a moment ago, they had been nearly asleep, the world much as it had always been - just neutral-tinted and such - whatever had got into his partner to change it so? Doyle always had some bloody surprise in store...an unconventional creature, his Doyle; Bodie'd always suspected he hadn't yet explored to the limits of Doyle's strangeness...

Did he want to, that was the question. One of them. The other being, could Doyle really be going to do what he had hinted at, right here and now, six inches from Bodie?

Jesus Christ, the bloody idea was turning him on.

He screwed up his eyes, bit his lip, telling himself he couldn't be excited, not that way, not just by the idea of another man tossing off in his presence - he just wasn't kinky that way -

Not any man. Ray Doyle. And every sense was alert, waiting, listening, for Doyle's next move -

"Ah, please, Bodie," came Doyle's quiet, rough-soft whisper. "Do it for me...Be good, you touchin' me that way...you could make me come, so easy..."

Dazed, Bodie felt his hand taken again, but this time Doyle made no move to place it on himself, just held it gently, waiting for Bodie's answer -

"What's the fuckin' matter with you," Bodie whispered shakily, "you turned queer or something?"

"Nah, just in the mood - "

" - to play around," Bodie snapped, but almost silently. God, if anyone around could hear them...

Strangely, that idea aroused him too even as it chilled; a sweet tang of excitement at the thought of the two of them silently playing this kind of illicit game in a sleeping bag surrounded by somnolent soldiers who could wake and hear them at any time...

"I suppose you picked up this habit in the bloody Met.?"

"'s not a habit - just a new idea - " Doyle's subtle, dreamy voice in his ear was waving a definite spell on Bodie. "I'd kill anyone else who tried it on with me the way I'm trying it on with you. But - we're us, not anyone else. An' I keep thinkin' about how it would feel, you touchin' me... please touch me, Bodie, just hold me..."

Somehow Doyle's steadfast intense whispering was discharging Bodie's surprise, his panic, his original dissent; though his tension remained, making his heart race, his voice shake a little: "All right," he murmured into Doyle's ear, "but I hope you know what you're doin', sunshine; hope you're sure - "

Why not, if Doyle wanted it? It wasn't much to ask... wouldn't be as bad as warming his bloody feet, and he'd suffered that without hesitation...

"Yeah, course I'm sure," came Doyle's muffled voice, husky with relief, and something more. "'s easy, you'll see - " And, holding his breath, shutting his eyes, Doyle moved Bodie's willing, hesitant hand over himself once more.

There was a breathy rustle of careful movement as Bodie, his heart pounding noisily in his ears, manoeuvred himself onto his side, slipping an arm beneath Doyle. Hard to believe all this was happening, but the amazing fact remained: Doyle wanted this to happen, wanted Bodie to - what had he said? love him to sleep - and had had the courage to ask. Bodie admired that courage. He was also recognising the signs of sexual excitement in himself with some surprise; but he wasn't alone in that. Bodie felt a leap of pleasure, a touching tenderness as he slid Doyle's jeans' zip down with shaky fingers, touched him through the warm cotton pants; and found him already hard for him.

He heard Doyle's breath leave him in a long sighing gust, and felt him lift his hips so Bodie could part the jeans wider, slip his hand inside the pants to take hold of him.

Denied sight, Bodie relied on the sensory impressions of his fingertips; Doyle was warm and hard, and satisfyingly bulky to hold; surprising, how pleasant it was to touch another man's body this way. Bodie squeezed him gently; how the hell did one...? The angle was all wrong... He felt Doyle's hand reach out, seeking him; settle reassuringly on his hip.

"That's nice... Beautiful... but harder, Bodie, it won't break, you know - " on a teasing, slightly breathless note. And as Bodie squeezed him again - "Just like you'd do to yourself - oh, for godsake - " in half-laughing impatience he closed his hand tight, tight over Bodie's; still, taut-trembling... "Ah, christ, mate, but you turn me on - " squeezing his eyes shut as the sweetness rose...

Bodie had just arrived at a better idea. Touching Doyle's aroused genitals was having the weirdest effect on him, not to mention hearing Doyle's tiny noises of pleasure; butterflies in his stomach, a heavy throbbing in his own groin, so that he was no longer concerned with Doyle's pleasure alone. He let go of Doyle, ssshing that young man's inarticulate murmur of protest, disappointment, unzipped and unbuckled his own trousers, pushing them impatiently down so he too was naked from belly to thigh. Then he slid his hand beneath Doyle's armpit to shift him. Doyle, always quick on the uptake in a sexual situation, soon cottoned on. He slithered over and settled himself on top of Bodie, head leaning back on his shoulder, wriggling so his buttocks accommodated Bodie's hard shaft of flesh.

Bodie was sweating. He held Doyle close-pressed down against him, kissed the side of his face, just beneath a feathery curl. He slid his hands down Doyle's sides, over the sharp hip-bones, veering in to take his penis once more - yes, now he had the right angle, now it was just like fucking his own fist, only so very, excitingly different, because it was Doyle who sighed and tensed on top of him and pushed himself upwards into Bodie's gripping, tunnelled hands, his parted buttocks working rhythmically on Bodie's own cock, and the hardness pressing there against him exciting him even further. When he came, Bodie's thumb rubbing over his sensitive foreskin too sweet to bear, he turned his face towards Bodie, his mouth searching; it was too awkward to kiss although he longed for it, but Bodie was flooded with love and an aching surge of tenderness as Doyle's moist lips touched his throat, a tiny whimper and then another breaking loose as his pleasure peaked, and broke, and spilled over into Bodie's waiting, accepting hands.

Bodie tensed, heart pounding into Doyle's shirtclad shoulderblade, his own rock-hard penis caught between in a channel of firm, sweet flesh, his hands still cradling the limp softness, the precious puddle of warm semen, his thumb still gently, spasmodically stroking him. He was so close himself, now... If Doyle just moved on him, just gripped him with those firm, muscular buttocks, just let him graze once more over the exciting pucker of flesh he could feel there that roused such wild, exotic flights of eroticism in Bodie's inflamed mind...

Instead, Doyle moved off him, extricating himself gently from Bodie's hands, leaving him bereft, and lost in the darkness.

"Ray - ?"

"Sssh - "

Doyle was back, face to face now; the heavy weight of him settling astride Bodie's thighs. He leaned over him, kissed his mouth once, fiercely. Though Bodie opened his eyes instinctively, it was still impossible to see, too dark to make out more than the glitter of Doyle's eyes. His own urgency gone, Doyle let Bodie invade his mouth with his tongue, searching, flicking there, with all the desperation of arousal unresolved; then he drew back, shrugging off the bag from his shoulders impatiently. They were taking a tremendous risk, he knew that, didn't care, didn't believe it could happen; this was too right to be spoiled.

He took Bodie's hands, moist and slippery from his own outpouring, held them carefully so none of it was lost. He leant very near Bodie.

"Say you love me."

Bodie said nothing. Doyle could hear his racing heart, his harsh breathing, sense his need, electrifying the muggy warmth of the little world that enclosed them, scented now with the tang of his own sex.

"Say it," he demanded, very low. "Say you love me."

"I love you," Bodie whispered; Doyle could make out the shape of his nose, the planes of his cheeks, the wide-open, helpless gleam of his eyes.

Without another word, he brought the other man's hands together around Bodie's own straining cock, keeping them covered with his own, moving them, keeping control; as Bodie, caught tight between his own hands, slippery with the evidence of Doyle's pleasure, thrust, went rigid, and spurted out his own to mingle with it.

Now it was all over, Doyle collapsed on top of him, more exhausted than he'd thought. Bodie gathered him up, pressed fierce silent kisses onto his face. Doyle submitted to it, even gave him one or two of his own. All around them was darkness, warmth, and silence punctuated only by snores, snuffles, the restless shifting of thirty whacked men deep in sleep, oblivious to the heady, passionate turmoil that had been taking place while they only dreamt of wild things.

"I love you," whispered Bodie; a free offering, and the truth.

Doyle didn't speak, only hugged him tight, putting all he felt into the desperate strength with which he gripped the other man. He was very close to sleep, Bodie safe-held in his arms.

"Doyle?"

But maybe Bodie needed the reassurance of words, just as he had done. Doyle roused himself enough to say, mouth moving against Bodie's cheek: "Love you...You know that... tell you more

tomorrow, hold your hand while we're on that fuckin' run if that's what you want 'cause I'd do anything for you, okay?"

"No - yeah - course I know that. What I meant was - you got anything to wipe me hands on?" Bodie, sounding abashed, but amused with it. In answer, Doyle took hold of his hands, dragged them down over the front of his own cotton shirt. Then he uncurled the fingers, kissed each semi-cleansed palm in turn. His mind dwelt on the symbolism of it all, their mingled semen, the essence of their lives, of life itself; now indistinguishable, inextricably fused together, never to be parted...

"Nice warm feet," he mumbled, still holding onto Bodie's hands, snuggling very close; and then he fell asleep.

Bodie stayed awake a bare moment longer, his heart full of wonder, and peace; and then he deliberately lost himself in the security of the warm body pressed into the curve of his and he too fell into the arms of Morpheus, to dream beautiful, prophetic dreams.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

B & D Beside the Sea

Sebastian

Another very early story, and the title says it all, though it began my reputation as the worst slash-titler in the world. Sweet and tender, with, it was pointed out to me, a most unrealistic sex scene - my enthusiasm for speedy and drastic consummation overrode more practical concerns. Ah well, many young lovers could no doubt say the same. Note the no-room-for-argument Happy Ending - by now I was building up a reputation as someone who wrote dark and miserable stories which could ruin your day, and was desperate to ingratiate myself back in with my peers who were beginning to shun me and retaliate by turning our heroes into elves with a penchant for teddy-bears.

=====///=====

Head down, Bodie trudged through the hot sand, wincing as the tender soles of his feet encountered tiny twigs, pebbles, and shells which deceitfully laced the apparently fine white sand. It didn't seem to be bothering Doyle, who was bouncing along ahead of him, threading a careful path through the spread of towels and slabs of lobster-pink human flesh, the jumble of suntan lotion bottles, and bags, and buckets, and spades, all of which adorned the beach. Probably had soles like elephant hide, Bodie thought sourly, not a little envious.

Finally Doyle stopped, tilted his face to the sea air as if scenting like a hunting dog, his eyes half-closed in concentration; he turned carefully around to inspect all aspects of the site, and finally nodded to Bodie. "This do?"

Bodie had been watching this performance with something akin to disbelief. "Oh yeah," he enthused with mendacious admiration, "it's got so much more than all the other seemingly identical spots we've passed on this five mile hike here. Worth waiting for though. Only you could see that subtle difference, mate."

Doyle acknowledged the heavy sarcasm with the barest of looks. He offloaded his shoulder bag -- souvenir of a Greek holiday -- and unpacked his towel, spreading it on the sand. Bodie did likewise. In fact, it was quite a pleasant spot, more secluded than some, in the shelter of the seawall; and the nearest family part to them handily obscured behind a lengthy striped windbreak.

"How long we got?" Bodie asked, unstrapping his watch and stuffing it into his bag.

It had been Doyle's idea, this: hot day, too many recent hours spent sweltering in an office, or a car; why not get away from it all, spend their day off by the sea? Bodie, disdainful ex-paras supercool hero type, had scorned the idea -- in principle. In practice it appealed enormously to his nature (and he suspected Doyle was perfectly aware of that) his spirits lifting irrepressibly the moment they got out of the car and surveyed the gritty-sanded beach, the almost-blue water, the pier with its peeling faded paint, and the rocks and the hamburger stalls which were all part of the British seaside scene -- it had a kind of beauty about it, flawed and tarnished and cheapened in a way a Greek beach never was however crude the rusticity of its tavernas; but beauty it was, none the less. Along the curve of the seafront were shops flagged with the colourful gaiety of beach paraphernalia, bright-painted beachballs hung up in nets, plastic inflatable toys; and shops to sell nothing but lurid sticks of rock in every shape, size and colour imaginable; amusement arcades with flashing neon signs everywhere one looked, and along the beachwall, heavy iron telescopes, remnant of a bygone age when pleasure was a simpler matter. Bodie breathed in the scent of ozone, candy-floss and seaweed, and was happy.

"Oh, I reckon we can give ourselves a few hours," Doyle was answering, removing his tinted glasses from the inner pocket of his jacket.

"A few hours," said Bodie with assumed moroseness, gazing around at the collection of rug-wrapped septuagenarians huddled in deckchairs, nodding into space, or simply staring; the scattered families of peeling pot-bellied dads, chubby mums, squabbling kids -- "where the hell are the beautiful people?"

Doyle gave a tiny sigh, glanced down at himself; very briefly, but Bodie didn't miss it. Doyle had style, even in his affectations.

"I was counting on picking up some local talent," Bodie grouched, ignoring him.

Doyle looked faintly aloof. "Can't you do without it for one afternoon, Priapus? Fresh air, sun, sea, sand -- why'd you have to drag sex into everything?"

Doyle would turn down the chance of some nubile female company no more than he would, Bodie knew that perfectly well. Just making the best of it, and pretending a leaning towards asceticism, that was all. Which was a joke, because underneath all that superficial cool Bodie suspected his partner harboured a raging fire of sensuality, a fine uninhibited appreciation of the delights of unbridled hedonism. It intrigued him. He knew Doyle better than anyone in the world did, knew everything about him -- but for the one area forever closed off to him, no entry, keep out. Seemed unfair, even ridiculous; mused Bodie as he watched his mate pulling off his t-shirt

unhurriedly, shaking out the head of curls, that he, Bodie, was barred from tasting that one thing about Ray Doyle. His gaze was almost wistful as it travelled over his partner's lithe nude torso.

Doyle had noticed the attentions. "Oi," he remarked as he unbuckled his belt, "What you starin' for? Not got me in mind for a substitute 'ave you?"

Bodie snapped back to reality. They had special reasons for going carefully on this particular subject right now; and Doyle, as he often did so unnervingly, had hit yet again on the right interpretation of Bodie's behaviour. Bodie had always prided himself on being unreadable, before he'd met Raymond Doyle with the cool calculating eyes that seemed to look clear through to Bodie's soul.

"Possibly," he said, poker-faced.

Doyle pushed his jeans down his thighs, began to step out of them. "Better move the towels bit closer together in that case," was his only comment, and he lay down on the lurid rectangle of towelling.

Bodie couldn't repress a grin, looking down at him. That was the thing about old Doyle, took Bodie in his stride, largely unshockable and never short of a comeback. His eyes travelled again over the length of him, nude but for a small black pair of swim-briefs --

Now there was a thought.

They had taken off their shoes before descending the stone steps to the beach, but Bodie was still otherwise conventionally attired in shirt and trousers. "How'd you do that?" he asked suspiciously.

"Do what?" Doyle didn't stir, soaking up the sun caressing his bare skin, the comfortably hot sand beneath his heels; he picked up a handful, let it run idly through his fingers.

"Get changed."

"I took off my t-shirt," Doyle explained patiently, "I undid my belt, I unzipped my trousers, I--"

"How'd you get your trunks on?" Bodie cut in, favouring Doyle with a look of exasperated hauteur.

Doyle tipped up his glasses, stared enigmatically. "Had 'em on underneath."

Bodie gaped. This simple expedient had not occurred to him. Conceding the round to Doyle, he rummaged in his bag and pulled out his own, watched by Doyle's cool eye. "Have to find a cabin somewhere." He screwed up his eyes against the glare of the sun, then shaded them with one hand as he stared along the beach. There in the distance he could see a little row of wooden huts. Picking up his towel, resigned, he prepared to set off.

Doyle was up in a bound, taking the towel from him. "No need for that."

"Wha--?" Bodie gazed at him in incomprehension. Surely Doyle had heard of the little law that precluded revealing one's all on the beach?

"Ah, c'mon Bodie, you're not that prudish. Like an old maiden aunt you are sometimes," Doyle said impatiently. "You change under a towel, that's the way the British do it. Look--" he nodded at a plump matron twenty yards away struggling under a voluminous tent-like garment, finally emerging like an overblown butterfly from its chrysalis, a bloated vision in a skirted blue swimsuit.

"I am not--"

It was no good. Doyle had taken him in hand, purposeful and determined. "Undo your trousers," he instructed, and watched with steely concentration as Bodie complied, shutting his mind off from the possible interest of any onlooker. Then, just as he had come to the fatalistic conclusion that Doyle was determined to expose him to all and sundry, Doyle, standing in front of him, whipped the towel around his waist, holding the ends together. "Now pull 'em off. Pants as well," he ordered. Bodie, struggling beneath the constricting towel, did his best. They were half-way down his thighs when he was struck by a sudden mistrust, and cold blue glared into mischievous green.

"If you're gonna drop me in it, accidentally let this slip," he snarled, "you'll be taking the long walk home, sunshine, and you won't be in any shape to do it."

"Would I --?" Doyle answered his own innocent question: "Course I wouldn't. Get on with it."

Only partly reassured, Bodie kicked himself free of trousers and pants, and, precariously leaning over, managed to insert one foot in the leg of his trunks.

It was then he realised that Doyle, still holding the ends of the towel together, was peering unashamedly over the top of it.

Bodie blanched, flushed, and grabbed the towel from him, clutching it against himself. "What the hell are you doing?" he enquired with precarious calm, and met Doyle's unabashed eye. "Just checkin'," said Doyle mysteriously, and gently but firmly took the ends of the towel from him again, gazing down into the dark cavern with deep interest.

"Your parents Jewish, were they?"

Bodie nearly choked. He glared at Doyle -- but Doyle was suddenly grinning at him with sly delight, and it was all okay after all. "Get on with it," Doyle said again, "I'll give you five seconds before I drop it --" and gazed into the distance with apparent lack of interest as Bodie, stooping, struggled to pull up the trunks, just as--

"-- five --" counted Doyle aloud, and let the towel fall.

Bodie was decently clad in blue and white striped shorts-style trunks.

Doyle stared him up and down. "Cut-off pyjamas?" he suggested; then he lay back down.

Bodie was hurt by this. "Marks and Sparks finest, mate." He sat on his towel, unpacked the Delial sun-oil, began to apply it to his shoulders. "Want some?" Without waiting for Doyle's reply, he upended the plastic bottle, thumped on the bottom of it.

Doyle's eyes flew open as large drops of warm oil fell on his chest. He caught Bodie's hand just as it made a gleeful dive for him. "You want us marked out as a pair of fairies? You wanna rub oil into me, mate, you wait till we're alone." He slanted an arch glance up at Bodie and began to smooth the lotion in himself, long fingers gliding over his skin with familiar ease. Liking the sensation, he let his eyelids fall, giving a little sigh as his hand slid on over his own skin.

Bodie watched, still breathless from the implied promise of the oil remark, always intrigued by Doyle's attitude to himself. He seemed totally at ease with his own body, he accepted it, he seldom looked in a mirror, he was perfectly happy about touching himself, he was unselfconscious in the way he moved. That attitude mystified Bodie who did not share it, made him rather envious in a diffused kind of way -- deep-down, Bodie suspected his body of unattractiveness, and to offset that he had developed over the years a bravado-inspired attitude of braggadocio that worked, in its way, nearly as well. He appealed to some types of women, Doyle to others. But he envied Doyle none the less. Doyle had overridden his physical imperfections, he presented them in the light of works of original art; he was innerly assured of himself in a way Bodie never could be.

Doyle nudged him. "Oi. Come back."

"Sorry, what?"

"I said, twice, 'ow about a dip," said Doyle, watching him unblinkingly. "Or were you serious about collectin' some company?" He nodded towards two girls who had just arrived and were settling on a patch some fifty feet away; pretty blonde things in bikinis; as they watched, one rose to her feet displaying firm white thighs and heavy-breasted female allure.

Bodie's mental withdrawal from the suggestion was swift, and something of a surprise. He covered it easily, camping: "Thought we'd settled I was gonna make do with you today, flower," on the principle that it was amazing how seldom one was believed when one told the bare truth, and accompanied the remark with a heavy-lidded pout and a swat at Doyle's thigh. God knew, they had little enough time alone together relaxing. He liked Ray, liked him better than anyone he'd ever met, enjoyed his company. And since one bloody evening a few months ago, he'd been watching Ray carefully for any sign that there might be a chance of something more, but--

"Okay with me, sweetheart, but you better make your move soon. Cold water plays hell with my libido." Doyle lay back down again, shutting his eyes.

-- but the signals he got from Doyle were always confused; Bodie found it impossible to read him on the matter. On the one hand, like Doyle's unfazed remark just now, and the one about rubbing in the oil, any suggestive camping around Bodie might instigate was always picked up by Doyle and returned, in fact he sometimes started it himself. Did that mean he was sure enough of his -- image, his sexuality to accept it in the light he thought it was offered, a derogatory joke one had to take, and respond to if one wasn't to appear threatened by it? Or did it mean he was sure of his sexuality in another way -- secure enough to admit he could, and would, respond to a physical advance from someone he found attractive, whichever sex they were?

Bodie didn't know; didn't dare to risk finding out. Wasn't sure he *wanted* to know -- it was all very pleasant as it was, the light flirtation between them, the tingly feeling of 'maybe - one-day' he got whenever Doyle gave him that tantalising come-hither look, or one of his rare, sweet smiles, staying just out of reach...

But there might be so much more, there was just a chance of that.

And sometimes the desire to find out once and for all, to resolve the confusion engendered by the endless games they played with one another, make Doyle lay it all in the open, was almost too much to bear...

He smiled wryly to himself. This would put the cat among the pigeons.

"Hey, Doyle; fancy making it with me?"

He didn't say it aloud. He never did, only rehearsed it, sometimes, alone at night in bed.

Sometimes Doyle said 'yeah, okay,' straight off. Sometimes he had to be coaxed. Sometimes he was taken by storm, crushed helplessly beneath Bodie's fierce onslaught. It always ended the same, anyway; Doyle there in his arms, pliant and responsive and gasping with the pleasure Bodie was making him feel...

He shook his head violently, like a dog dislodging water. He shouldn't be thinking these things about his partner. He smiled again, more bitterly this time as he imagined yet another opening -- "Hey, mate, I toss off to wild fantasies about you every night, makes me feel good, how about trying it for real?"

It wasn't all his fault. Doyle was the flirtatious type. Bodie couldn't decide whether he did it deliberately, for Bodie's sake, or whether it was Doyle's automatic reaction to the subconscious awareness of a potential sexual response. And, with his looks -- Bodie, being both generous and objective, would not quite call him 'androgynous,' no, way, Ray was all male -- but certainly there was something unconventional about him, the loose curls, the starkly beautiful chains adorning throat and narrow wrist, the big eyes --

They were staring at him now, wide and calculating.

Bodie swallowed, uncomfortably, wondering how much he had given away in those moments of

far-off introspection. Doyle was sitting up, hands draped across his drawn-up knees, head on one side, watching him carefully.

"This is," he remarked for the record, "the fourth time. Are you coming in for a dip? Or not? What's on your mind, Bodie?"

Bodie blurted out, "Andy's party --" and could have buried his head, ostrich-wise, in the sand.

Doyle's face turned distant; he gazed out to sea. Small sailing boats passed serenely; every so often a noisy motorboat would appear and zig-zag through their midst. Behind them, walking along the seafront path above, some noisy teenage trippers had a radio going very loud; they were laughing and shouting and mucking about with all the self-centred excitement, the us-against-the-world aggression of adolescence.

"Oh, that."

He said nothing more. Bodie's scalp was tight with embarrassment; what the hell had he said that for? Doyle's guarded reaction made him more than ever sure that he was all wrong, all his hopeful interpretations totally on the wrong track --

Andy's party. Three months, or twelve weeks, eight days ago now.

A mad, riotous celebration of still being alive. The stupidities only men who were daily threatened by death, past, present and future, could devise. A gut-rotting amount of alcohol. Idiotic stunts. Ridiculous games. One of which had resulted in forfeits -- "Put your head in a bucket of water and sing all 4-1/2 verses of Betty's Lament," "Drink two Cowley specials" (Scotch, lime juice and advocaat). And when it had been Bodie's turn to lose, he had drawn the short straw with a vengeance, his slip of paper conveying the instruction to his fuddled brain -- "Kiss your partner."

Childish, stupid, his remaining, uneasy rationality had scorned; even as, obedient to the shared ethic, the mob madness, he pursued Ray Doyle around the room to the cheers and jeers of colleagues and ran him down at last.

He would never forget it, that first heart-stopping moment of seizing him, the warmth and familiar yet unfamiliar sense of Ray close to him, held tight in Bodie's stronger arms; the initial struggle, and then Doyle submitting gracefully to the rules; laughing, wary eyes looking up at him, just before Bodie's searching mouth found his.

Although he had relived it many times in fantasy since, Bodie couldn't now remember just how it felt, to kiss Ray Doyle. He did know that it had been wonderful, the nicest thing he'd ever done, and when, needing breath, he'd opened his eyes to find Doyle's drowsily shut, an expression of concentrated ecstasy on his face, he felt a deep dive of his guts as if something momentous had happened. It was like a blow to the stomach. Or a dazzling light shone directly in his eyes. Or the dizzying rush of a drug-induced high spreading out along his nerves.

No blow, no dazzle, no drug. Just Ray Doyle, head tipped back, clearly and uninhibitedly set alight by the touch of his, Bodie's mouth.

He had, he supposed, expected one of two things, on that strange night when they were frozen together in a moment of stilled-time amid the jeering and the catcalls and the already fading interest as frenzied activity was renewed elsewhere in the room.

Either Doyle would view him henceforth with apprehension, distrust, a kind of transferred unease; or everything would come right for them at that very moment, they would walk off together, to resolve their innate loneliness and their need in one another.

In the event, however, neither alternative had happened.

Doyle had opened his eyes, met Bodie's for one brief, telling moment, his hands still holding onto Bodie's shirt. Some message had passed between them, and Bodie was no longer sure he knew what it had been. Then he had let go, stepped back, forcing Bodie to do the same; and he was left empty-handed in the tatters of his own desire. They had gone on with the party, acted quite normally and had done so ever since, no contention or even tension between them; everything as it always had been.

But Bodie couldn't forget it. Whether Doyle remembered as he did, he couldn't tell. He stared at him now, brooding eyes searching his face.

Doyle leant towards him, slowly, as if mesmerised; the musky tang of warmed sun-oil hit Bodie's senses. Doyle made as if to say something; changed his mind. "Swim," he said succinctly, and sprang to his feet.

They picked their way over soft hot sand, then through shingle that made Bodie wince and pick his feet up in a hurry, only wince anew when they made contact once more with the sharp pebbles. Then, just when he thought he couldn't stand it any longer, there was the blessed relief of firm, cool damp sand, and finally the icy cold shock of the water rushing up to lick at his toes and retreating.

It felt good on his abused soles. Bloody British seaside, he thought grimly to himself, not for the first time, and advanced further into the sea. Doyle, a few seconds behind him, yelped with shock. Bodie, now with the water half-way up his legs, his calves beginning to ache with the chill of the water while his ankles had gone numb, turned to investigate. "Okay?"

"Bloody cold," said Doyle through chattering teeth. He lifted one foot out, then the other, arms wrapped around skinny ribs, bottom lip caught between his teeth. He looked absurdly mournful. Fastidiously, he kicked out one leg to disentangle some slimy green seaweed which had attached itself. Bodie decided instantly to be brave in contrast. He grinned, waded purposefully out thigh-deep, braced himself, and dived forward.

After the first agonising second or so it really wasn't too bad. He swam vigorously around for a while, avoiding the beachball being chucked around nearby by a group of mindless army types; a

passing inflatable powerboat sent a rippling wash over his head. When he turned for shore, it was to see Doyle still standing there, only having progressed as far as his knees. Goose bumps were standing up all over him, the cool breeze lifting his hair. He looked perished. Bodie wanted to wrap him up and cuddle him back to warmth.

He didn't. He grinned, standing up, and waded towards him.

Doyle saw the intention in wicked blue eyes, began a wary retreat watching Bodie all the while, the cross-surge of the waves against his calves threatening to disorient him. "Just you dare," he warned, but Bodie was quicker. Cold and dripping, he launched himself against Doyle, locked his arms around his waist -- Doyle so warm against his cool skin -- and they fell heavily together with a resounding splash into three feet of salty water.

When he surfaced, spluttering and shaken, there was murder in Doyle's eye. He advanced menacingly on Bodie who was laughing, jumped him. Bodie was ready to put up a fight and they wrestled together for a while in a struggle that suddenly turned amicable, now Doyle was over the outrage and the first shock of the cold. They raced each other, arm over arm; and one of the mindless marines, watching them, threw the beach ball in a fit of macho needling so it bounced off Doyle's golliwog head; Doyle promptly kidnapped it and threw it to Bodie. They had a good game of it, tossing it serenely back and forth, while the marines launched unsuccessful raids to rescue it. Finally tiring of the game, and getting numb, Doyle threw it some distance away and left the tattooed hunks to swim for it.

"Gettin' out," he said to Bodie.

"Cold?"

Doyle nodded and rose out of the water, a skinny male Venus arising from the foam, at least to Bodie's eye. Bodie followed him up the beach, eyes dwelling on the clench and flex of Doyle's buttocks beneath the shiny black nylon; he was cold himself now and glad to be out in the heat of the sun. They passed the two girls, who, Bodie noticed, looked Ray up and down, and then himself; he ignored it and hoped Doyle wasn't tempted. He wanted him all to himself, today.

He was gritty with sand, it was everywhere. He rubbed himself down briskly as his partner did the same, then stretched out on his back and let the hot sun gradually revive his cold-numbed nerves. His hand was touching Doyle's who was lying next to him; a casual, accidental contact and Doyle didn't move away.

"Fancy a cuppa?" Bodie asked, seeing that Doyle still looked chilly; he twisted his head and saw a hot-dog emporium not too far away.

Doyle made a barely perceptible motion of his head. "Nah." He sounded drowsy.

Bodie lifted his head to look at him, then rolled onto his stomach so he could do it more easily. Eyes closed, wet-spiked lashes lying on the round cheek; each heavy brown curl trailing its own rivulet of moisture across his temple. Bodie's gaze travelled on down the bare throat -- no chain

today, wonder why not? -- and the dark chest hair, a delicate understated pattern of masculinity. The finely muscled arms, one at his side, fingers stilled in warm sand; the other lying carelessly across his flat belly; the great veins of an athlete standing out in stark blue relief on the tender white skin of his inner arm. One knee was bent outwards, almost touching Bodie's thigh as he leant up on one hand, completing his careful, fascinating study of Doyle's body; his eyes returned to his partner's face. Bodie, who was used to it, tried to view it as a stranger might. It was an odd face: odd in the sense that taken feature by feature it was flawed practically everywhere one looked; and in that viewed as a whole it had a perverse haunting beauty.

But Bodie wasn't a stranger. And he found Doyle faultless; everything about him was attractive.

Realising what was happening he drew back, conscious of his thudding, racing heart, the tight knot of yearning in his guts. He unclenched one hand, looked at his sweaty palm, trying to calm himself. God, but this was getting beyond a joke.

Only it never had been a joke.

He meant, of course, that it was getting beyond the point where he would keep it in the realm of fantasy, a bit of illicit spice to colour his erotic dreamworld. He was beginning to want -- *too much* -- to make it real.

What was it about him, he thought, looking down into Doyle's sleeping face, its refined cherubic look belying the cruel hard streak that was as much a part of Doyle as the conviction in his own ideals, and was perhaps the same thing. Why him?

Because we're partners, because we had to learn to be close, however little we liked it. Couldn't stay alive any other way. And because he's smaller than I am, and because his beauty melts me inside, and because despite all that he's such a paradox, god Bodie, *he's* not the one who needs wrapping up and protecting, not him with his calm self-assurance and his vicious toughness and his competence at everything he tries and his determination and his quick wits...

The hot sun was beating down. Bodie was sweating freely; but it wasn't just the warmth. He threw himself violently onto his stomach, rested his head on his arm, staring at the blank grey wall ahead; shutting out all the background noise, the far-off wash of the sea, the harsh seagull squeals, the shouts of frolicking bathers.

Wouldn't you just know it would happen like this.

He could handle it when it was just a flicker of sexual attraction, a frisson of dark pleasure unlikely to be fulfilled, but just-possible-enough to make it fun.

But now it was more than that. Much, much more.

Restless, he turned his head, ear pillowed on his upper arm, so he could watch Doyle again. So deeply asleep... Doyle could sleep through anything, when he wanted to, bar the barest bleep from his R/T, the first pre-ringing ting of the phone, signals he was trained to recognise and to

react instantly to. Aching inside, knowing he was taking a risk but unable to stop himself, Bodie edged closer so his face was a millimetre from Doyle's bare upper arm. The scent of him arose, alien and familiar and heady with the added warm musk of sunoil mingling with his sweat.

It was irresistible. Zeus himself, who had succumbed to the charms of the young Ganymede, would certainly have swept off this sleeping Doyle without a passing thought; and Bodie was only too mortal.

He let his lips brush over the warm scented skin of Doyle's arm, tracing gently over the soft downy hair; and then his mouth parted and he let his tongue glide there, playing over a centimetre of salty silken skin.

The taste of him filled Bodie's senses; heart, body and soul cried out for more. No chance. He'd risked too much already. Heart pounding, he pulled away a little, and braced his arms to push himself up.

He knew Doyle was awake the instant he moved.

Every muscle tensed, he raised himself and stared down into Doyle's wide-awake face, into his eyes: pale green ice collared around narrowed pinpoints of black. Bodie waited, frozen. What had he done?

Nothing. Everything. A snatched moment of self-indulgence; Doyle might read it any way.

He was sweating, drops of it running into his eyes. He made no move to brush it away. Then, unbelievably, Doyle's face changed; a kind of weary tenderness there. He reached out, touched Bodie, very briefly.

"What do you want, Bodie?" he whispered, fiercely; and the quiet intense words echoed around them. "Tell me..."

Bodie's throat was tight with tension; he opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He just stared at Doyle dumbly. Doyle shook his head, looked down at the sand. "Should've stayed at home today... I knew it, but I..." He ran out of words, his face absorbed, looking inward.

Should have stayed at home? Bodie was trembling inside with strangeness and confusion. "You wishing you hadn't come?" he tested, cautiously. Funny how old his voice sounded...

Doyle's head came up. He stared at Bodie, then briefly glanced around at the throng of people covering the beach, seeming now to pen them in, halt and frustrate any possible revelation. "You know what I mean," he only said, and held Bodie's eyes for a long moment before his lashes swept down once more.

Bodie couldn't have been more stunned if the sun had suddenly tumbled from the sky and landed with a splash and a fizzle in the ocean. His heart was pounding again, the veins in his wrist throbbing as he stared at them, struggling to cope with the giddy rush of sensations.

Doyle slanted a glance up at him. "Why didn't you say something before," he muttered urgently, "oh Bodie, for godsake why--"

He broke off, knowing the answer only too well. Bodie had held off, as he had, because it wasn't the easiest thing to admit; one's own judgement a precarious thing when the emotions were so involved, and knowing that if one was wrong, the penalty was just too high a price to risk the gamble. He had known for a long time that he and Bodie were inextricably bound up in one another, he couldn't remember the exact moment the knowledge had hit him, it was more a gradual growing of awareness that they belonged together, that there would never be a time when they would be forever apart. He knew Bodie knew it too.

But that didn't necessarily need to mean sex.

Unless they wanted it to.

He'd known he did ever since Bodie had chased him, wrapped him up in strong arms and kissed him, not in fantasy but in reality. But he might never have known for sure that Bodie did too, had it not been for the chance that had woken him from sleep moments -- a lifetime -- ago, to find Bodie surreptitiously nuzzling his arm, an expression of such helpless, loving confusion on his face it melted Doyle's heart...

So now they both knew. And here they were, seventy miles from home surrounded by crowds; it couldn't have happened in a worse place. He lifted his head and studied Bodie's dear, goodlooking face -- now his, for the asking. That was the hardest thing, not to be allowed one touch, just one touch to say all he was feeling, had felt for months...

He rolled onto his stomach, pressed his aching groin into the sand -- oh god, he hoped Bodie didn't think it was just sex, that was part of what he had to offer but he felt so very much more and he hoped Bodie knew it --

Bodie also rolled onto his stomach, so they were lying as close as possible, faces turned together, warm breath mingling. Doyle moved his hand so it was lying alongside Bodie's thigh; he stroked him very gently, a tiny fingertip touch tracing minute circles. They spoke in whispered murmurs, like kids sharing secrets.

"We've wasted so much bloody time..."

"When did you first--?"

"Was when you got knifed, I reckon... was so mad with you..."

"Long ago as that? Wish I'd known..."

"An' you?"

"Moment I saw you, sunshine."

"My mouth's dry..."

"That's passion, that is."

"Nerves, more like... Don't care what it is, it needs rectifyin'."

Reluctant to disturb the new-found intimacy, which had settled over them like a warm cloud, isolating them from the rest of humanity, but desperate for a drink, Doyle rubbed his eyes, rolled over and sat up. He allowed himself a quick affectionate squeeze of Bodie's shoulder, and noticed something. "You're gettin' burnt. Better get up, move around a bit, we don't want you all sore."

Bodie glanced unconcernedly down at hot red skin. "Who cares?" He got up, too, shaking off sand.

"You will," Doyle said softly, "when I get you back home --"

He had that funny, faraway look in his eyes. Bodie took a deep shuddering breath, not quite believing all this. He picked up his bag. Now that they were standing up, on their feet moving across the sand doing normal things -- they rinsed off the sand, salt and sweat under a rusty shower head positioned at the walkway up off the beach -- he felt the magic of moments before receding behind a facade of routineness. As they stood at the counter of the tea-place drinking warm coke from cans, Bodie was seized with a terrible fear that maybe it hadn't been real, maybe it had just been a fantasy engendered by too much sun and an excitable imagination; or if it *was* true, maybe Doyle would come to his senses, change his mind...

He stared at Doyle who was posed artistically propping up the counter, absently noting the way his partner's nose was wrinkling slightly at the pervasive odour of greasy fried onions; in desperation.

Doyle saw the look, divined its cause with no trouble. "It's all right, Bodie," he said clearly, not stopping to check whether anyone might be listening, for *they* had not been privy to the intense exchange of emotion, the cataclysmic shift in their lifestyles that had taken place. Only Bodie would know what he meant. "It's forever. Now, or tonight, or next week; makes no difference."

Bodie nodded, and looked away before he drowned in green fire, out and along the beach.

Bodie always maintained afterwards that sex had been the last thing on his mind; that a lot had happened very fast and all he'd had in mind was that they needed very badly to be close, and alone, even if only for a few moments --

His hand went out to Doyle, checked and then continued, because the last thing he wanted was for the new awareness between them to create awkwardness, and he patted Doyle's arm to get his attention. "Look." He pointed to the far-off row of dilapidated beach-huts he'd been about to set

off for earlier. From here it could be seen that they were hugging the sea-wall around an outcrop of rocks, and that the beach in front of them was deserted, probably because it was extremely stony, with an unpleasing aspect.

Doyle followed his gaze, understood instantly. He threw his empty can towards a litterbin where it fell with a clatter, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Let's go."

On arrival, it was even plainer why this part of the beach was empty, the shingle adorned with smelly rubbish, rotting seaweed, oilcans, old rope. There was a large red-lettered sign, too: "Bathing is DANGEROUS From This Point." The huts looked as if they hadn't been used in years; but they didn't care, didn't notice. They were young, and newly in love.

Bodie chose the end cabin, latched the door shut behind them. The cubicle had a wooden floor, close-slatted wooden walls, and a small cracked mirror on one of them. It was about four feet square, plenty of room for one person, or two who didn't mind being very close. The confinement made awkwardness vanish, and Bodie's arms went instantly around Doyle, hugging him desperately close. Doyle hugged him back, starved of touch, turning his face over and over against Bodie's cheek, his eyes closed. Bodie's hands stroked up and down Doyle's bare warm skin, long tremulous caresses, their groins thrusting urgently together. Their mouths met to kiss; hard and demanding, everything suddenly so frenzied, dizzingly fast and sweet and desperate...

They were both hard, pressing together in a contact more painful than satisfying. On a hissing, indrawn breath Bodie broke the kiss, slipping his hands down Doyle's back, inside his damp trunks, held cool damp buttocks. He squeezed them, then ran his fingers down the cleft, burying his hot face in Doyle's shoulder, his eyes screwed shut as the need in him welled to an ache of unbearable longing. This wasn't enough, but he knew what to do, what would assuage it. "Please, Ray," he murmured, "oh, please..." and his fingertips trailed over the entrance to Doyle's body, brushed away a grain of sand there, returned to play with it gently.

At first, Doyle had stiffened slightly, unused to the intimacy of the touch, the invasion of his most guarded privacy, but he forgot prudishness when his wanton body betrayed his hesitation, responded instantly to the exciting thrills of pleasure Bodie's gentle finger was giving him. He left the cool analytical part of his mind behind, stopped thinking, sagged against Bodie, spreading his thighs to give him greater access.

Bodie slipped one hand down the front of his trunks to squeeze his throbbing erection, tenderly cradle his balls, the other still gently sliding up and down between his buttocks. "Please," he whispered again into Doyle's ear, "Wanna fuck you -- need you--"

Doyle was too far gone for more than a moment's hesitation. No woman had ever touched him like this, known so surely how to turn him on, spoken to him with such harsh urgency. He nodded once, tightly, and turned to the wall, bracing his hands against it, his legs spread. Bodie wrenched down the slip of damp black nylon and Doyle lifted his feet in turn, kicked the trunks impatiently away. "You bring the Delial?" he tossed over his shoulder tersely.

Bodie was rapt in his concentration on the view of Doyle thus presented to him, spreadeagled against the wall, the bare white buttocks in stark contrast to the tanned skin elsewhere an incitement to rape, to plunder the cool naked body offered to him. It took a moment for Doyle's query to sink in.

"Sun oil," repeated Doyle through gritted teeth. "Don't want to hurt me, do you?"

Hurt him? Never. Bodie caught on, grabbed for the bag, fumbled around in it with shaking fingers, finally disentangled the greasy warm plastic bottle from the encumbering folds of a damp towel. He had a struggle with the top, and shot out far too much over his fingers. With a reverence approaching worship he rubbed it in between Doyle's buttocks, squirted some more on direct from the bottle for good measure; the scent of it arose like a light aromatic cloud.

Doyle made a sound that was half-laugh, half-groan; the warm oil on his balls and between his legs was a ticklish sensation. "You must have used half the fuckin' bottle on me. You'll slip out, mate..."

"Nah," Bodie assured him, raising a hand to brush sweat out of his eyes; he was breathing hard. "It'll be okay, just relax..."

Doyle closed his eyes, pressed his palms into the wall, and bit his lip, bracing himself. He felt the other man's warm solidity push against his back, Bodie's knees pressing into the backs of his... so good, safe... and warm lips trailing over his neck and shoulders. Hands were holding his hips, and he could feel the thick snub lance of Bodie's arousal rubbing up and down between the cheeks of his ass. He held his breath, prepared for pain although the slippery point of flesh gliding over his sensitive sphincter was giving him glorious sensations in the area -- god, whyever did we wait so long --

Then Bodie, breathing heavily in his ear with excitement, took one hand from Doyle's hip, and used it to guide himself gently into the other man's body. A little groan escaped him as he eased into the hot moist channel -- it felt so bloody marvellous... and so easy, no resistance, Ray rocking back against him, his beautiful welcoming body gripping onto him smoothly, tightly.

"Christ, but you're fuckin' wonderful. You are..." he murmured, scarcely conscious of what he was saying. Head turned sideways, resting on Doyle's shoulder so he could nuzzle his neck, he slipped one hand gently around him, stroking blindly with trembling fingers over the damp skin of hip, belly, finally seeking out Doyle's semi-erect penis, squeezing it until it began to fill out and lengthen in his hand. "I love you, Ray, love you so much..."

Doyle was totally relaxed now, thighs widely parted, forehead pressed into rough wood, concentrating on the strange sensations of being filled; and Bodie thrust into him and withdrew, thrust and pulled back, with a smooth sucking movement that was darkly, sweetly erotic. Yeah, it felt good, the Greeks had it right, sodomy was fun; and Bodie's subtle hand was rubbing his cock rhythmically all the time. He went with it. He was suddenly conscious of an overwhelming surprise, as the twin sensations spread, touched, gathered together in one vast oncoming rush --

"Oh god, Bodie," he sighed, "you're gonna make me come, it's too -- oh, christ --"

He was half-laughing, half-weeping as he flooded with orgasm, thighs shuddering, pulse over pulse into Bodie's tight hand, spilling over and onto the wall; and his muscles clenched tight around Bodie who moaned deep in his throat and clutched Doyle suddenly hard back against him as he poured out his own warm seed deep within Doyle's guts.

Doyle slumped against the wall, felt Bodie slip from him. His thighs were still trembling. Bodie turned him, held him, covering him with kisses which he weakly returned, breathless and still laughing.

Bodie bore them both gently to the floor, leaning back against the wall, wrapped him up tight in a tangle of warm oily limbs, murmured into his hair with a voice still ragged, "What're you cackling about? Wasn't meant to be *funny*."

"It's hysteria --"

Doyle tucked his head under Bodie's chin, snuggled close against the strong body. He was beginning to be aware that it was very hot, very stuffy in the tiny cubicle. It reeked, too -- sex and sunoil.

"Look at me."

Obedient, he lifted his head and looked up into Bodie's sweat-streaked face into very serious deep-blue eyes that flooded with sudden warmth as they surveyed him in return. Doyle, thoroughly fucked and all spent-out, looked very cute, cuddled up against Bodie's chest as he was.

"Okay?" was all he asked, softly.

"No," said Doyle, and as Bodie lifted an eyebrow in enquiry, a little worried frown between his temples, he punched him lightly on the belly, Bodie's hard muscles tensing automatically to meet the blow. "Of course it wasn't *okay*. It was bloody -- fantastic -- only I can't find words to say how it was, and as soon as I get my strength back I'll show you, instead."

Bodie, with proud new proprietorship, touched his limp sticky genitals delicately. "How long?" he asked thoughtfully.

Doyle began to respond promptly: "Seven in--" and was forced to shut up as Bodie kissed him forcefully into silence. They were in a mad mood, euphoric and tired and blissfully happy.

But they had to pick up the threads of normality sometime. Doyle finally pushed himself away from Bodie's idly wandering hands, ran his fingers through his tangled sandy curls. "God, we're disgustin'," he said, eyeing Bodie with totally fallacious distaste -- actually, Doyle quite fancied him the way he was now -- "Filthy. If Cowley could see us now--"

That was a sobering thought all right. Not wanting to give it serious attention right now, Bodie said gloomily, "E probably can. Got X-ray vision, he has. Not to mention clairvoyance. Probably making a note in the file right now, his lips pursed up in that mean little scowl -- 'On this day, regrettably agent 3.7 saw fit to screw 4.5 through the wall on the seafront at Sexmouth' --"

"Nah, it'll be okay." Doyle said no more, gathering up their discarded swim-trunks, pulling his on, wincing as the gritty material rubbed over his tender areas. "We need a shower."

"Stating the obvious, as usual? That's the copper in you coming out, that is, Doyle." Bodie unlatched the door, stuck his head cautiously out. "All clear," he announced: and blinking a little in the sudden light the two weary CI5 agents stumbled out into a wave of heated air. They walked along the front and threw themselves into the sea.

There was still the rest of the day to see out; no need to cut it short. Might as well avail themselves of the rest of the delights the seaside had to offer. "How about a pub lunch?" suggested Bodie as they bounded up the steps, Doyle a little stiff-legged. He nodded towards a likely place, named vaguely appropriately, "The Bull and Spear."

Doyle assented. "Yeah, okay. But we better stick to orange juice."

Bodie gave him a glance of non-comprehension; the anticipation of a pint or so of cool lager had been beginning to form almost imperceptibly in his mind.

Doyle elaborated, "I think I've been well-oiled quite enough for one day --"

Upon which dreadful pun Bodie thumped him, and the two men walked off to begin the rest of their lives. Together.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

The Ball Was Good

Sebastian

*Another very early story. The exuberance, the delight, of being newly in love (me) shows.
Obviously it was Wimbledon week at the time of writing.*

=====|||=====

(J.P. McEnroe, 1978, '79, '80...)

Almost like guilty schoolboys, the two men crept out of the shrubbery in the late dawn and surveyed the long green planes of the private tennis court; in the early morning sun, it was a pleasant sight, redolent of strawberries-and-cream and gracious, English country life.

Beside the court the taller of the two off-loaded a pair of rackets, a box of balls, two towels, a tracksuit top, and an assortment of sweatbands, wristguards, and other essential tennis accessories. He sighed, theatrically. Why was it that he always got the job of lugging things around while his partner loped easily, and empty-handed, at his side? His eyes sought for and found the errant, who was squatting in the middle of the court attaching the centre net-tape to its ground linkage.

Bodie came up behind him, forgetting his minor grievance. "You sure the girls are still asleep?"

"Course they are," Doyle assured him, his fingers deftly fastening the screw. "Wouldn't you be?" And he gave a reminiscent, satisfied smile.

Bodie gave that cryptic comment some thought as he went back to the pile of things, throwing the two rackets to Doyle so he could check the height of the net, and positioning himself at the netpost to await instructions. "We're not asleep, are we?"

"Up," ordered Doyle, crouching with the rackets balanced side to end. "Bit more – stop -- down a bit -- that's okay - " and the net arranged to his satisfaction he rose smoothly to the balls of his feet he was feeling very athletic this morning -- and resumed the former conversation. "Ah, but it's different for women, innit? Doesn't take it out of 'em so much at the time, but they're knackered longer after."

At this unusual logical twist, Bodie snorted, watching as Doyle stretched like a supple cat, turning his face to the sun, an expression of blissful well-being pervading his features. "Well, if it's all been taken out of you, sunshine, then I reckon I'm gonna thrash you into the ground this morning."

"That's not the object of the exercise though, is it?" Doyle pointed out, coming towards him and thrusting one of the rackets his way. "We're practisin' so we don't make prats of ourselves in this bloody tennis party, aren't we?"

The two CI5 men had been invited away to a weekend party at the home of Lord Nailsham; his daughter's intimate friend happened to be a pretty young concert violinist whose breathtaking arpeggios had been delighting Ray Doyle for some weeks now, and who had suggested, almost as an afterthought that he might like to bring that weird mate of his -- 'the one with the nice eyes' -- along to keep her younger sister company. Bodie had been quite happy to agree since he liked sponging off nobility, and since the sister was a very attractive young lady, who proved remarkably responsive to Bodie's best dashing-cavalier-with- a-hint-of-psychopath act. The first night had gone very well, dinner in the Great Hall followed by surreptitious rearrangement of the sleeping accommodation with satisfying results all round. The next day had been just as good, a lazy day by the poolside and on horseback, winding up in bed once more with their respective ladies, fully fed on venison and the lord's best vintage port. They had been warned in advance about the tennis since neither of them had picked up a racket in months.

"I am not," Doyle said now, for about the tenth time, "being beaten blot-and-blot by some chinless wimp who carries his balls in a string bag and his racket in a press."

Bodie made a derisive noise, on his own account. "No chance."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, supershot," Doyle countered. "These are yer actual Upper Class 'ere, you know. They 'aven't anything better to do than bash balls around all day, in between fortifying themselves with top-grade protein and vitamins. No daily graft and a soggy 'amburger at the end of it for them, is there?" He sighed soulfully and looked up from beneath his lashes, the picture of noble suffering.

It was thus that the plan for this covert early morning practice had been conceived, Bodie being no keener than he to be shown up as two leaden-limbed provincials by the Upper Class Twits. True, Bodie was fairly confident that he and Doyle, being in far better physical lick than the artistic young men floating around Nailsham's estate, would give a reasonable account of themselves. But, obedient as he usually was to his partner's whims, despite the surface grumbling, he had dragged himself out of bed with one final, only semi-regretful glance at the sleeping angel next to him, hunted out his tennis gear, and come with Doyle to this deserted part

of the extensive manor house grounds.

The grass was pressed, rolled, mown, a velvety carpet in striped shades of green, its white lines freshly painted; the air was clear, the sky blue. Bodie felt a lift of pure, animal pleasure to be up and out this early on such a beautiful morning. Doyle was looking keen, too; fit and fresh in white tennis shirt, neat shorts, a white headband around the curls, blue-trimmed white socks and immaculate shoes. He was running on the spot, limbering up. He had improved on his tan this weekend, long lengths of his limbs were exposed, and from the top of his lean thighs to his ankles, from each lightly muscled arm to the slender wrists, he was an even shade of pale gold, the fine body hairs glinting fair in the sunlight. An expression of ferocious concentration on his face, he was trying out imaginary forehands and backhands as he jogged up and down. The corners of Bodie's mouth lifted irrepressibly as he watched him, freely admitting to himself that Doyle, masculine though he was, looked good enough to eat this morning.

He tossed some balls Doyle's way and took up position on his side of the court. "Come on then, Navratilova. Let's see what you're made of."

"Never-ad-it what?" I queried Doyle, being deliberately moronic; and he picked up the balls, stuffing one in his pocket -- Christ, these shorts were tight.

They knocked up for a while, and it must be admitted that Doyle's thoughts were not entirely concentrated on the serious business of striking ball over net; he had left the warmth of his bed and the drowsy curve of the girl next to him with definite reluctance, and the air was cool, felt good on his sensitive skin, even the light breeze stirring through the hair on his scalp arousing light, erotic tingles in him.

Should have stayed in bed a while longer...worked it out of my system first...

"Been a long time since I saw you in action," he called across the net, and winced. "The tennis, the tennis," he hurriedly added, though there was no indication that Bodie was sharing his super-sensitive reaction to the morning, and the ensuing one-track line of thought.

"No time," said Bodie disgustedly. "The Cow sees to that. It got so every time I was making serious on-court progress the fucking bleeper went -- I fed around this story about a jealous Scotsman who got twitchy if I was out of his clutches too long, but people were beginning to *talk*." He shot Doyle an arch look and camped his way to the back of the court.

They began to play in earnest. Doyle, while possessing flashier strokes, capable of mercurial bursts of speed around the court, and the occasional breath-taking shot, was gradually worn down by Bodie's heavier weight of shot and more solid play. A natural athlete, Bodie was, all strength and muscle and beautifully coordinated action -- the bloody ball didn't stand a chance, Doyle moodily reflected, as Bodie unleashed a powerful forehand drive that flashed past him at the speed of light to land an inch inside the baseline. Receiving Bodie's serve, time and again his fingers actually stung as he made a useless dab at it and the heavy ball pinged wildly off his flailing racket. But more unnerving than the struggle to win the occasional game was Bodie's new habit.

In common with some of the more notable players to be seen on TV it was Wimbledon fortnight -- Bodie had developed a grunt.

He grunted when he served, when he ran for a ball, when he jumped for a smash. That wouldn't have mattered, except that the wild corner of Doyle's mind that he never could quite control had translated the sound into something quite different, and wildly inappropriate. They were having some quite long rallies, since he never gave up on a ball and managed to scramble back all but the outright winners, and the punctuated rhythm of Bodie's earthy sighs had acquired a totally unintended significance.

"Uuhh..." panted Bodie as he thumped a serve, "aahh..." as he chased to the net to pick up a short ball, "ooohh..." as he stretched wide for a punching volley.

For all the world, Bodie sounded as if he were in the throes of mad, passionate love-making. It was doing the oddest things to Doyle.

He was acutely conscious of the rough cotton aertex scraping over his sensitive nipples; the tight pull of the shorts over his misbehaving groin -- every movement made it worse, or better, depending which way one looked at it -- the breeze caressing his naked skin. And every time Bodie made that tantalizing noise, it seemed to strike home in his guts...

"Aahhh..." Bodie ground out, a long, lush sound.

He had to do something. The shorts were getting unbearably tight.

"Bodie --"

His voice came out in a squeak, as it was sometimes wont to do. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Bodie -- why the hell do you keep making that noise?"

"What noise?" Bodie was genuinely surprised as they met up at the changeover; Doyle looked decidedly peevish.

"Urgh," Doyle tried. "Uumph." It didn't come out the same, and he scowled at Bodie. "Trying to be a McEnroe, are we?"

"It releases the tension," Bodie assured him, and peered closely into the cross face. "You ought to try it, mate, you're looking a bit hot and bothered," he said cheerfully. "Making you work up a sweat, am I?"

In more ways than one, Doyle thought grimly, and used the time when Bodie had his back to him to arrange himself more comfortably inside the constricting clothing. That nearly turned out to be a disastrous mistake, since even the fleeting touch of his impatiently scrabbling fingers on himself sent a shivery thrill of anticipation through his urgent shaft of unruly flesh.

Things did not improve. He seemed unable to disentangle the wild, sensual images his mind was throwing up at him from clinical concentration on the game, his eyes unconsciously seeking images to feed his arousal even as his rational self fought to quell it. Hence, he was unusually conscious of the way Bodie looked, the lie of his cropped, dark hair, the muscular forearm flashing as he wielded his racket, the powerful thighs, a deeper shade of brown than his own, the strength and grace of him as he moved around the court bending and stretching with ease, and style, Doyle sighed in frustration, and dragged his eyes away. This was getting ridiculous. If he went on like this, he'd be leaping the net. and pushing Bodie to the ground for a frenetic coupling in the open air, the grass crushed beneath them, assuaging his burning need in Bodie's body, panting out his love and his hunger into Bodie's salty hair --

He had to slam the brakes on that line of thought and very quickly, excited little throbs jumping in his groin as his eager body responded amorally to the graphic images his inflamed mind was sending down. He took several deep breaths, forced himself to concentrate on the game. This was utterly mad.

But he ached with the wanting of -- something -- anything --

It was 4-1 to Bodie in the second set, which score surprised Doyle who couldn't remember winning a game -- couldn't have recalled a single point to save his life, in fact. As they met up beside the net again preparatory to changing ends, Bodie had another concerned glance at his opponent. Floppy-damp curls surrounded the round, heat-flushed face, which was only to be expected given the warmth of the day and the exertion. It was more Doyle's air of distraction that was bothering the other man; he didn't seem to have his mind on the game at all; looked half-asleep, in fact, eyelids drooping heavily over slitted feral green.

"4-1, eh?" he said, nudging him. Doyle stiffened. The touch of Bodie's warm skin on his own was unbearably sweet; it was all he could do not to give way to the seething urge to seize the man and press against him, seek blessed relief... He stared at Bodie with something akin to despair.

"Don't be like that," said Bodie, misunderstanding completely, putting his head very close to Doyle. "You won't be the first to succumb to me strokes."

Doyle visibly shuddered. Bodie couldn't be making things worse if he was *trying* to. Bodie pressed two balls intimately into his hands and winked before jogging off to the back of the court.

As Doyle threw up the ball and prepared to unleash his racket head at it, again the brush of rough cotton over his erect nipples sent little thrills of pleasure through him, right down to centre in his groin. As he chased after Bodie's return, the rhythmic shift and rub of his aroused flesh against the seam of his shorts was beginning to produce an unmistakable slickness he knew only too well heralded the approach of orgasm -- and soon, too. Things were getting desperate. Not here -- *please* -- Bodie'd never let him live it down if his cool, together partner suddenly sank to his knees, and, groaning, wrenched down his shorts to adorn the tennis court with something far less familiar to it than its usual dose of Fisons. He sank his teeth into his lower lip in the hope

that the pain might distract him but even the small tang and the taste of blood only served to fuel his rising excitement. God, was he turning into a bloody masochist?

Just then, Bodie let out one of those damnable groans, one of those low, sexy rumbles deep in his throat that had started the whole problem off in the first place; and it was all too much.

"Goddammit!" The yell pierced the air. Doyle threw his racket forcefully to the ground and stood, shoulders hunched, fists tightly clenched.

Bodie was over the net in a single bound, running towards him. "What's the matter? You pull a muscle or something?" He put a hand on Doyle's arm; his partner had affected a strange, stooping posture.

"Nope. Just have to go back to the house for a moment, okay?" Doyle said between gritted teeth. Bodie stared, noting that Doyle was almost shivering, a fine tremor running through his limbs.

"Wha' for?"

Doyle's eyes came open, they were fever-bright. "Whaddya *think!*" he squawked.

Bodie's lips curved. "Caught short, eh? No need to do the long walk, though, mate; plenty of bushes around." He indicated the surrounding shrubbery.

Doyle only shook his head.

"Come on." Bodie urged; Doyle was not usually so shy. "It's all looking a bit dry, probably be glad of a nice, warm shower." Keen for victory, he was eager not to break into the game for longer than necessary, and the house was ten minutes' jog away. "I'll look out for you; wouldn't want to shock the ladies."

"It's not that."

Doyle's voice was almost a mumble; he dropped his head. "What is it, then?" asked Bodie, moving closer, a puzzled frown on his face.

It was the smell of him that did it in the end, the fresh scent of cotton clothing, mingled with the irresistible animal lure of Bodie's clean, healthy sweat. Warm waves of Bodie washed over him -

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Aroused into madness, Doyle grabbed him locked his arms behind Bodie's back and pressed himself into the other man's body from chest to groin, desperate. His eyes closed. Their warm knees touched, soft/hard contact. He waited, strung out on fire and ice.

Astounded, Bodie gazed down at the flushed face, read the signs of high sexual tension there, in the drooping eyelids, the silvery line of sweat that ran beside the full mouth -- as he watched, a tongue darted out and flicked it away -- the bitten lip, the expression of aching need...

A delighted smile spread across Bodie's face, and he hugged the thin figure unconsciously tight. "So that's it," he murmured, "a touch of the morning matrimonials, eh?"

Doyle could only nod, gasping. Bodie was squeezing him just the way he most needed it; warm hands were running up his flanks, and he didn't want to think.

"Can see why you didn't have your mind on the game --" Bodie slipped a hand between them, ran his hand over the front of Doyle's shorts, feeling the heat and hardness there give a convulsive throb -- "but I wouldn't advise going back to the house. Not in a state like this --" He pressed his hips forward to emphasize his point -- "you could be 'ad up, mate." Another little wriggle. He was enjoying himself. But at Doyle's indrawn gasp, his helpless pleasure, Bodie relented. "Bad, is it?" he asked softly, sympathetic.

Doyle nodded, mutely. He caught his bottom lip between his teeth, in anguish. He was so close...and yet he needed more. He was alive and warm and throbbing in Bodie's casual, knowing hands, and if Bodie let him go now he'd die... He waited, trembling, to follow Bodie's lead.

In fact, Bodie found him a very arousing sight; he had a kind of primeval beauty about him, bringing ancient fertility cults, the pagan worship of virility and healthy male lust to mind. I could do anything with him, Bodie thought, noting his own rising heat with surprise; anything, the way he is now...all mine... Doyle threw back his head and let out a long hissing sigh of need. "What shall we do?" he whispered fiercely, without opening his eyes. "Where...?"

In answer, with an urgency all his own, Bodie grabbed his hand and pulled him along, away from the calm, forgotten lawn-tennis scenario and into the outskirts of the shrubbery. It was cool in the thicket, and dense enough to preclude observation. Beside a bush, Doyle threw himself down to lie on the dusty earth, thighs falling apart, one hand rising to hold himself. Bodie watched the urgent clutch of the thin fingers, mesmerized. Did Doyle mean to -- ? If so, maybe he shouldn't be hanging around? The swift disappointment subsided quickly, under the unmistakably erotic influence Doyle's uninhibited behaviour was having on him. He would stay...and watch...

Then Doyle's eyes flashed open, hazy with desire. "Get me out of these bloody clothes for godssake," he hissed, and watched impatiently as Bodie, shaking, knelt beside him.

Was it a dream? he thought hazily as his clumsy fingers undid Doyle's shorts; it felt like a dream, a crazy, erotic nightride -- he pulled the shirt out and pushed it up to reveal the ribbed chest, sheened with damp tendrils of dark hair. Doyle seized his hand and pushed it onto his nipples; he was breathing very hard. Bodie stoked the small, brown buds with an unsure touch, hut he gained in confidence at the pleasure Doyle was obviously deriving from the gentle movements of his fingertips, the slender body arching to meet his touch, turning under his hands.

"You are in a bad way, aren't you?" he whispered, feeling a strange surge of tenderness and affection rise up behind the heady, sexual heat. He loved Ray, loved to see him like this. "What

the hell am I gonna do with you?"

In answer, Doyle's bare arm shot out, crooked around his neck, pulling him down and close for a fleeting kiss; damp tongues touched. A hand touched his face, manoeuvring him over the warm, moist skin spiked with the faint scent of soap and sweat. Following his wanton's lead, Bodie pressed his mouth to Doyle's body, rubbing his tongue over the pointed nipples, fired up by Doyle's sighing response, the lean fingers twining distractedly in his hair offering a vague, reciprocal caress.

Suddenly eager to feast his eyes on the sight, he lifted his head, looked down the length of Doyle's body, from the pleasure-lit face, right down to the white-clad feet. Doyle, dishevelled in tennis gear and half-undressed was ridiculously attractive. He ran his hand up from knee to the warm, soft skin of the inner thigh, watching the big muscles there stiffen as Doyle clenched all over in another spasm of helpless delight; slipped questing fingers beneath the leg of the shorts, encountered damp, hard heat.

His heart nearly stopped, as his fingers brushed over the exciting, forbidden territory.

But it turned frustrating for both of them as his hand struggled to find greater access; the shorts were just too tight.

"Don't muck about, for chrissake," whispered Doyle into the tense, beating silence. "*Please*, oh god...waited too long already--"

Thus chastised, Bodie struggled with the shorts, wrenching them apart, and presently Doyle was released from the constricting fabric. God, but it felt wonderful, the cool air playing over his heated nakedness.

As he scabbled the tangle of briefs and Fred Perry's down Doyle's firm, golden thighs, Bodie's eyes widened. He had viewed the erect male organ before in the course of the odd -- some of them very odd -- blue movies taken in during a misspent youth, but they had never seemed objects of beauty to him, before now. Doyle was quite skinny across the hips, and the engorged sex arching over the flat stomach looked the more impressive in comparison. As he watched, it gave a little jerk, and a throb, and Doyle's fists clenched by his side, his face screwed up with anguish.

"*Bodie--*" Too far gone for embarrassment, he grabbed his hand and folded Bodie's fingers around himself, moving his palm over them until he was satisfied Bodie knew the way he wanted to be touched, then his hand dropped away to lie at his side. It felt so good, every hissing breath he took seemed to draw pleasure through him, and he was filled with glory as the wonderful sensations peaked and he was coming at last, as Bodie's other hand gently curved around his balls, every nerve and organ and muscle overflowing with sweet, sweet pleasure as the other man gave him the blessing of beautiful release. At his wanton performance, no surprise: maybe those would come later, but he didn't think so. He heard Bodie half-whisper, "Hang on a minute," and heard him leave. A moment later, the crackle of undergrowth, and then a rough touch on his skin. He opened his eyes to see Bodie carefully cleaning off his bespattered chest and belly with one

of the towels. He watched Bodie unblinkingly. Bodie finally met his eyes with a half-abashed grin.

"You been at the sheeps' eyeballs again, lover?"

Two syllables, to make him happy.

He leaned up on one elbow, captured Bodie's face with a hand, looking into it for a long moment. Then he kissed Bodie lightly on the mouth. "Thank you."

Bodie shrugged. "'S okay. You'd do the same for me. I suppose," he added, suddenly unsure.

Doyle gave a chuckle, lay back down. "Yeah. Any time. Now, if you like."

Bodie wasn't quite sure he meant it, and made no move.

"I'm not kidding," said Doyle, watching him, "--well?"

Bodie smiled at him, a funny, rueful little smile. "Yeah." He checked his watch, as if he'd only just thought of it. "Nearly time for breakfast."

Doyle disregarded this unsubtle, uncertain hint. "Bit tired of kedgerie, meself." He dropped his head back on the dirty, lumpy ground, the discomforts of the situation more apparent to him now than a few minutes ago, when he had been lost, oblivious to all but the urgent demands of his body; and held out a hand. "C'mere."

Bodie, who was inwardly terrified at the same time as being desperately eager, made one last bid for escape. "'S a bit public here, innit?"

Not fooled, Doyle shook his head. "Didn't bother you when it was me on the rack, did it? Look, mate. It's seven a.m., no-one got to bed till three last night, no-one knows we're 'ere, we're half a mile from the house and the gardener doesn't work Sundays. So stop prevaricatin'."

"Prevaricating," murmured Bodie desperately, "that's a good word."

Doyle was watching him, suddenly troubled. "'Course, if you don't want --"

Bodie shook his head. "No." He let out a long sigh. "No. I -- do --"

That was enough for Doyle. He put out a hand, grabbed a handful of shirt, and yanked. Bodie half fell on top of him.

With one hand, Doyle smoothed Bodie's hair with immense tenderness. He loved this man; no-one else had ever moved him in quite the same way. "You're a sexy thing, you know that?" he murmured, tracing a forefinger around Bodie's mouth, watching it quiver to his touch. "You're a very bad bit, gettin' me going like that."

"I did?" queried Bodie with genuine innocence; and as Doyle's warm hand slid under his shirt he closed his eyes.

"All that groaning. Sounded like the best bits of a blue movie, you did... An' the way you moved -- like a bloody fantasy..."

Bodie like to hear this; he wanted more. His eyes fixed on Doyle with hungry concentration. Doyle tipped him onto his back, leaned over to slide away more clothing, continuing: "Lovely thighs ... you've got beautiful thighs, know that?" He ran a slow, caressing hand over the powerful curve. "All the time I was runnin' around out there, I kept watching them, wondering what it'd be like to be gripped between 'em, just couldn't get it out of my head... God you looked beautiful -- *are* beautiful --"

He undid Bodie's shorts, one-handed, not hurrying. He traced a finger along the lower belly, then slipped it inside to gently stroke soft skin, making a little sound of pleasure deep in his throat when his hand closed around the warm, hard curve of Bodie's cock -- "Oh yeah, you like this," he whispered, looking up at Bodie's tense face. "It's a naughty game we're playin', Bodie, but you like it, don't you?"

"Mmmm," was all Bodie could manage; the subtle movements of Doyle's hand searching him was making it difficult to think. And Doyle was right, the illicitness of the act, allowing another man, his mate, to touch him this way was making it all the more exciting. The lure of the forbidden...not to mention Doyle's husky, wicked voice whispering vaguely dirty things to him....

"Well-made, aren't you?" said Doyle with admirable delicacy, as his careful fingers freed Bodie to spring forth uncramped, parting the shorts and pulling the pants down. He stroked up and down the solid length of Bodie, rubbed his thumb over the slippery tip. Snatching a glance at Bodie's face, he smiled to himself as he took in Bodie's expression.

His eyes were screwed tightly shut and he was breathing fast and shallow. Blindly, he reached out a hand, encountered Doyle's bare arm and stroked him clumsily, wanting to give something in return, show Doyle how much he was loving the attentions, the sensations aroused in him by Doyle's sure touch.

Without letting go of him, Doyle dropped his head to lick Bodie's nipples, whispering, rather muffled between sucks, "An' this? D'you like this, Bodie?"

"Not as much as you do," Bodie admitted jerkily; he found the sensation more ticklish than arousing, remembering Doyle's leap of frantic response when he had done this to him.

Doyle smiled, pleased by the honesty; he slid his mouth regretfully away to tongue Bodie's ear instead. "I'll teach you to like it," he promised. "It feels good, Bodie; god, it felt good when you did it to me... You're gonna learn to love it, you'll beg me for it --"

He kissed Bodie's mouth, parting his lips with a gentle tongue, closing his eyes as he drank in

the other man's response, the sweet taste of him. He broke the kiss with reluctance and one final, valedictory lick, when the hardness under his gently working hand began to throb more urgently; he wanted to make this good for Bodie, the best ever...

Half sitting up, he slipped his other hand between Bodie's rigid, straining thighs, cradled the soft balls, gently stroking. Bodie gasped and thrashed, head tossing from side to side.

"Christ, you feel good," Doyle breathed. "You know what I'd like to do to you, Bodie?" His voice dropped to a low, intense murmur as he squeezed and released him, squeezed again, a faster rhythm now -- "I want to -- kiss it --" Bodie's arching response to that made him grin shakily and continue. "Yeah, you look -- lickable. I'd like to suck you, you'd love that, wouldn't you, me sucking you off -- fuck my mouth --"

He was about to suit his actions to his words, when Bodie gave a long, low groan. "Ray," his voice was almost a sob, "gonna come you're making me come -- oh Christ -- love you --"

Maybe next time, Doyle thought ruefully as his hand clenched tight on him and Bodie spasmed beneath him, filling his palm with warm stickiness as Bodie had the sweetest, most intense orgasm of his life as Doyle watched intently.

Reality came slowly to Bodie; the sound of the birds, the hardness of the ground pressing into him, he opened his eyes after what felt like aeons, squinting against the sun filtering through the overhead trees, to see Ray Doyle licking his hand, eyes slitted fiercely, an expression of dreamy languor on his face. He met Bodie's eyes for one intense look, then bent his head to lap at Bodie's belly. When he finally sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Bodie was still coming down to earth, feeling dazed, unreal...

A wild, crazy start to the day...it still had the air of a fiercely erotic dream, strangeness pervading the air...

Then Doyle smiled at him, and everything was back to normal, the strangeness gone.

"Why do I get the feeling you've done this before?" he muttered, throwing a hand over his eyes.

Doyle chuckled. Bodie slanted up the hand so he could look at him.

"Well?" he demanded. "Have you?"

Doyle winked at him, then looked inscrutable.

Bodie felt a surge of jealousy, which he knew was irrational, but he felt it just the same. He said nothing, long lashes falling to shade his eyes.

"C'mon, Bodie," said Doyle, sensing an opportunity to be wicked. "How d'you think I got into CI5?"

Bodie's eyes met his, not understanding.

"You've 'eard of the casting couch, 'aven't you?" pursued Doyle, suggestively.

Bodie stared, the image of the black leather and chrome object that adorned one corner of Cowley's office coming instantly to mind. Suspicion, doubt, fleeting revulsion flickered across his face.

Doyle couldn't keep his face straight any longer. He howled with laughter, thumping the ground with one hand. Bodie suddenly twigged.

"You little sod," he growled, and lunged for him. They wrestled, laughing, for a while and when they tired of it they lay silent, holding each other very close, very secure. Bodie breathed in the scent of Doyle's dusty-fresh hair. He still wanted to know.

"Seriously --," he began.

Doyle turned his face up, eyes very wide. "Oh, I'm serious. Very. If you are?"

It was a heart-stopping moment. It wasn't easy to say the words, but he wanted to, before the moment slipped away as he sensed it easily could, this might become a lost, isolated encounter of midsummer madness, and he didn't think he could bear it if they put it behind them. Ray had given him the opening --

"Yeah... Love you. Ray, I do love you," he mumbled, and buried his face against Doyle's shoulder.

Doyle's face creased with affectionate amusement. He stroked his hand through Bodie's hair, then down his arm. "Will you marry me, then?"

Bodie was, after the tension, flooded with a rush of unexpected happiness. He forced his face to behave; only the soft, dark blue eyes giving away his helpless, loving feelings.

"Oh, I dunno about that," he said seriously. "I dunno if you could give me the lifestyle I'd like to become accustomed to." He waved an explanatory hand in the vague direction of the unseen mansion.

Doyle looked pensive. "My first proposal -- and you're turning me down?" He sounded wistful, eyelashes wavering, mouth set in an unhappy little droop.

Bodie couldn't bear to see him like that, whether he was joking or not. He hugged him fiercely, kissed the pout away. "Daft idiot. I'm yours and you bloody well know it," he said shortly.

Doyle's assumed misery vanished in a flash. He grinned, rolled, and bounced gently on Bodie's belly. "That's settled then," he said cheerfully. "Love each other forever." He said it lightly, but he knew it was true. They were destined to be together; some fate had ordained it. "Shall we go

back and make the announcement now, or spring it on 'em just before the match?"

"Oof," said Bodie, winded as Doyle's rear thudded into his stomach. "Get up, you little animal. We've been rolling around in the dirt long enough." But he pulled him down for one last kiss before they hauled themselves to their feet. Bodie didn't quite know what had hit them, but he knew he liked it. He wasn't even surprised by it; it just seemed perfectly natural that they should have slipped so easily into a declaration of mutual love. He'd think about it later. Maybe. For now, he was just happy.

"You never did answer my question," he said as he rearranged his clothing.

Doyle, engaged in the same task, turned an enquiring eye on him. "What?"

"That wasn't your first time with a bloke, was it? It's not new to you."

"The love is..." and seeing that Bodie was not to be put off, he admitted: "The sex, no."

"Who?" pursued Bodie, intensely jealous.

Doyle looked distant, lifting one knee to dust it off, gazing back to the past. Bodie deserved honesty. "Was a time when I couldn't make up my mind which way I wanted to go. Tried it all, with anyone who looked okay, didn't care what sex, colour, race... God, I was a wild kid." He shook his head, remembering. "Had to cool down when I got into the police, mind you. It's been mostly women since -- mostly, but not all," he added, scrupulously fair. He slid a glance at Bodie to see how he was taking all this. His heart dropped at the expression on Bodie's face. He went to him, slipped his arms around him and hugged him.

"But that's just sex, Bodie, and it's over now. You've done the same, you know you have, even if it wasn't with men. 'S not important. We've got each other now; we won't need anyone else."

The conviction in his voice, the sincerity in his eyes swept Bodie's doubts away as if they had never existed. He held him close, trailed his hand through tangled curls, and lifted his face to kiss him.

When their mouths slid apart, Doyle was gasping. He tipped his head back, eyes falling shut. "Wanna do it all over again," he murmured. "Oh, god, look what you've done to me..." He pressed his hips against Bodie, grinding them round in a slow, sensuous sweep.

Bodie released him in a hurry, not without an appreciative glance at his handiwork; served the poor sod right for wearing such tight shorts, probably deliberately chosen to show off his neat little rump. "I am not," he said with firmness, "getting down on that mucky patch again just because you're insatiable. We have a tournament coming up in a few hours, and we'll be worn out --" his voice tailed off as he took in certain things about his partner he hadn't noticed before, lost in the attraction of the man himself, the wonder and newness of it all.

"Doyle," he croaked.

Doyle stretched luxuriously, arms locking behind his head, accepting the inevitable. His eyes came sleepily open and he smiled at Bodie, then noticed his expression. "Whassamatter? Anyone'd think no-one loved you," he said, supremely innocent of the picture he presented, too happy with the way things had gone.

Bodie swallowed. "Did you bring a change of tennis gear?" he said sweetly. He knew full well that neither of them had.

Doyle's mouth fell open. He surveyed first Bodie, who stood the inspection grimly, then looked over himself. Filthy was not the word for it. The spotless perfection of gleaming, pressed white tennis gear was gone, probably forever since it seemed unlikely that washing powder would have the necessary power to wipe out the smears, stains, dust-streaks with which they were both freely adorned.

"Oh, shit," Doyle swore unrepentantly. He ran his fingers through riotously tangled curls. The back of his neck felt gritty.

"Make our excuses and leave?" suggested Bodie primly.

They made their way out into the open air, wincing against the sudden blaze of sunlight, to collect their things from the courtside. They were quiet now, needing time to think, to adapt to the new turn their lives seemed to have taken. Bodie was the first to break the silence as he shouldered all the gear, from habit.

"What about Valerie?" he asked, referring to Doyle's girlfriend who was, presumably, still fast asleep and unaware that her bloke had spent the morning making wild love with her sister's.

Doyle shrugged. "She'll live. Was gettin' fed up with sitting through all those concerts, too," he added.

"Christ, you can be callous at times," Bodie said, a little tingle of foreboding sliding through him.

Doyle picked up on it instantly. "Never with you," he said steadily, holding Bodie's eyes. "That's a promise."

Bodie found, surprisingly, that he believed him. Doyle was continuing, thoughtfully: "It's totally different. Girls... What does she know about me? I just happen to fit the type she gets hot for, good for a few evenings out till you get fed up, time to move on. You know how it goes... She doesn't know the first thing about me," he said again.

"Yeah, know what you mean," Bodie said, repentant of his mistrust. He and Doyle had five years of solid friendship as the foundation of their relationship.

Doyle was remembering something, his face pensive. "Ann -- she was different --"

Bodie watched him, a little wary. Doyle seemed to collect his thoughts, looked at him. "Tell you about Ann, some day. Whatever you want to know... That's over. From now on," he growled, the shadow that had crossed his face lifting, "'S just you an' me, big boy, an' you better believe it." He mock-punched Bodie's midriff, scowling ferociously.

There was suddenly perfect understanding between them; there would be time now for the sharing of past sorrows, as well as the celebration of the present happiness.

Suddenly breaking the mood, Doyle slid a glance of fleeting concern at Bodie. "You look a bit loaded, mate. Sure I can't carry anything for you?" he asked, with enchanting courtesy. Bodie had towels slung around his neck, clothing draped over one arm, two rackets in one hand and the box of balls precariously balanced on top. Doyle frowned, head worriedly on one side.

"Don't want to tax you, flower," said Bodie with a seraphic beam, "'cause I've got a heavy programme scheduled for you later on tonight--"

And they began to jog, off towards the house. Two contented voices floated back toward the deserted tennis court --

"-- who won, anyway --"

"-- think we both did --"

Game, set. And match.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Between the Lines

(during "Mixed Doubles")

Sebastian

Mixed Doubles - a wonderful episode, and this too slight a story to do it justice. But who could watch that scene with Towser when he rips open Doyle's T-shirt with a knife and Bodie reacts in protective anger, and not yearn to know more? Contains a couple of fanciful descriptions of Doyle - who has a beauty difficult to capture with a pen and yet I kept on trying - efforts which sometimes came back to haunt me in parodic compilations such as Doyle, the Green-Eyed Beauty - where my own words feature far too often for comfort :)

=====///=====

In one thing, Macklin was right. They had grown too used to success. From his position leaning against the wall, arms folded, Bodie was frowning as he watched the scenario being acted out on the warehouse floor: he too had felt that sickening punch, known the piercing tang of sharp knife sliding along skin, and understood that worse than any pain was the fury and resentment and loss of pride that came after one had tried and tried and still the tough bastard came back at you. Macklin was good. Better than he'd expected.

He was bruised and battered and tired and the thought of another round with Macklin and Towser made him shudder. But worse than that prospect was what he was going through now; watching it happen to his partner. He watched because not watching would be worse still; too conscious that Doyle was smaller than he was, lighter, and eye-catchingly vulnerable, slender-wristed, overlong curls, eyes wide with almost-fear as he anticipated the next blow.

Bodie's fists clenched. "Give it to him, Ray," he muttered as Doyle reeled near him. Useless encouragement. It was clear that Doyle was about finished; all his punches lacked strength and

direction, he was staggery on his feet, but you could see he was going to die trying. Not for his partner, the simple surrender. Lithe and lean and muscular as he was, Doyle was no match for Macklin. Neither of them were, Bodie conceded; and it stung.

But more important than that, Ray Doyle was getting hurt. And it killed Bodie to stand back and watch.

Doyle's straining arm gave up at last in Macklin's grip. One blow to the guts from a hard elbow, and he was thudding onto the floor, a still, red-T-shirted heap. For the second time that day Bodie was there, extending a hand to him, and it was a moment before Doyle was even able to take it. Bodie practically had to lift him to his feet and hold him there.

"Thought you were hard boys, didn't you? Two real Flash Harrys." Macklin's voice held a weary contempt as he stood, legs aggressively apart, watching them. Bodie slowly rubbed the sweat-damp cotton of his partner's back as Doyle leaned against him, offering a shred of comfort. He stared out at the blonde-headed sadist with murderous dislike. He said nothing. Doyle dropped his head onto his partner's reassuringly solid shoulder; he was breathing very hard. He was dazed and not thinking very straight; but he was aware that where he now stood was the only refuge for him in the world right now.

"My god, you've got things to learn," said Macklin, watching them. "You think you've finished? We've only just started. Give him to me, Bodie, and let me make a man out of him. Worth a try, anyway."

Part of Macklin's job, the needle. It got to Bodie more than Doyle; he was on a shorter fuse. He stared directly at Macklin, thinking lovingly of his big Magnum - get you alone with that, mate, and I'd ram it straight up your - But he dismissed that as too unsatisfying; no, he wanted to take Macklin apart with his bare hands, and Towser with him. And that's what you're here to teach me, mate, he thought savagely. That's right, you teach me. And then watch your back.

He looked down at the slighter man leaning on him, felt the quivering exhaustion in the slender body; and something began to tear loose inside him.

"Let go of him, Bodie," warned Macklin in a low voice. "Let go of him. Come on, Doyle. You should see yourself; it's bloody pathetic. Come and take me on and prove you're a man, not a little flower."

He stood there, lazy, mocking and arrogant, his eyes travelling cynically over the big dark man and the smaller one in his unconsciously protective grasp. Doyle's body had stiffened at the taunt, and now he was stirring, about to turn and resume his efforts. Half dead on his feet. You couldn't deny the courage of the man. The simmering rage in Bodie suddenly towered, and exploded.

"You bleeding sadist, you hurt him again and I'll fucking well kill you for real!" he shouted, and launched himself at Macklin with all the brute force he was capable of, coupled to an insane rage, and outrage too; this bloody maniac was out to hurt Doyle, his partner. He had a glorious

few seconds before Towser waded in and hauled him off.

The whole tenor of the exercise had changed. Bodie, held back in the black man's iron grip, stared down at his enemy with slitted eyes. He looked blackly dangerous, still on a slow fuse of burning aggression. Macklin, breathing hard and wiping a trace of blood from his nose, slowly got to his feet, staring at Bodie all the while. "Well, well, well," he said softly. "So now we know. How to get the *real* hate out of you."

He said no more, turning away. Pulling violently away from Towser's grip, Bodie watched him go, fists clenched. Then he turned to find his partner, who was sitting on the bed beside the stark whitewashed wall, head in his hands. Doyle glanced up as Bodie sat down heavily beside him. He said nothing.

"Bastard," said Bodie through gritted teeth. He looked over at Doyle. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

He was far from being okay. But Bodie's sudden outburst of unleashed violence had startled him as much as it had Macklin. It made him thoughtful.

Bodie was taking hold of his arm, in a familiar grip, nodding ahead. Towser was advancing on them brandishing a cosh; a mirthless smile stretching his lips. "I'll take him," Bodie growled, and got to his feet.

"Not without me, you don't." Doyle struggled up too, putting his weariness aside to stand watchfully at Bodie's side. They were a team. Live or die.

Only a few hours till the arrival of Parsali, the man they were to protect. 'Sleep on it', they'd agreed, but it wasn't working out that way. They had left the light on, and there were sounds in the room still, the rustle of shifting nylon as restless bodies turned in the sleeping bags.

The sombre tone of the preceding conversation had unsettled Doyle; he felt strained and uneasy, his mind running wildly on an erratic course. Bad medicine, as Bodie had said. If he went on like this he'd be on a sure ticket for getting himself killed if there was a hit planned for Parsali. Parsali would make it, barring the most unthinkable bad luck; he had enough confidence in himself and his partner to be confident of that. But whether he and Bodie would also both survive - well, that depended on themselves, and the way he was feeling tonight... Put it this way, he told himself with grim humour, if I were Cowley and I knew what was going on in my head I wouldn't send me in on this one...

He fought the depression and anxiety running around in his mind with thoughts of pleasant things, but they kept slipping away from him and the bleakness refused to be distracted. Damn, he cursed silently, his hands clenched by his sides; damn damn damn. What he needed was to get drunk, several large shots of whisky would do it, relax him enough to let him sleep. Or a woman - he thought briefly of the soft sweetness that was Claire - or a relentless blast of laid-back stereo pounding his mind into numbness. He had none of those things; and so Ray Doyle lay wide

awake, jumpy with tension, and fear, and an uneasy premonition of disaster close at hand.

None of those things; but he did have Bodie. Raising himself on an elbow he glanced down at the other bag. Bodie's dark ruffled head was unmoving on the pile of clothes serving as a rough pillow. His eyes were shut. Bodie wasn't troubled tonight. He supposed that was one advantage of being an ex-mercenary; you learnt how to cope with the night before facing the front line.

"Bodie?" he said, very low.

"Yeah?"

"Thought you were asleep."

"Will be, in a minute." A drowsy murmur.

Doyle was gripped with panic, that Bodie might go off to sleep and leave him alone. "I can't."

"Try counting sheep."

"I want to talk a bit."

Bodie gave an exasperated sigh, but he rolled over obediently, dismissing sleep with reluctance. He looked down in the general area of his feet, nearby which lay the undisciplined head of his partner. "Okay then, what's on your chest? Apart from all that scruffy hair, that is."

Doyle ignored both the question and the levity.

"You said you'd written letters."

This made little sense. Bodie backtracked over their earlier conversation; it was a strange mood that had taken Doyle tonight. "Oh - yeah. Letters." He waited, yawning.

Doyle picked at the cover of his sleeping bag, not looking up.

"You write me one?"

Bodie made a face. "What the hell's got into you tonight? Of course I didn't bloody well write you one."

"Who, then?" Doyle persisted.

Bodie heaved another meaningful sigh, and humoured him. "Family, bank manager, old mate of mine I knew in Africa. That's about it."

"Old mate?"

Bodie couldn't quite identify the note in his partner's voice. "Yeah, Jack Heyward. Mentioned him to you a couple of times."

"You haven't seen him in years."

"S'right," Bodie agreed. He couldn't see Doyle's face when he squinted over; it was in shadow. Just then Doyle rolled over and lay flat on his back, considering. "Man you haven't laid eyes on in a decade, family - likewise - and your bank manager."

"Yeah."

There was clearly more to come, Bodie guessed, from Doyle's dangerously quiet tone. He didn't have long to wait.

"No girls? Not Cowley?"

"Nope."

"So those are the people you're closest to? Jack Heyward, your - "

Bodie forestalled him. "No," he explained reasonably. "Those are the people who for a variety of reasons might need or appreciate some word from me after I snuff it. And now can we bloody well get some sleep?"

There was a silence. Bodie closed his eyes, began to drift again.

"I bloody well might appreciate some word from you after you snuff it!" exploded Doyle.

Bodie was startled all over by his partner's near shout, and was not at that moment inclined to take all this too seriously. "Aaahh..." he sympathised, with heavy mockery. "You mean all this is a subtle way of telling me you want me to write you one? Well, I will, old son, I will. Soon as I get my hands on a pen."

"It might be too late."

Doyle's quiet voice had more effect on Bodie than the previous explosion. He pushed himself up and looked down at Doyle, frowning and quite serious now. "I wish you'd stop all this, mate. Okay, so you've got a premonition about tomorrow. Just don't lay it on me, okay? And if *you* could forget it, stuff it, shove it out of your mind, you'd be doing yourself a bloody favour, too. I didn't leave a letter for you," continued Bodie without a pause, "because when we go, we'll fuckin' well go together and you wouldn't be around to read it, ergo waste of paper, time and trouble. Also, Cowley'd be sure to read anything we leave behind when our number comes up - you know the nosy old bastard - and crap himself laughing."

"Why, what would you put in it?"

Bodie snorted. "Bloody hell, mate. You're a strange one tonight. What d'you *think* I'd put in it? 'Dear 4.5, now I'm gone I think you ought to know that from the first moment I saw you I lost my heart and I've been hiding my feelings all these years'...?"

"You weren't hidin' 'em very well the other day."

Bodie stilled; every last trace of facetiousness wiped out of him at Doyle's quiet, grim words. He leaned up on his elbows and stared. "What?"

"You 'eard me," said Doyle concisely. "Macklin looked at us pretty funny, y'know. It'll go in the report, that's for sure. I shouldn't be surprised if the Cow sends for us and gives us a non-fraternization lecture. Or worse, maybe."

It was out in the open; no point trying to push it away. So Bodie shrugged, accepting the inevitable. "Okay," he said lightly, but he didn't look at his partner. "I'll come clean to George. Sorry, sir, I broke the rule. I got involved. I cry when he cuts 'imself and laugh when he's happy. I bulldoze people into a pulp if they look at him unfriendly, and I want to cuddle him when he gets hurt."

There was another silence. "It's true, Bodie," said Doyle, quietly. "It isn't a joke. It's true."

Bodie scowled in irritation. "I know it's bloody true. I just told you, didn't I?"

He thought Doyle might pursue it, and relieved when his partner said nothing, just gave a sigh. "Can I go to sleep now?" he asked plaintively. "Or is there anything else you want me to confess? Just ask away, won't you? I'm perfectly happy to bare my innermost soul to you, mate." His tone had changed to purest irony.

Doyle didn't answer that. Bodie shut his eyes. Only now he was as far away from sleep as Ray Doyle.

"One of us might go tomorrow."

Doyle's leisurely comment breaking the silence didn't surprise Bodie. When Doyle had said he wanted to talk, he wasn't kidding. He made it determined, full of flat conviction. "Nah. No way."

"It's *possible*, Bodie!" snapped Doyle. "Don't keep on bloody denying it. You're not stupid. *You know it could happen.*"

"Yeah - " said Bodie harshly, and then he stopped himself, and said more gently, "Yeah, I know. You happy now?" He went on before Doyle could reply: "*But*, the night before we go on parade right beside the bloke everyone's trying to kill isn't the best time to hark on about it, is it? You think happy thoughts, sunshine. Think about your Claire, and how hot she's gonna be for you when she comes off nights. Think up some wild new fantasy to try out on her. Okay, mate? Sweet dreams," he said firmly, and settled down to sleep.

Doyle had hardly heard any of it. "Bodie. I want to ask you something."

Bodie groaned, his patience finally gone. "God, Ray, you really have got yourself into a state, haven't you?" he commented, not unkindly, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. "What you need is a drink, mate. I'll have a look in the bag."

Doyle ignored that, looking up as Bodie leant over him, his wide eyes steady. "Wait. If I ask you to do something for me, will you do it?"

"What is it?" Bodie demanded, suspicious, looking down into Doyle's troubled face.

"Will you do it?" Doyle only repeated.

Bodie hesitated only for a second or two; then he grinned. "Yeah." He ran a quick, light finger down the straight line of Doyle's nose. "There. I've agreed. So now tell me what it is."

Against all expectations, Doyle lost his nerve, and rolled over, burying his head in his arm. "You're gonna laugh yourself sick."

Now all Bodie could see was ruffled brown curls, the line of silver around the nape of his neck, the top of the green T-shirt. He stared at it, confused. "Nah, won't. Promise. Come on."

"Sleep with me."

The muffled words leaked out of the sleeping bag. Stunned, Bodie said dumbly, "What?"

"Sleep with me," said Doyle more clearly, and he turned his head to one side, staring ahead, suspended in numbness.

After a long, tense silence, Bodie said slowly, "Let's get it clear. Are you propositioning me? Or what?"

"I don't know. I don't know!" Doyle repeated vehemently. "What I do know is that I don't wanna be on my own, not tonight, not now."

Bodie's doubts lasted only a moment or two longer. "Okay," he said quietly, and reached out a hand to his own bag; then leaning back to Doyle. "Come on, shift, sunshine." And then as Doyle stared at him, impatiently: "I don't know what books you've been reading lately, mate, but we're not both gonna fit in one bag, now are we?"

Doyle watched in silence as Bodie quickly and efficiently zipped the two identical bags together; and a moment later Bodie was there with him.

He lay quietly against the bigger man, more peaceful. He could hear the slow, steady beat of Bodie's heart near his ear, smell the warm scent of him, feel the solid strength of the arms around him. He could see Bodie's solemn, half-shadowed face inches from his, the curled lips, the

arrogant flare of the nostrils.

Bodie, watching him, raised a hand and brushed back all the curls, smoothing them away in an unsteady, tender gesture. He wasn't quite sure what was happening, but he had no quarrel with it. "You really got yourself worked up, didn't you?" he said, low and gentle. "You're so strung up, Ray. Really uptight. What's all this about? Come on, tell me."

Doyle studied his partner's face. He felt sad, and weary, and he had never been more conscious that this might be his last night on earth. So it was good to be held by someone stronger, give way, let someone else cope for a while. He said only: "Premonition, like you said."

This time, the word opened up a vision of bloody death. Bodie saw himself leaning over Ray Doyle, sightless green eyes staring up, tumbled, lifeless limbs; and looking, shocked, into Doyle's living eyes he knew that Doyle was seeing the same.

"No," he said fiercely, gripping the green-clad shoulders, shaking him. "No way. You cut this out, d'you hear me? You've got to stop it now, Ray, before it goes too far. You're not gonna die tomorrow. I won't let you. We're not going to die," he said with emphasis; and waited, staring frowning into his partner's strangely beautiful face. Then:

"Someone is," said Doyle bleakly. "So why should we be the lucky ones?"

Bodie had no answer for that. No words.

Doyle watched with unflickering eyes as Bodie leant towards him, his own eyes steady; but he was a little unsure, hesitant as he touched his lips to Doyle's forehead. When Doyle didn't flinch, he drew in a deep shuddering breath as a flood of strangeness and longing ripped through him, and his suddenly hungry mouth sought out and found Ray Doyle's.

"Must get some sleep, love," Bodie murmured against his cheek. He knew Doyle was awake. His body lay heavily relaxed across his, his eyes were closed and he had not spoken. Bodie knew it just the same.

Doyle stirred, lazily. "Mmm. In a little while." He wanted to hold onto this feeling, just a little longer. Reality and the morning would be with them soon enough.

"Feel any better?"

"Yeah." Doyle stretched against him, warm skin against his own. Bodie's fingers tangled slowly in damp curls. "You mean a lot to me."

"Yeah, I know." Then Doyle roused himself from his reverie, his eyes coming open, and he stared at the face close to his. His new love. Or not so new. "You don't exactly hide it."

Bodie was, and knew himself to be, protective, even possessive; as any partner of a two-man team might be of the man he worked with. It had been acceptable; they were good friends. But

now?

"Maybe I'd better start."

A little cold reality began to creep back into the dreamy haze. Doyle said, looking at him, through him, "It doesn't bother me. You?"

"No. But people talk." He lifted a strand of Doyle's hair, considering its brown softness; and let it fall, tracing the curve of it where it lay on his forehead with a gentle finger.

"Even now? Before now?" CI5 was a strange place; very enclosed. They were all too tightly-knit; too involved in one another.

"Oh, I'm well known for it," Bodie said lightly, and the sudden grip of his tensing hands belied the levity. "Didn't you know? I can't leave you alone, that's what they say. It's a right bloody laugh for the pen pushers in the Ops Room."

"True?" Doyle was fascinated. To all appearances more sensitive and finely tuned than his partner, of the two of them he was by far the less likely to be on the CI5 grapevine. Gossip bored him, even when it concerned himself; maybe that was an egocentric trait, he wasn't sure.

"True," Bodie confirmed. Beneath the layer of sliding nylon fabric, he reached for and found Doyle's hand, twining his fingers around it. "I'm starry-eyed besotted with you, madly in love; and you, opinions vary - you put up with it. That's how the current story runs."

"Yeah?" Doyle lay quiet, in Bodie's arms; it felt like a good place to be, the right place. He thought about what Bodie must have gone through, and how he had kept it to himself, to spare Doyle. His fingers gripped Bodie's tight; and the other hand he let run up and down Bodie's arm, a gesture of comfort and atonement.

"Well," he said at last. "They got it wrong."

Bodie chuckled. "Yeah."

Who knew what he was thinking? Doyle didn't. Maybe they meant different things. He wanted there to be no doubts, not tonight. He wanted Bodie to know exactly where he stood, because he might never get the chance to tell him again. So, abruptly, he sat up, both hands reaching up to tug at the chain behind his neck. He found the fiddly catch, released it, and let the warm metal slide about in his hand for a moment. Wondering what was going on, Bodie too had pushed himself up and was staring at him. Doyle surveyed him for a moment, weighing his chain in his hand; then he put it around Bodie's neck, fastening it on securely. The bright metal gleamed on Bodie's smooth skin; he wore nothing else. Then Doyle lay back down.

"They'll get it right now," he said, contentedly; and settled down in Bodie's firm, loving grip. Now they could go to sleep. And tomorrow could throw at them what it would.

Cowley took a sip at his drink, the first of the day, and set it down with a satisfied sigh. He canted a glance up at the blonde-headed man at his side. "Well, lad; what's on your mind?"

Macklin studied his drink - orange juice - and considered his words carefully. The silence was too long for Cowley's liking; he was a busy man.

"Come along, man. I haven't all day. About Bodie and Doyle. A week ago you were saying they're the best I've got."

"They are," Macklin responded without hesitation. "They're a good team, they're highly skilled, they're quick, fit and intelligent. And they've got guts."

"And - ?" Cowley prompted. He trusted Macklin's judgement.

Macklin looked up and met his eyes directly. "What would you say about their personal relationship? How they get on off-duty?"

Cowley took it in his stride. "They're close," he finally stated. "Good, close friends." The early morning sunlight shot golden tones into the good whisky, lifted it from dullness into incandescence.

"Maybe too close."

Macklin's quiet words made Cowley's head come up, eyes sharp and piercing. "What are you saying?"

Macklin repeated it, unembellished. "Maybe they're too close."

Their eyes held. "In what way?" Cowley said, very quiet.

Macklin didn't hedge about. "I got to Bodie every way I could think of. Trying to push him as far as I could, so he'd give me his damn-all hating me. But in the end he showed me the way himself. Threaten his partner - " Macklin shook his head, remembering, " - hurt Doyle; and that's when you get to see what makes Bodie tick. He was on me like a ton of bricks. For a moment back there I thought he'd kill me."

Cowley acknowledged it. "He's protective of Doyle, yes. Smaller man, more sensitive. I wouldn't say there was anything odd about that."

"You've never thought - "

"Thought what, man?" Cowley checked his watch, impatiently.

Macklin gave it to him straight. Looking Cowley directly in the eye, he said: "That Bodie and Doyle might be a good deal more to each other than just good buddies."

Cowley thought about it, remarkably unfazed. He took another leisurely sip of his drink before he replied. "Some sexual contact, you're meaning? No, I hadn't thought about it. But it wouldn't surprise me." Bodie had enough cheek for two of them. And Doyle was unconventional enough to go along with it, if he felt like it. Yes, Cowley could imagine, that some dark, drunken nights, fooling around together the way they did -

Macklin made an impatient gesture. "Sexual contact isn't what I'm talking about. That wouldn't matter, necessarily; you're right. I don't know about that and I don't care. But I think it's more than sex."

Now he had all of Cowley's attention; the other man was as alert and tense as a cat, and watching him intently. "You must have seen it!" said Macklin sharply. "Haven't you watched them together? They're too ready to be amused by each other; they're too aware of one another. And if Doyle loses Bodie's attention, he has to get it back, he opens up those big eyes and looks up at him; he *flirts* with him, near as goddamnit. And Bodie falls for it; oh, he's fallen all right," said Macklin cynically. "You watch him some time when Doyle's around. It shines out of the man. Doyle means everything to him. He'd kill for him."

The question Cowley asked, softly into the silence, was not the one Macklin had been expecting. "So - Bodie has fallen in love. And Doyle?"

Macklin stared, thrown off course. "Doyle?"

Tousleheaded, self-sufficient creature; too pretty for his own good despite the super-fitness, the animal, muscular grace of him. That was how Macklin remembered Ray Doyle. The other thing he remembered was Doyle, shaken, weary and hurt, turning blindly on stumbling legs to the man he knew would be there, waiting to hold him and offer voiceless comfort.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Doyle too. Oh, maybe it doesn't show as much, but it's there. I'm sure of it. You've maybe got yourself a problem. Those two are - " he hesitated, searching for the right word, and settling eventually for the trite, obvious phrase he could find no better way to express. " - it's love."

After a long moment Cowley sighed, taking the last of his whisky slowly. "Aye, well. I'll maybe look into it. Thank you, laddie."

Bodie shoved his hands into his pockets as he went down the steps behind his partner, who was taking them fast. He didn't let himself think about what Doyle might be going to say. At the foot of the flight, Doyle stopped and waited for him to catch up, his arm resting lightly on the stone balustrade. Bodie gave him a faint, wry shrug.

Doyle said, without expression, "Told you you were too fond of me."

Bodie just looked at him. Doyle swung into stride again. Bodie fell into step at his side and they walked along the grimy pavement in silence.

"What d'you think?" Bodie said at last.

Doyle shrugged. "'Bout what?"

Bodie wasn't going to get exasperated. "The old man."

"S'obvious, isn't it? Macklin coughed - told you he would."

"It must be nice," said Bodie moodily, "to be so often right."

"I don't think it's too serious. What could Cowley do?" asked Doyle rhetorically. "I mean, what could he do?"

"Separate us."

Doyle shook his head. "Nah, he couldn't. There's no way he could do that."

"You gonna tell 'im 'e can't?"

Doyle's tousled head came up and he stared at Bodie. "Yeah. If he tries. Forget that. So what else could he do?"

"Tell us to cool it?" Bodie suggested, tentatively.

Doyle shook his head again. "He didn't seem too worried. Did you think he did?"

"No, I didn't think so."

"He just likes to know."

"Well, so now he knows."

And us? Bodie thought, wanting to say it aloud. He watched the serious face of his partner, eyes fixed straight ahead as he bounced along, lost in thought. He'd been very remote, very self-contained today, had Ray Doyle. Yesterday's shootout had upset him, though he had said nothing; and after it he had disappeared off somewhere and Bodie hadn't seen him until they met up in their boss's office this morning to give him their report on the Parsali affair. And then Cowley had given them a little report of his own.

Bodie pulled on his arm, indicated a pub. "Have a drink on it?"

"Can't, got things to do."

"They're so important you haven't time for a quick pint?" Bodie demanded.

Doyle turned his head to look at him. Standing there against the wall, ruffled hair ruffled further

by the wind, back to the usual scruffy-clean attire and a check jacket, he looked very appealing to Bodie. He wanted to reach out and hug him; but Doyle's next words killed the urge dead.

"I'm seein' Claire," he said, eyes wide and clear as he looked at Bodie. "At 2. Have to go home and change."

There didn't seem very much that Bodie could say. Chilled and isolated, he nodded at Doyle, at a loss, but striving for a normal tone. "Yeah, of course. She'll be up by now, won't she? Awake, I mean. Okay. Well, think I'll stop off for one, anyway. See you around, sunshine."

He gave him a little smile, but Doyle lingered, watching him. "You looking after my chain?" he asked, suddenly.

In answer, Bodie hunted around inside his shirt, pulled it out hooked over a finger. "You want it now?"

"Nah. You're keepin' it. Just checkin' you had it safe."

"All the time."

Their eyes met. Then Doyle put out an arm, took Bodie by the wrist, and yanked him close. For a moment they were standing, very close, in full view of any passers-by who might glance their way. Doyle tipped his head back, slanted an unfathomable green-eyed glance at Bodie. "Got a few things to do. Loose ends. Then I'll call you."

"Call me what?" Bodie retreated swiftly into the safer areas of levity.

"Oh, anything you want," said Doyle, very soft, and he looked into Bodie's eyes all the while as he lounged indolently against the wall, holding Bodie's arm. "I'll call you what you want me to, sweetheart. But let me get this out of the way first, okay?"

Doyle's hands moved over him quickly. Bodie thought for a dazed moment that it was quite possible he was dreaming all this. Then Doyle let him go, tipped him a wink. "I'll see ya."

He had gone five yards before he turned back. "Oh, by the way. You got a spare doorkey?"

"What? Oh, yeah." Bodie began to hunt around for it. If Ray wanted a key to his flat, Bodie was only too happy to give him one.

Doyle grinned at him wickedly, head cocked to one side, a safe distance away; he was all come-hither eyes and sensually curved lips. "Not me, sunshine. I don't need one. You might, though," remarked Doyle cryptically; and then he loped away.

Bodie stared after him, shaking his head. Doyle always managed to surprise him, one way or another.

"Oi!"

A hand thumped his arm, a face peered into his, eyes alight with curiosity and mischief. Lewis, a CI5 colleague. "Don't tell me he's coming across at last." He jerked his head meaningfully in the direction Doyle had taken, nodding sagely. "Thought I was going to have to pour a bucket of cold water over the two of you. On the street, no less. Cowley wouldn't like it, you know."

Bodie wasn't listening. He had searched around in his pocket and found his front door key missing. *Doyle* -

"The little sod's picked my pocket!" roared Bodie, delight and outrage in equal measure; and then he slapped his open-mouthed colleague on the shoulder, laughing, and went with him into the pub.

Doyle shied pebbles into the pond with regularity and accuracy; the ducks had taken one look and moved, miffed, to the far end.

"You've met someone else."

At least she wasn't crying. "No...not exactly."

"You owe me the truth about that, Ray, if nothing else! If it isn't someone else, what is it?" Not crying; angry. Much better. The tears would come later, when she was alone.

"It isn't that simple," he continued, softly over the ripple and splash of the water. "You knew I wasn't going to ask you to marry me. Right from the start, I never pretended that."

"No. But - " She stopped, and bit her lip. He looked away from her as he said: "It isn't you. Not your fault. I just - "

"You just want to be free," she said bitterly.

He looked at her then, with a little, distant smile. "Not free. No. I'm sorry, Claire." He got to his feet, threw the last stone into the centre of the pond and watched the concentric circles spread.

"I'll have to be going. If there's ever anything I can do - if you need me for anything, you know how to contact me."

He sounded brisk. She could see that, for him at least, it was truly over. Best then to make it quick; he was right. She held off the tears as he kissed her one final time; and let them spill over as he walked away.

Doyle walked along the road, a little sombre after the encounter. But it had been necessary. He needed Bodie and Bodie needed him; it was as simple as that. And he had the feeling Bodie would make sure there was no room between them for outsiders. Doyle was happy enough about that. He felt secure, and loved, as if this had been waiting for them for a long time.

He turned the corner into the road where Bodie lived, and as he walked along he dug out the stolen key from his pocket, tossed it up and caught it. A wide, jubilant smile was beginning to curve across his face. For the first time in his life, Ray Doyle was totally, uncomplicatedly happy in the knowledge that he was settling down.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Blood Heat

by Sebastian and ET

=====///=====

Hands thrust deep into the pockets of his parka, Bodie jogged up the short flight of stone steps, his breath rising in steady, steamy puffs before him. One barely warm, glove-covered hand emerged briefly to press the buzzer marked 'Doyle', then he turned idly to survey the street. A thick frost lay everywhere, sparkling on rooftops, grass, pavements and windscreens, glinting coldly in the weak, morning sun just struggling to make an appearance from behind a distant block of flats. Not a scene to be admired, especially not after the last two days of acute discomfort. Only when you were without, did you come to realize just how much you depended on such a basic necessity as electricity.

Bodie shrugged deeper into his warm, quilted jacket and turned to try Doyle's buzzer again. C'mon, Doyle, he thought crossly. Where the hell are you? Keeping a bloke shivering on your doorstep when you're nice and cozy in your gas-fired, centrally heated flat.

That was one of the reasons for Bodie dragging himself out of his lukewarm bed in the early hours of Saturday morning - the lure of Doyle's warm flat and the thought of an enervating game of squash at the sports club followed by a piping hot shower. Chin buried in the top of his jacket, Bodie blew small, impatient breaths of steam into the icy atmosphere and cursed the striking electricity engineers, hoping they too were suffering. Probably all had the foresight to get themselves converted to gas, he thought morosely and was disgusted all over again with his four redundant storage heaters sitting in solid and useless splendor in his flat.

Feet growing numb, Bodie tried the buzzer again. Surely Doyle couldn't be out already? He checked his watch. Only a quarter to eight. No shops open yet. Therefore the lazy sod had to be still in bed. Nice, warm, cozy bed.

It didn't occur to Bodie that on any normal Saturday when they weren't working, it'd be him stubbornly still abed while Doyle tried to get him out of it.

Finally losing patience, Bodie heaved one hand under his parka and fumbled in his cords, wincing as the large bunch of keys stuck themselves in a rigid, knobby knot and refused to leave his pocket. In no mood to mess around any longer, he tugged, heard some stitching go and

jangled them free. Fitting a shiny yale key in the door, he let himself into the communal hallway, spurned the lift and took the stairs at a run, sorting out the second key as he went.

Doyle's front door was opened and shut equally quickly and he stood inside listening. Silence. Must be still asleep - lazy bugger.

As Bodie made his way to the bedroom, he suddenly realized how low the temperature was here, too. Surely Doyle's heating system couldn't be up the spout as well. Then it dawned on him that Doyle must have let his boiler go out. An amused grin curved his downturned mouth in a different direction.

He passed through the livingroom, thinking how abnormally quiet the place was. Doyle always had music going, often even when he wasn't there - more than once Bodie had seen him put a tape or record on and immediately go out shopping. He spared the large, streamlined - and presently useless - stereo a smug glance, thinking fondly of his ancient, portable and, more important, battery powered radio.

The bedroom door opened noiselessly under his hand. Nothing but a tumbled mound of duvet on the bed. Bodie sighed into the cold air, more disappointed than he'd expected to be. Ray had obviously had the sense to wangle himself into a friendlier bed for the weekend.

Feeling decidedly chilly all over, Bodie turned to close the door again and begin a depressed retreat back to the feeble warmth of the car. As he took a last look at the room, his eyes alighted on something that had been thrown carelessly over the back of a chair. Doyle's sheepskin. He halted. Doyle hadn't stirred anywhere without that over the last couple of days. Therefore...

He stalked quietly back towards the bed, studied the shape of the heaped-up quilt and stealthily lifted a corner, peering underneath.

Sure enough, there was a mass of tumbled curls deep down in the bed and nothing else to be seen as Doyle lay curled in on himself like a sleeping dormouse protecting itself against the rigours of winter.

"Ray?" he said tentatively into the feathery darkness.

There was no reaction for a moment, then Doyle stirred sleepily and began to straighten, a tiny whimper leaving him as his toes made contact with a cold expanse of sheet. He didn't wake, just stretched and rolled dopily onto his back, head finally emerging onto the pillow with an incoherent mumble, eyes still closed.

The draught of cold air obviously made itself felt, because a long-fingered hand crept from beneath the folds, tugged the duvet out of Bodie's fingers and back round himself and giving another rumble, Doyle went back to sleep.

Bodie looked away from the relaxed and sleeping face, averting his eyes from the faint flush covering Doyle's round cheeks. But the familiar ache lingered around his heart.

Bloody typical, he moaned silently to Doyle's feet. Looked like Ray had completely forgotten about the game they'd arranged last night. He spared the gently smiling, slightly pink features another glance.

"Are you getting up, Ray?" he asked. "Or not? Eh?"

No response, except for a deeper snuggle. "Ah, come on, mate."

The messages from Bodie's feet were getting fainter as the cold-induced numbness spread up his calves. He sank down onto the edge of the large bed and shook what he took to be Doyle's shoulder.

"Ray...wake up. 'S freezin' out 'ere."

Quite what he expected Doyle to do about it, he didn't know, but he wasn't having Ray cuddled up in a warm bed while he froze on the floor beside him.

Doyle drew a slow and very deep breath and without opening his eyes, withdrew a lean arm from his cocoon. His hand found Bodie's wrist still holding his shoulder and travelled slowly up a quilted arm.

His movement released a warm cloud of air from beneath the duvet, bringing with it the concentrated, natural, musky-animal scent of a sleepy Doyle. It was a very pleasant, clean smell, reminding Bodie of quiet, secretly treasured times spent close to his partner: studying files, heads down over a desk; resting quietly between call-outs; or the exhausted, sweaty proximity in the gym - a time when they were close in mutual support, sharing a desperately tiring bout with Macklin and Towser.

Bodie inhaled the scent in a shaky breath, eyes moving from the unconsciously inviting face to caressing hand and back again, wondering painfully what Doyle could be dreaming about. He could barely feel the weight of the long fingers through the padding of his coat and wished fervently that he was wearing less. Doyle touched him like this so rarely and now he was it was just his luck to be clad in his thickest clothes.

Ray had to be still half asleep and dreaming. There was a contented little smile playing over his lips.

"Bodie..."

"Yeah?" he said softly, reluctant to awaken him too much, break this unfamiliar, gentle mood. Funny: he'd always expected that Doyle would be decidedly ratlike first thing in the morning - he certainly was when he turned up in Cowley's office at 9 am. What happened between then and now to dispel all this sleepy sweet temper on awakening?

Doyle grinned at him, a drowsy, crooked little curve of his lips. "Woke me up," he said unnecessarily, and yawned, baring his tonsils, with supreme unselfconsciousness. "What you want then, Trouble?" he got out before his mouth closed again.

He rolled onto his side and looked up through half-open eyes. His hand slid down Bodie's arm but did not leave it.

Bodie watched those slim fingers close on his wrist. "Come to see if you wanted a game of squash."

Doyle gave a little shudder, snuggling deeper. Toes appeared from beneath the bottom of the duvet, wriggling: and were hastily snatched back under. "Too cold."

"You can say that again," said Bodie bitterly. Doyle still had a soft, dreamy look about him; not quite awake yet. Bodie, who had been up and suffering for hours, was extremely envious. "Thought it might warm me up a bit," he said pointedly.

"You cold then?" Another yawn. One eye opened.

"Yeah, course I am - there's bloody power cuts everywhere. Even Hell's frozen over this morning."

The corner of Doyle's mouth lifted, showing his chipped tooth. "Nice 'n warm in 'ere."

"Oh yeah, good for you mate, I'm really glad about that," said Bodie, but the sarcasm drifted away on the air and vanished

as surely as the ephemeral white stream of his exhaled breath as Doyle said drowsily: "Come in 'ere with me, then," and the hand on Bodie's wrist tugged at him as he wriggled over to make space for him.

"Doyle - " began Bodie, startled and irresolute; but the curled form didn't move again.

How many wistful hours have you wasted willing something like this to happen - ?

Life's short, Bodie...

His silly heart was pounding away as if something momentous had happened; he

admonished it silently as he fumbled with his outer layers, fingers awkward and stiff with cold.

No time for long deliberation; once he was down to his shirt it became imperative that he seek refuge under the covers, or die unheroically of exposure.

About to scramble in under the temptation of the duvet - it lay over Doyle like a fluffy, plumped-up cloud, promising warmth and comfort - he looked down at his thick cords, hesitated, then recklessly removed those too. Then he lifted the cover and eased himself in next to Doyle.

The shock of the sudden close heat on his chilled skin was intense. The warm body that was Doyle came unhesitatingly into his arms, wriggling and pushing until he was huddled close to Bodie's chest, an orphan sheltering from the storm in the lee of a craggy cliff; then he was still.

Bodie had nearly passed out.

His arms had instinctively gone round Doyle when the smaller man crooked an arm round his neck and pulled his close; and it was then Bodie discovered that Doyle was not, as he had supposed, wearing pyjamas.

Bare, hot limbs were all over him, twining generously with his chilled flesh with a touching lack of reluctance; and Bodie was still in a state of shock.

Doyle's warm breath touched his face as he murmured sleepily, "Are cold, aren't you - soon warm you up - go back t'sleep now - " And so Bodie lay there, heart racing, with Doyle snuggled up against him, soaking up the lovely, heady warmth of him, timing his own breathing to the gentle rise and fall of the soft-haired chest pressed against his.

Warmth and well-being began to steal through him insidiously, freeing and soothing the numbed stiffness of his icy feet. He scarcely dared touch him at first lest he should waken him with the shock of cold hands on the overheated skin; but as Doyle sighed in his sleep and nestled closer still, he became daring and put one hand lightly over Doyle's waist, the other closing tentatively around the skinny arm tucked up between them, holding him very carefully as if this so-rare trusting closeness might fracture at any moment and be lost to him forever more.

This, just this, was what he had been wanting, needing; this alone of all the world had to offer.

Make the most of it, he told himself with almost savage self-derision; it's little enough to ask, isn't it? Just a quiet, drowsy cuddle on Doyle's innocent invitation; nothing to sound trumpets over. Won't get the chance again, perhaps not ever... Treasure every moment of it, Bodie, old son, it's all you're ever likely to have...

Too overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all for anything but the most inchoate desire for closeness, Bodie shut his eyes. He had no intention of wasting the time in sleeping; no, better to lie here, fully conscious of what he was doing, what he had been granted.

Wasn't all that screwy, was it; not so very queer, to wonder what it would be like making it with another bloke, especially one as vibrant and as sexual as this one was - he could be forgiven that, surely -

But to get so much pleasure out of simply lying here close to him, holding him while he slept, loving the soft-hard feel of him and the smell of him drowsing and heavy with sleep... yes, some might say that was screwy all right...

Warm, fresh-scented curls seemed to be everywhere, tickling his face. Bodie buried his nose in them, drew in a deep lungful of the fragrance, desperately filling himself with the memory. He squinted down at the flushed, round face, its cool craft lost in sleep; and all his careful resolution fled him at a stroke.

Gently, he pushed aside Doyle's warm curls, and put his lips to the smooth skin of his

temple, shutting his eyes as he savored the sweet, forbidden pleasure; and because given the vagaries of sleep it would not seem strange, he let his parted mouth stay there, close to Doyle's faintly damp skin, and his mind ran on wild, sweet things.

Not gonna go to sleep - not miss a moment of this - so warm, so close to him - even his lovers don't get closer to him than this - and he trusts me more than any of them - never last, they don't, but I'm still here

love him

I love you, Ray Doyle

Fight tigers for you, I would. Tigers...or brave swirling rapids

Bodie tumbled suddenly and unexpectedly into swirling rapids and began swimming flat out, searching for something unglimped, desperately yearned for -

Doyle started awake, realized firstly that he was not alone, secondly that whoever-it-was was lying on his arm, and thirdly, when he poked his nose cautiously over the edge of the duvet, that it was bloody cold. Freezing. The raw air seared into the tender membrane of his nostrils and he hurriedly disappeared back into the warm, dark fug beneath the duvet.

His free hand explored the form next to him, encountered a solid, cotton-covered shoulder just as he remembered who his companion of the morning was.

An unseen, delighted smile passed briefly over his face.

Bodie.

Yeah, now he remembered. His partner had turned up, much too early, woken him out of a deep sleep, pleasant dream - not time to get up yet - tried to make him leave his nice, warm solitary world for the chilly outside - and then his own drowsy counter-suggestion that Bodie, instead, should join him in this isolated bubble of luxurious comfort - apparently Bodie had taken him up on the idea.

Good. Nice to wake up next to Bodie, because he liked Bodie, a good deal more than he ever got around to liking most people, and he knew instinctively that Bodie would be okay to have around in the mornings in the dopey, half-aware period before one was properly equipped to meet the world, that Bodie wouldn't be going to do anything irritating like complain about his stubbly chin, or giggle roguishly, or tickle him with coy suggestion when he wasn't in the mood, despite appearances.

He sniffed, because the cold air he had inhaled was making his nose run, and pounced.

Bodie didn't wake up at once, stirring restlessly and mumbling something.

"Ssh," murmured Doyle, "'s only me." He wriggled around a bit more. Bodie's feet seemed nowhere to be found.

"Christ, Doyle," came a sleep-thickened grumble, "don' do that."

Doyle smiled; in exuberant form. "Not doin' anything. You wait till I really get started, mate; then you'll know it."

Bodie's eyes came open then, deep, sleepy blue. Beautiful, thought Doyle, staring into them with fascination. Most beautiful eyes I've ever seen -

Moved by an impulse he didn't understand, didn't question, he leant over and kissed Bodie, on the mouth.

"What you do that for," said Bodie at last. He looked up.

"Oh, I'm very lovin' in the mornin'," Doyle told him, with a little smile, finishing abstractedly - "you've got socks on."

Still wondering if he had dreamt those warm lips which had seemed to touch his, Bodie took a moment to react. Doyle used the time to sit up, disregarding the icy blast of air that swooped in

as the duvet lifted, and knelt by Bodie's knees.

"Better get 'em off, sunshine," he admonished, "'s very bad to wear socks in bed."

And before Bodie had the chance to prevent it, he had ripped off both white towelling socks and tossed the out of the bed.

Bodie was sensitive about his feet, and inclined to be uncomfortable when they were visible. "Don't, Ray," he mumbled; but mere exposure of the offending objects was nothing compared to what happened next.

Doyle took one cold, pale foot in each hand, stroked over the smooth, delicate skin with warm, firm thumbs.

Bodie jerked away. "Stop it."

"Okay, okay," Doyle grumbled lightly, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, then threw himself down flat again. "Just tryin' to warm up your extremities - yeow - "

Bodie, engaged in firmly tucking the duvet back over them - it was so cold in the bedroom that ice had frozen in crazy patterns over the inside of the windows - had grimly trapped Doyle's warm calf between his soles.

"That'll teach you."

"I don't mind," Doyle told him, unexpectedly amenable; he laid his head on Bodie's shoulder, looking up at the side of his face. He laid one hand on Bodie's chest, plucked at the shirt. "'S true, though. Better to wear nothing at all on a cold night. Clothes just restrict the circulation."

"You," said Bodie, tweaking a curl, "make it all up as you go along."

"Nah, all based on careful research."

Bodie disdained to reply to that. He lay there, trying to hold onto the warmth and closeness just a little longer because surely Doyle must be going to move in a moment; not that he wanted him to: Doyle could lie against him like this, breathing quietly into Bodie's neck, hand lightly pressed to his chest, all day if he wanted to... His wicked companion had gone, however, suspiciously quiet. Bodie soon found out why.

"Bloody hell, Ray!" he snarled, removing a skinny hand from where it was snaking around the top of his underpants. "You lookin' for a black eye?"

Doyle only gave a little, throaty chuckle and threw his thigh across Bodie's, trapping him; the crisp hair at his groin grazed Bodie's hip. "Don't need these on, do you?"

"Doyle," said Bodie, genuinely distressed as Doyle's hand gently probed him, "Don't - " But he couldn't move, and, worse, didn't want to; some perverse part of him wanting Doyle to seek him out, discover his excitement -

Doyle soothed him with gentle, indeterminate noises, and continued the careful journey of his exploring hand, following an urge that was too strong and too sweet to be questioned.

"Ray, please," said Bodie, softly, "please don't."

With a sudden movement Doyle twitched the thick, light duvet over their heads, enclosing them both in warm, secret darkness.

Bodie shut his eyes.

He knew he shouldn't let this happen, but Doyle's hand had found his tumescent hardness, fingers folding around it, and it felt so good, so sweet -

"Ray - "

"Ah, Bodie, ssh...let me just - "

And even through the rising heat engendered by Doyle's subtle hand, Bodie, astounded, heard the throaty catch in Doyle's own voice and knew without a doubt that whatever it was it

wasn't just a malicious put-on -

A warm, soft tongue passed like velvet over his nipple, shocking him; he felt Doyle's lips fasten there, the moist flicking tongue sending thrills of pleasure through him. Doyle's scratchy chin brushed over his chest. He reached out blindly, and Doyle was there, sliding into his hands with ease, the bare, hard heat of him intoxicating.

The scant protection offered by his briefs vanished as searching fingers slipped inside, eased down and bared him in his turn.

A slow, delicious rocking began; heat on burning heat. And as he came, panting out his soul and his need and his yearning, he told him he loved him, said it over and over, the words leaving him as easily as if he had planned them.

Dazed in the sudden bereftness of aftermath, he heard Doyle laugh.

He left the bed, abandoning all that warm, enclosed intimacy that had turned so sweetly into something so very much more, and strode to the kitchen, shrugging into a borrowed bathrobe and a bitterly hurt dignity that was all his own as he went.

When Doyle found him, he was kneeling by the silent boiler, striking a match.

"Bodie - ?"

"Trying to light the fuckin' boiler," he said savagely, between gritted teeth, fingers fumbling stupidly with the box of matches. "Very clever, letting it go out, mate; this place's like a bloody morgue."

Swearing, he dropped a lighted match. He lit another, thrust it through the opening. Nothing.

"What's the matter?" Doyle did not even try to pretend he was talking about the boiler; in fact, although his eyes had never left Bodie, he had not taken in what he was doing. He came a little closer. "Why'd you run off?"

Hearing the note of uncertainty, the puzzled hurt, Bodie's head came up. He stared at Doyle, who was naked and very nearly blue. "Why did you laugh?" he asked brutally, cross-questioning. "Funny, was it? Like a good laugh, don't you, sweetheart - well, I've had it of playing the fool for you to have a good snigger over - "

"Bodie," Doyle interrupted, kneeling abruptly down beside him; he propped an arm on Bodie's bent knee. "I laughed," he said, looking up with solemn eyes, "because I was happy."

"Because you were - ?" Bodie thought about it, the matches forgotten. "Oh." He dropped his head, stared into the grimy workings of the boiler. "Well, why didn't you - " His empty hand made a quick, sweeping gesture and stilled, defeated, confused.

"Hey..." Doyle grasped the aimless hand in gentle fingers, pressed it to his belly, making it stroke circles into the pearly moisture on his skin. "'S not all yours, y'know," he whispered very close, and grinned at Bodie, devilish and loving all at once.

Bodie stared at him, a smile threatening, as he concentrated on the faintly sticky, silky skin under his hand. "Happy..." he repeated in confirmation, hearing a quiet 'yeah' in his ear.

He felt a shiver run through Doyle, took it to be cold-induced and returned to his task.

Contentedly, Doyle surveyed the profile of Bodie's downbent head, then his gaze wandered on, over to what he held. A frown replaced the smile.

Bodie, unaware, struck yet another match.

"Bodie - "

"Yeah, just 'ang on a moment, sweetheart - " and this time the word an unselfconscious endearment that warmed Doyle's heart, "wait till I get this going and then we can - Trust you to

let it go out - Need lookin' after good and proper, you do - " Screwing up his face he poked his head forward, peering inside the grimy flue.

"Yeah, well, I think there's something I ought to tell you - "

Bodie turned his head, smiled at him, a smile of such blinding sweetness that Doyle caught his breath - "Can tell me anything you like - but in a moment, okay? I'm freezing to death - "

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Doyle put in hurriedly. "You can strike matches at it all day...if you can't - " he gave him a look from beneath his lashes, " - think of anything better to do...but it's not going to light." Doyle smiled at him, shook his head. "Power cut."

Bodie made an exasperated face, slid an arm round the chilly body of his mate and pointed him towards the boiler. "This is gas, Doyle," he explained. "Not the stuff in volts - gas."

"Yeah," agreed Doyle, and just as Bodie turned back to his matches, added: "And how d'you think it gets around the house, natural instinct? It runs on an electric pump."

Bodie's mouth fell open; then he shut it, manfully, turning around on his heels. "Ah." He put the box of matches down, precisely. "So - "

"So we better find somewhere warm - "

The two powerful CI5 minds moved together to the same conclusion.

"Back to bed?"

Doyle nodded. His teeth were chattering. Bodie threw both arms around him, hugged him, picked him up with no little effort and carried him back to the bedroom.

"Good job you don't run on electricity," he said as he lowered his precious new love onto the mattress.

"Oh, I dunno about that," Doyle murmured, drawing Bodie down with him and swathing them both in duvet. "I can feel a pretty strong surge of somethin' comin' on right now..."

###

Zeroplanic

Bound to the Mast (*Siren's Sequel*)

Bodie leaned on the buzzer, his face grimly set. It was some moments before he was answered.

"Doyle 'ere."

"You alone?" Bodie countercharged.

Doyle's tinny voice nevertheless managed to acquire an edge of defensiveness. "Yeah - why?"

"Okay if I come up?"

There was a moment's hesitation before the terse reply - "'s open."

Bodie pushed through the door and took the stairs two at a time, brisk, unhurried, and determined.

His partner was attired in white sweatshirt (sleeves rolled up as usual - why does he do that? Always.) and jeans, lounging on the sofa with one bare foot up on the coffee table, nursing a glass of whisky close to his chest (bet that's not his first of the evening, either). He didn't look noticeably enthusiastic about Bodie's unexpected arrival late at night, not that Bodie had foreseen anything different. Maybe once. But no longer.

Doyle waved at the drinks tray. "Help yourself."

Bodie complied, pouring a generous slug of Haig into a glass. Mozart was blasting away, hardly in the background, so he turned it down very low before dropping into a chair. Doyle noted the action but did nothing other than narrowing his eyebrows into a brief frown. Bodie raised his glass to him, took a healthy swallow of his drink.

"So," said Doyle at last, when it became clear that Bodie wasn't going to talk, "what brings you 'ere this time of night?"

Blue eyes shot up, locked with wary green. "I was lonely," said Bodie with ironic simplicity; and he saw that it took Doyle aback.

"I - see - " Doyle's eyes shifted; examined his ankle. It was almost funny, really, thought Bodie with amused savagery, you could almost see him changing gears, glimpsing a red light - uhoh, Danger - "No girls comin' across for you tonight then, eh?" he tested, with an uneasy attempt at their usual patter.

"I haven't tried to find out," said Bodie, absolutely without embellishment. Yeah, really funny watching Ray trying to figure this out, little sparks of alarm leaping in his eyes.

"Not like you?" said Doyle on a questioning note; but Bodie only shrugged, watching Ray all the time with broody concentration, and so he didn't miss the next shift of awareness, another change of gear -

Doyle grinned at him, a sharp white baring of teeth, and uncoiled, stretching out slowly and languorously so he was lying full length on the settee, chin propped on one hand, the other travelling oh-so-casually down over his chest. He sighed, in a leisurely fashion. The tension in the room was suddenly acute.

Yeah, I guessed this'd be the next thing he'd try - it's his bloody answer to everything he can't handle - he'd rather prostitute himself to me like this, anything rather than risk letting me get close...

It made him angry. It made him melancholy, for it was one more reminder of how far apart they were, in attitudes, in morals; in everything.

Deliberately, Bodie picked up his glass, rose to his feet and came over to perch on the wide cushioned arm of the settee. He leaned against its back and glanced down at Doyle's upturned face. He looked faintly uneasy, Bodie thought, but very mildly so as yet.

You wait, Bodie promised him silently with grim satisfaction and no pleasure, you'll be dancing like a bloody flea on a hotplate before I finish with you...

No point in stringing this out.

He reached out a hand, traced gentle fingers through the warm curls tipping over Doyle's forehead - so sweet, to touch him after so long - but it was bittersweet pleasure that passed in an instant -

Doyle jumped, slight body actually flinching.

"What the 'ell are you doin'," he enquired rhetorically, very precise; with a little undercurrent of threat underplayed as yet.

Bodie rubbed his fingertips down Doyle's cheek, meeting the astounded enraged eyes that stared up at him without friendship. His tone was wistful, but unsentimental as he said, "You hate me touching you; why, Ray?"

Doyle had knocked him off by now and had rolled to sit up in one swift movement. He ignored the question. "I dunno what you think you're playin' at," he began, and this time the dangerous note was played to the full, but Bodie didn't let him finish.

"No, I know you don't," he said in the same reasonable tone, "really bugs the hell out of you, that, doesn't it? You have to pull the strings all the time, we have to play your games, by your rules, and what I might want never gets a chance, that right Ray?"

Doyle was watching Bodie very steadily, icy temper barely leashed. Easy to see why Doyle scared the life out of people; so unpredictable, this oddly beautiful creature who could turn from cool indifference to volatile temper to icecold fury in seconds, and on inconsistent provocation. And of all his moods it was that coldness that frightened most about him; the hint of the insane, the chilling purpose emanating from some depth within that said he would let nothing and no-one stand in his way.

It wasn't true, of course. Or - not the whole truth. Just an act, or so Bodie suspected. Ray simply did it better than most, but no-one could be that cold, that self-sufficient, that hard; not really. Just occasionally, Bodie got a glimpse of something that lived beneath Doyle's tightly guarded image; a flash of genuine humour, real worry, true remorse. Bodie had been seduced into wanting more than glimpses. It was time for Doyle to pay up; or retrieve the stake.

Doyle was saying something, but Bodie had missed it. "What's that, sunshine?" he said with silky good humour. "Didn't hear you."

"I said," Doyle repeated, very carefully, "that it's late, and isn't it about time you were goin'?"

"I'll go," agreed Bodie, "when we've sorted things out between us." With a black eye, a battered ego and a bleeding heart, most likely.

"Bodie, I don't know what you're talking about."

Disregarding this for the hedging nonsense it was, "I've had enough, Ray," said Bodie, "enough of you and your little games."

"Bodie," Doyle spat, making an obscenity of the word, "for the last time I *don't* know *what* you're on about, and I think you better bloodywell fuck off before - "

"Don't know what I'm on about, eh?" Silk turned to steel, Bodie's swift, cutting voice raised a little, to intercede. "You don't remember what we did the other night? In Whitehall, Ray? About midnight it was, bit after maybe."

More fool you if you didn't see this coming - for Bodie could see that Doyle, after all, had not

expected this. He watched Doyle's eyes wince, waver and drop, to hide the realisation that had flooded into them - WHY had Doyle not expected this? Banking too hard on Bodie's being too embarrassed, too - ashamed - ever to bring the matter up? The love that dare not speak its name...well, it worked for too long a time; but now something had snapped. Doyle had called his bluff once too often, maybe; settled too complacently into the assurance that there was one taboo Bodie would never break, underestimating or unconscious of Bodie's courage, Bodie's ability to stare a sick reality in the face however closely it concerned himself.

"DO you remember?" Bodie pursued, grimly. He was not enjoying this. He looked at the slight, angry figure, moodily huddled in an attitude of belligerent defensiveness; poor little rat, backed into a corner with a vengeance - how he must be hating this - looks knocked out -

Careful with your answer, Ray; it's Morton's fork all right, with a nasty twist...

He wondered which Doyle would choose: the truth? Just how good was he at judging people; knowing just how far they could be played, and when they had had enough? Almost certainly Doyle would be grimly, desperately clinging to the hope that Bodie would let this drop if fenced off long enough; but if he was, then it showed how little he knew about Bodie, for a start...

Bleakly, Doyle had reached his decision; playing, disastrously, for time.

"Bodie, what's got into you? In Whitehall? We were campin' out the restroom, is that what you're on about? We were," explained Doyle as if to a child, "on a special job with Cowley, we were waitin' for a phonecall, but it never came, so we broke it up around six a.m.; is that right?"

"Almost," said Bodie, "but you've missed some of it out," and with one swift sudden movement he went for him.

Doyle had seen it coming the instant before it happened, the careful amusement in his eyes snapping out like a light; he was now on his feet. Bodie, emptyhanded, rose too, moved towards him. "You've missed some out, Ray," he repeated pleasantly. "You had a shower, remember that? Decided to take a shower in the middle of the night, you did - "

His voice changed without warning to driving force.

" - because you knew we'd be alone, didn't you; knew we had a whole bloody hour kicking our heels - "

"Stop this, Bodie," Doyle interjected, backing away almost imperceptibly, darkened eyes watching every movement Bodie made, "Stop it now, or I'll knock the bloody phone off and CI5'll be round 'ere asking for *your* explanation - "

He could do it too, the cunning little bastard, thought Bodie measuring the distance with a swift eye; phone right behind him - one wrong move -

So he made it quick, and dirty. "*Why? That scared, are you?*" And while Doyle, voiceless and

winded, digested the implications of that, Bodie was there, locking him to the spot, gripping his upper arms and forcing him close, pursuing his point, now he had reached it, with unswerving determination. He gazed dispassionately down into green eyes flaring angry panic. "Is that all there is for you, Ray, what happened the other night? You that far gone are you, that kinky? Is that the limits to your kicks, you an' me tossin' off on our own after you've got us nice and ready for it?" He ignored Doyle's sharp indrawn breath, the white teeth sinking into the full lower lip; continuing on an abstracted note as he scanned the ugly snarl twisting the other man's face: "Dunno if there's even a name for it, do you? Can hardly call it voyeurism, can we, 'cause you make damn sure to vanish when it looks like getting 'eavy, when you've pushed me too far and you reckon it's time to start backing off, don't you." He shook him a little. "What would you call it, Ray?"

"A mistake," Doyle ground out between gritted teeth; abandoning at last the long months of pretence, of it-never-happens, and it was, although hardly sweet, at least a sort of victory. Every muscle of Doyle's was hard at work resisting Bodie's stronger ones, a silent, grim struggle to escape, the cost of which showed only in the sudden outbreak of sweat highlighting his forehead.

Bodie held him tight, unmoving, and gave him, in return for the hurt, his own, painful truth. "It isn't good enough, Ray. Not any more. I want - I need, more than that. Or - *"nothing at all"* he added, with steadfast, hardwon determination and let Doyle go at the same moment, stepping back.

That was the price, to bait the trap. He had to accept the consequences.

Doyle had staggered a little, but recovered his balance instantly. Never ceasing to watch Bodie, he brushed his sleeve quickly over his forehead, plucked automatically at his suddenly clammy sweatshirt to get a draught of cool air playing over his heated skin. To Bodie's relief he didn't seem angry any more, the wild dangerous glitter that seconds before had sought to transfix Bodie into submission fading from his eyes. Bodie sat down, suddenly finding that his legs had gone rather weak; picked up his drink and drained it without noticing what he was doing, all of his conscious attention still fixed on his partner.

Doyle stayed on his feet, looking down, thumbs hooked into his belt. "It's better that way, Bodie," he said at last, and at last he was sincere, telling the only truth he believed in, "It's the only way it can be. No risks, that way..."

"Risks of what?" Bodie was on his feet again, agitated, unable to stay still. "Of getting - 'emotionally involved'? Well, sunshine, I've got news for you. If all those sexy little games of yours - don't touch, just look, and then get yourself off - if all that was just to make sure we never got too bloody loving, then it failed, *sweetheart*, I'm telling you - "

The endearment, cruelly used, made Doyle wince, unexpectedly; but he stayed where he was, skin ashen, still and watchful, hands clenched together in a last terrible bid to hold it off, deny Bodie's next words, but it was too late, childish ritual no longer worked for him.

"I love you," Bodie said to him, eyes wide and still and strangely peaceful.

Nothing moved. Silence, taut as a bow-line, strung out between them.

Then Doyle gave a tremendous sniff, wiped his nose on the back of his hand, turned around in an aimless fashion looking for his drink. Bodie handed it up to him, wordless. After a moment, however, watching Doyle considering his whisky, eyes half closed, head bowed, the patient calm of new-made confession snapped.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded, throwing himself angrily back down onto the sofa. "I love you, Ray, god help me and I've no great hopes of that, and I want you so goddamn much it's killing me - it hurts me," he said in a low voice, looking away. "It hurts me - too much, Ray. I'm sorry. Maybe you were 'appy the way it was. But I can't be - not any more. Every bloody time you do it, I catch myself hopin', maybe this time... but it never 'appens, does it? So - one way or the other - not any more. That's all I came here to say." He stopped, drew in a deep breath. Jesus, but he was tired. Tired of fighting. He didn't want to look up; but he did.

Then, unexpectedly, Doyle tilted his chin up off his chest, gave him a little smile. "All?" He looked exhausted too, shadows dragging beneath his eyes, though the steadiness of their gaze remained unaltered.

"And to - " He stopped again. It was all too bloody difficult. Not to mention embarrassing; all his bravado seemed to have deserted him at a stroke.

" - to what?" Doyle asked intently.

Now Doyle was in the Chair once more, wearing the little hat named inquisitor. He would always be happier that way, Bodie acknowledged bleakly to himself; what chance an equal relationship between them? They were lovers in his dreams; but even there they were seldom happy.

And in reality Doyle was not his lover; acknowledging the vital attraction that had been between them from the moment they met, he had devised a careful little set of acts to satisfy the urge that nudged them together without there ever being the need of the smallest contact between them...

" - to love you," he completed dully, "if you'd have let me, if I could've talked you into it."

"Not very good at it, are you?" came Doyle's low voice, in which there was, amazingly, a hint of laughter free of mockery.

Bodie shook his head briefly, staring down at his lap. "Nope."

"Good enough, perhaps."

The note in that made Bodie's head snap up. Doyle was smiling at him, not his usual cocky grin, nor his predatory, mirthless shark's smile; but a little, unsure quirk of his lips. One hand was posed on a tilted hip, rakishly; for once, the exploitation of his own brand of charm seemed

unconscious.

"Oh, Ray," said Bodie a little raggedly, running a hand through his hair, "you get me all - shaken up - whatever you do... I half wish I hadn't bloody said anything, but I wanted you to know - that I do love you. Whatever happens..."

Doyle said nothing, but he sat down beside him, quite close, elbows propped on his knees.

"I wish you'd bloody say something."

Silence.

"For godsake, Ray!" roared Bodie, nerves strung out to the edge of his limits.

Into the near-dark, the heated vibrating silence, as asked Doyle began to talk. Quite steadily at first, a low monotone which Bodie dared not interrupt, and soon lost all desire to as he sat there, stunned and pitying under the impact of all Doyle was telling him, what he had perhaps been trying helplessly to tell him without need of words in the determined shunning of physical contact, of mental closeness. A commonplace enough little tale, of insecurities born almost at his own birth, hardened as he grew out of infancy into childhood; confirmed further when he became an adult, finding out the hard way that it held no pretty surprises, no angel-sung unions; discovering that he had, after all, only two gifts in life of interest to others.

Both of which Bodie knew about; having been exposed, mercilessly, to both. Doyle was tough; and he looked good. What more there was took guts to discover. Also persistence.

Long after Doyle finished speaking - not trailing off into incoherent self-pity; and Bodie would have forgiven him that, had half-expected it - but closing the book with concise, bleak finality, Bodie was silent.

"Yeah," he said finally, dragging a hand over his eyes, "had a rough deal, haven't you? 'S half your own fault, though. Actin' so cold - unfriendly - the way you do; it puts people off, you know. If you want pity, Ray, you won't get it from me."

Not fair, perhaps. Doyle hadn't asked for it. Wasn't even asking for it now; just sitting there, frozen, leaning forward with his shoulders hunched, dusky head drooping a little as he considered his hands; still wary, still tense and untamed as a wild hawk, out on his lonely limb, fierce and concentrating even when perfectly still.

Hesitantly, Bodie put an arm around his shoulders, a tentative light touch that gained strength when Doyle did not immediately flinch away.

"Don't feel sorry for you," he mumbled, his unruly heart going wild; "I love you."

And when Doyle still said nothing, he added curiously: "Don't you believe that?"

Doyle forced a smile, which faded quickly; he fiddled with his cuff. "Nah, 's'just a physical thing."

Bodie did not reply. Doyle risked glancing up at him, a little edgy, a little nervous.

"That's all it is," he said again; and this time Bodie shook his head.

"It's never been that - not for me."

"What?"

Bodie mentally shook himself, a grimace momentarily twisting his features. He was handling this very badly; was he going to keep hurting Doyle all night? If it had been necessary at first, it was no longer so. The hand holding the thin shoulder left it, slid down his arm until it reached the warmth of bare skin, a gentle unconscious touch as much for his own reassurance as for Doyle's.

"I mean - it's always been *more* than that."

Doyle looked down at the square strong hand stroking clumsily up and down his forearm; but did not dislodge it.

Annoyed by his own awkwardness more than anything, Bodie continued with a little burst of irascibility, "What the hell did you think you were doing when you started all this, undressin' in front of me and so on?" He glared down at the top of Doyle's head, nostrils flared with aggression. "I figured I knew, all right, bit of kinky fun, nice boost for your ego gettin' me so hot I didn't know what to do with meself, oh, you're bloody good at it, aren't you? Should have been in a sheik's harem you should, mate. After a bit I thought to hell with it, why not play along? I thought I could handle it, christ, it was even too bloody good to be true in some ways, 's not every day you have a fantasy come true is it?" He stopped, features smoothing out, looking down at his hand, lying forgotten on Doyle's wrist; he circled it loosely with finger and thumb, unaware of what he was doing because he needed all his attention on what he was saying so he didn't louse it up again -

"But the reason why it didn't work out, why I couldn't take it any more, is because I never could see it in the light you seemed to. Something we could pick up when we felt like it and put down straight after. I couldn't keep it up - can't keep it up, because - "

Unnervingly, Doyle was leaning back into the curve of Bodie's shoulder and looking up at him, the widespaced eyes unreadable, unflickering.

Unexpectedly, Bodie gave a little, rueful smile - impossible to be cross with him for long - and completed what he had set out, with courage, to say.

" - because I fell for you, didn't I," he said lightly, and brought Doyle's captured hand to his mouth for one swift kiss, letting it go straight after. " - harder than I've ever gone for anyone in

my life, dunno why, 's not just the look of you, 's everything - "

He stopped, because it was impossible to put into words the hundred and one reasons why, bewildered and shaken by his strange feelings he had fallen so hard for the strange creature who'd been allotted him as partner; so much love, on so little encouragement... It had come to him very early on, in one of those peculiar flashes of perception most common on the fringe of sleep, or when the mind is primarily engaged on something else; that here it was; that no-one else would ever do for him, that he would never love again in such a way as this.

It had been hard to hide, at times.

Then Doyle had turned the world on the flat of a swordblade; offered him an edged new reality; holding a sharp-eyed warlock's sway over Bodie's learned vulnerabilities, saying -

- yeah, you can have me - on my terms -

And the one time Bodie, confused by his new-lit love, had tried to offer him more than mere, solitary response, Doyle had pulled back, searing whiplash withdrawal in his eyes -

You can have me - but only at a distance -

Because he did not want commitment?

It was only lately, and gradually, that the answer had come to Bodie; no, it was not that Doyle *wanted* to shun commitment. He wanted it, craved it, needed it; perhaps more than most. But, rejected time and time again in the past, and with no expectation that this time would be any different, he had yet found a way to keep Bodie his. Bound to the mast by Doyle's stronger will, Bodie had been held captive, helplessly made to yearn without ever knowing the relief of touch, endlessly fascinated, endlessly unfulfilled...

Bodie smiled, involuntarily. What a fool he'd been.

So insecure.

He'd had it all so wrong. Doyle was the defenceless one.

Hot-tempered, wild, self-centred, vicious, cold, aloof...

Yes, all those things showed one side of Ray Doyle.

But not the only side, and the more fool those who had rejected him, turned him off on such a fragile investigation of his character. Besides -

" - no-one's perfect," he said aloud, startling himself; and was brought back to the present with a jolt as Doyle's upturned face, held for so long in the unseeing focus of his eyes, shifted, its features settling into a pattern of confusion.

Bodie smiled and brought up his hand, ran it through rough brown curls with careless new intimacy, to cradle Doyle's head against his chest. " - but you'll do," he completed, dropping a swift kiss downwards.

"Bodie," said his wanton, unaware of his new role in his life, "I think you've finally gone round the bend." But he said it with no heat, just a kind of resignation.

"Yeah, probably. Have to have done, to take you on," agreed Bodie, attention caught up now by the feel of the thin warm body he had been holding without appreciation. Shifting, he ran a finger down the side of Doyle's face.

Doyle met his gaze without default. "What do you want, Bodie?" he asked directly, steadily. Bodie watched the movement of his throat as he swallowed. How many times did Doyle need telling?

"I dunno," he said less than honestly, since he knew perfectly well what he wanted from Doyle, only life never was ideal and the way his had turned out, the down-on-one-knee with a bunch of roses and a jeweller's box approach was not appropriate.

"What *do* I want?" He answered himself, matter-of-factly: "What everyone wants, I suppose. Someone to be there when I need to yell my 'ead off." There was a moment of blank silence.

Doyle poked his head up, puzzled. "That's *all*?"

It was so daft Bodie lost his own seriousness; happiness swooped in to take its place. Maybe that was equally daft, but he didn't think so, he felt the subtle difference in the way Doyle curved against him. He hugged him tight, so tight he heard Doyle's bones crack. "We'll be awkay, son," he promised in a mock-Custer voice, and then, "With my brains and my beauty and your - " he put his head on one side, frowned a little, pretending to be puzzled - "What you got goin' for you, Ray? Eh?"

Doyle chuckled, and at the startling, deep sound, the tension, held for so long that it had ceased to be noticed by either of them broke, dissolved away. Their eyes held; then travelled, searching, wandering over every feature, every definition of limb beneath material, learning anew the well-known image of one another; returning, wondering, to the incredulous truth they read in one another's eyes. Breath held, Bodie had the strange, compelling feeling that if they parted in that moment, never to see one another again, it would all be the same; that to the end of their days, through other relationships than this, other lives, other timelines, they would remember: this and this moment alone would forever be the lodestone of their existence.

But because they were only mortal, and too human not to fear the passing of time, Bodie felt too soon a shiver of the future touching him, urging him, whispering, to press for completion, so there could be no turning back, no second thoughts, ever...

"Let me come to bed with you, Ray," he whispered, urgent, "please..."

He was never to know that Doyle, arrested as he stared at him, was seeing not the present nor the future, but a time when Bodie's eyes had been wet with the tears he himself had caused, unthinking and cruel; he caught Bodie's hand with a little, incoherent sound and they moved together, unerringly on the same path.

The bedroom was dark. Bodie, stumbling over unseen obstacles, finally came to the wide haven of the bed. He reached for the light.

A hand touched his, brought it away. "Don't put it on - "

All of Bodie ached to see, to indulge his senses with the sight of his newly-won love. Yet -

He had forced this, borne Ray down, won over the hard, cleverly-styled resistance of years, by sheer dint of showing love. Just that.

The light stayed off.

Delayed by unfamiliarity with the terrain, Bodie was there some moments after Doyle, sliding tremulous naked limbs between cool cotton sheets, feeling the plush warmth of blankets press him snugly from above. He could hear harsh, quickened breathing, and the scent of Doyle was all around him now, no longer a scant, precious gift tossed his way in passing, nor a cooled bare reminder, furtively snuffed from discarded material; but warm, living and real. Dazed, he looked over, caught the gleam of eyes.

He reached out, slid open hands around warm naked skin, gathered Doyle to him, fitting them together very carefully.

So beautiful...

Doyle's warm breath touched his face; his feet were cold. Bodie gloried in the feel of him; he held him gently, one hand slipping down over his shoulder, down his back, gliding fingertips and flat palm over velvety skin punctuated by the sharp upward ridges of narrow bone, here; and here; sweeping down to rub over the curved hard flesh of the buttock, a gentle journey intended more as loving reassurance than as discovery though it served as both: blind, he was learning Doyle through touch. "You're beautiful," he whispered; and, tipping up the wilful, rounded chin he sought and captured the soft mouth with his own.

Kissing him was a dark insidious pleasure that invaded him slowly, filling him with a sweetness he gave back to Doyle in generous measure, tracing the full curve of his lips with his tongue, a loving messenger; slipping softly inside to explore the silky membranes of his mouth; rubbing over spiked ivory teeth to reach beyond and press the rough/soft pad of Doyle's tongue with his own; drinking him in slowly and deeply, pausing every so often only to swallow. He could have kissed him forever.

When Doyle, needing breath, made a little sound, Bodie drew back, touching his lips to Doyle's

one final time. "You okay?" he said, very softly, and he felt the barely perceptible movement of Doyle's acceptance. He held him close again, rocking them gently, his heart full of love, and an immense tenderness that was making the pit of his stomach hurt. He buried his lips in the curve of Doyle's neck and shoulder, resting his head there. Christ, but Doyle felt slight in his hands; unexpectedly so, fragile and all too vulnerable. Bodie could feel his heart, pounding away beneath thin skin. He placed his hand over the fast pulsing beat. "You scared?" and was answered by Doyle's tremulous, throaty whisper:

"Yeah..."

"Don't be," he said, aching; and stroked him gently, trying to reassure. They were lying half on their sides, belly to belly; his erection nudged at the tender softness of Doyle's genitals: Doyle was only partially aroused, lay unresisting in Bodie's hands. But as Bodie, cursing his own body's unrepenting urgency and afraid of alarming him, made as if to shift away, so as not to be prodding him in a way he might interpret as threatening; Doyle's rough whisper in his ear, "Don't stop - like it..." made him stay where he was, pleased and shy that Doyle liked his arousal. He pressed Doyle's buttocks, squeezing, then releasing. He slid one hand between their bodies, took Doyle's penis in his hand and pressed it to his own sex, holding them together; so beautiful he could nearly die of it, Doyle so trustful of him, thin, hesitant fingers beginning to trace their own delicate pattern on his back.

He trailed finger and thumb over the cleft in Doyle's buttocks, slipping between. That seemed to excite Doyle, the urgent pulse of response within Bodie's encircling hand immediate, but frightening him at the same time: Bodie felt his muscles clench in unthinking resistance. Understanding, Bodie turned his hand instantly, rubbed over the curved buttock, undemanding. "'s okay," he murmured raggedly, half-smiling against Doyle's round cheek, "not gonna hurt you, Ray - do anything you don't want - "

And he rolled onto his back, taking Doyle with him so Doyle lay on top of him, a skinny lick of a thing but heavy for all that; unfamiliar, the sensation of the flat, silken-haired chest pressing onto his, slick with their mingled sweat. He could see Doyle's eyes, wide with surprise as he considered Bodie's unexpected move; with one hand behind his neck he coaxed Doyle's legs between them, and pressed Doyle's rump downward once again so that their groins were tightly together. He felt the press of Doyle's arousal against his, rejoicing that he had been able to do that for him; he stroked his hand down Doyle's spine to where it ended and, once more, traced a finger into the parting of flesh, seeking out the tight knot of warm dry skin, rubbing over it.

Again, it excited Doyle; he made a little, animal sound and bit Bodie's chin. Hot, slick and urgent now, he wriggled, and strained to get his cock closer to Bodie's, grinding them slippily together, drawing whimpers of pleasure from them both. Bodie heard their rushed breathing, felt the thudding of their hearts; oh christ...they were so close, now...

He trailed the hand away from Doyle's clutching buttocks; Doyle removed his parted mouth from Bodie's chin which he had been licking, over and over, and hissed: "do it again - ah, please, Bodie - " on a distressed whimper of need, frustration -

"Goin' to - don't be so - bloody - impatient - " Bodie returned through gritted teeth, aroused nearly into madness himself, but not so far he could hurt him in their need - he sought for and found Doyle's cheek, stroking it with one finger; searching instinctively Doyle turned his head and caught the wanderer with hungry lips, sucking it strongly, almost gulping as he drank in the additional stimulation; then pausing, panting.

Almost coming, his cock leaking spurts of sticky moisture between them, easing the desperate circular pressings of belly on belly so it was now slicker, smoother, intensely pleasurable, Bodie took his hands gently away from the sweet wet suction of Doyle's hungry mouth, returned it to his buttocks; sliding it moistly between so he was gently probing the entrance to Doyle's body, finally slipping it inside the hot, open channel.

The effect was electrifying. Doyle jerked, and stiffened; raising himself, palms either side of Bodie's shoulders pressing into the bed, he thrust strongly against him, and withdrew, pushing back to bury Bodie's finger inside him more deeply; then thrusting again.

It was too much.

Bodie came; wordlessly crying out, clutching Doyle to him, lifting his hips, knowing even as he was lost in his own ecstasy the joy of feeling it happen to Doyle too, the thin damp body pressing hotly down into his, twin disjointed spasms soaking between them, their warm mingled semen running down hip, belly, thigh, as Doyle sobbed and shivered.

Neither man moved for long moments after.

Then, finally, unhurriedly, the urgent clutch of Doyle's fingers gripping Bodie's arm slackened; with a long sigh he buried his face in Bodie's shoulder. Returning slowly to reality, one last throb of pleasure running through him as Doyle shifted, grazing lightly over his hypersensitive groin, Bodie discovered that Doyle, in his excitement, had dribbled all down his neck. It was just one more intimacy, one more little thing to make him happy.

"I love you," he whispered.

Doyle sniffed loudly, rolled sideways, leaving the lower halves of their bodies tangled stickily together.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

After a moment, Bodie, still moved by the wonder of it all, pulled down the sheet and blankets, pushed them aside; he gazed down at the naked, sprawled body thus peremptorily revealed to him. In the play of the moonlight shafting through the slatted window blinds Doyle looked more than ever like some sated wanton sprite of a fairytale. Moved beyond poetry, he touched his fingers to the silvery bright trails streaking Doyle's navel and pubic hair. "Messy little bugger," he whispered, loving it, "aren't you?"

"Not much better yourself," came the husky answer; and Bodie grinned, absorbed, running a hand along the relaxed curve of Doyle's thigh. When he had come here tonight he had had no great hopes that he would leave with even their cautious friendship intact. This - this was beyond his hopes; and now he had no need to leave at all.

"Well? Was it as good as you thought it was gonna be?"

Bodie thought before he answered, drawing up one knee, resting his arm on it. "It was different," he said, " - better."

"That sounds - contradictory - "

Something in the uneasy waver of the long word alerted him; and as he turned his head, searching Doyle's face, the betraying moonlight did the rest.

He discovered that Doyle had not, after all, been dribbling.

"Ray - ?" he asked, incredulous, leaning over him, pushing curls aside with a brusque hand, "what is it?"

Eyes that were far too bright, shining with more than happiness, looked blindly away.

"Ray..." Bodie scrambled down in the bed to get closer to him, pulled the covers over their shoulders; took one of Doyle's chilly hands in each of his, stroking stiff fingers with his thumbs until they uncurled and gripped on to his.

"s all right," Doyle said unsteadily, giving another tremendous sniff. He tried to extricate one of his hands.

"Don't do that," Bodie said; but looked around in vain for a handkerchief. He transferred both hands to one of his and groped for a corner of the sheet instead, thrusting it at him. "Use this -" Doyle pushed it away, not speaking; he buried his hot damp face in Bodie's neck. He said something; Bodie didn't catch it and turned his chin gently, insistently. "What is it?"

" - don't leave me - " said Doyle clearly; he had stopped shaking.

So that was it, poor little sod.

Still couldn't believe it was true; still waiting for Bodie to push him away now he'd had what he wanted; still expecting all that mystical closeness to evaporate and the door to close with a thud, ending it.

"Ray," he whispered, holding him close, covering him, pressing him down with his own body in an unconscious, protective way, "I'm not ever gonna leave you, not ever; don't you understand that?"

Maybe Doyle did, maybe he didn't. In any case he listened to it; and fell asleep where he lay, holding on to Bodie as the other man stroked him gently, rhythmically; his breathing gradually becoming even and regular. Then Bodie eased himself onto his stomach, slid one protective, possessive arm over him and settled down to sleep himself.

Have to teach Doyle how to trust...and to laugh a bit more often...looked cute when he laughed, with that little crease appearing in his cheek...make him happy...think you can? - yeah, no trouble...all he needs is

Love

lots and lots of it

Bodie was asleep.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Breakfast at Tiffany's

Sebastian

I wrote this story because somebody asked me for one, and until I read it today in 2006 I had completely forgotten it. In fact I said 'Never heard of it. Must be someone else's!' when the title was mentioned to me... but yes, I see it's mine. Not one of my favourites - Doyle seems a little shallow and a little mean - but perhaps he will unbend as time goes on. For after all, "this was not the last of it, no end but a beginning".....

=====|||=====

Doyle had good days. Bodie was sure he could remember one, quite recently. Alas, today Doyle's mood had been obvious from the moment he wrenched open the door at Bodie's cheery ra-tat-tat and raged through it like a winter wind. Time to wince and walk three paces behind.

Nothing funny, either, about Doyle's temper. When he had it in for you, you knew it, tongue lashing at you like a gale of broken glass: thick skin and plugged ears the only known antidote. But all the same, this morning's face beneath unbrushed curls was sour enough to make you want to laugh - if you didn't care too much about your prospects, that was.

"Look," Bodie said mildly, as his hands pulled the wheel steadily around and the van swung away from the kerb, "Better early than late. Cowley's hell when you get the wrong side of him."

Not so much as you are, though, my sweet.

"I've left Deborah back there."

Ah. So that was it.

Bodie sensed a bitter glare burning its way through the space between them, and the snapping words tossed after it: "She was just in the mood - and you come bloody banging at the door!" Doyle's hands shot into the air in pained memory and wrung together.

"Just acting out Cowley's orders, mate," Bodie pointed out equably. "You know," he added, "what we get paid to do."

"You could have left it a bit, ten minutes or so. Not much to ask, is it?"

Yeah, why didn't I. Ten minutes' wait while you screwed yourself soft inside Deborah would have been nothing, compared to what I've got to put up with for the rest of the day.

The van was picking up speed now, out on the open road. "Look, Doyle, I'm - sorry." Ridiculous. His partner was so vicious and so aggrieved you'd think Bodie had stood up and bespoken an impediment to the banns, not thwarted Doyle of one quick fuck for a few mean hours. And here Bodie was apologising - ! He tried to soften his voice over the irritation which kept rising in waves: "It'll go off in a minute, Ray. You know how it does. Imagine you're in a cold shower. All that icy water, shrinking up your - desires." The remark, accompanied by a suggestive sloop of the eyebrows, was supposed to make Doyle laugh, but only silence followed. Bodie had to fight to keep his eyes on the road; they kept straying sideways and downwards. "Nearly there," he said cheerfully, seeing the sign for Hampstead coming up.

"I wish." A dour mutter; beside him Doyle sighed and lay back in his seat with his eyes closed. Now Bodie's gaze was safe to pry. Doyle was wearing a faded lemon tee-shirt and navy denim jeans, zipper tested to the limit. Bodie flicked on the indicator, brooding, silent. It was Doyle who spoke, eyes flying open, snapping:

"If you weren't so damned sweet on bloody Cowley - ! You know, Bodie, there's times I doubt you were ever butch enough for the Paras, way you jump like a little dog any time the Cow clicks his fingers."

"Yeah," said Bodie tightly, and his fingers whitely gripped the wheel, "well, it's our bloody job to. Jump, go 'woof', lay down and die, whatever the man says: he's the one paying our wages."

"Get a life," was Doyle's response to that. Cold. Flat. Dead.

And now he could not summon grace from anywhere. "Yeah, a life away from you would be something. Stop being such a pain in the bloody arse, Doyle."

Which prompted a quick little smile. "Thought you went in for that sort of thing."

The sun went behind a cloud; he flipped the visor up. The moment the words had left him he had sunk his teeth into his lower lip, waiting... He said nothing. But Doyle was onto it by now, a rat with a bone in its teeth, hungry, tenacious: "Yeah, pain in the arse, am I?" He chuckled, not nicely. "Like the sound of that do you, Bodie?"

Hampstead. On a Sunday morning. Nice houses, nice people. Walking the poodle, baby toddling along holding someone's hand. A boy skateboarding, leaning this way and that, selfconsciously hip. A milk float clunking along and stopping, disgorging whistling milkman in peaked cap, twirling pints of silver-top in one hand. It was all very nice and very suburban and not quite real. A far cry from the inner city ghettos they were used to.

"Come to Hampstead," Doyle said, "So cool, it snows." He cackled, looking at his fingernails, rocking back in the van's dodgy front seat.

At least the mood had improved somewhat. "Where's the Cow, d'you think?" Bodie muttered, drumming his fingers on the wheel. "If he's much longer someone'll ring up the police to get us moved on: this old banger doesn't fit in with the Range-Rovers round here." And nor did they. Looked like a couple of gangsters, probably, sitting there behind sinister tinted glass with their grim faces, guns beneath their arms.

"Yeah, why'd you bring it, anyway? Capri grounded or something?"

"Cowley's orders." Bodie nodded at the rear. "Reckon he's planning on going incognito."

"Oh, is that it," Doyle said. "Not because you were planning to have your wicked way with me in the back then?" He snickered again. The joke-theme had clearly set in for the day.

The RT burst into life with its urgent two-tone call. Bodie picked it up calmly; he was proud of himself today, the way he was staying so cool, sitting so still, breathing so even. "3.7.?"

Cowley's acid Scottish tone replied: *If I can see you, Bodie, then so can everyone else. Get yourself round the back, man. 'Undercover' doesn't mean 'out of the rain', you know.*

Bodie's mouth twisted, abashed. "On my way, sir." He started the engine, about to replace the handset, but it hadn't finished with him:

Into the garage and wait. You're too damned early!

"No pleasing some people, is there?" Bodie muttered, and began to move the van off.

"You see? I'd have had time for Deborah." Doyle groaned, dropping his head back against the seat. "Probably twice."

"Round here, d'you think he meant?" Bodie cruised doubtfully along a line of garages; one glance up at the geography of the buildings confirmed his guess. "Yeah. That's it, innit?" The up-and-over door of number 125 was open. Bodie eased the van into the empty garage, killed the engine and snatched on the handbrake.

"Must be comin' out the back," Doyle said idly. "What's 'e doing here anyway? Got a fancy woman, d'you think?"

"Diplomat in hiding's more like it." Bodie cast his eyes over the terrain, cataloguing possible boltholes and sightlines for hidden gunmen out of sheer habit, not noticing the green eyes that dwelt on him close by; and thus the sort of strike he might be expecting was not the one he got.

"Is it better with men?"

Bodie jerked in his seat, eyes flashing in surprise. "What sort of a bloody question is that?"

"I'm just askin'," Doyle told him tranquilly. "I mean, you 'ave birds, don't you? You're obviously not a hundred per cent queer. Why bother with blokes at all? That's what I'm wondering. You could have any girl that took your eye, it's not that only some old queen would have you. So it must be good, I reckon, or you'd never go for it."

Bodie shrugged. Did not reply.

"Come on, Bodie," Doyle pursued, "I really want to know."

"It's none of your business, is it? Just shuddup, Doyle, I don't want to talk about it."

Doyle grinned, sharp-toothed, deceptively angelic. "But I do." Dark words, dark voice.

"Giving you a thrill, is it?" Bodie said savagely, unwisely, because that opened the way for Doyle's quick retort:

"Yeah."

"Doyle, shuddup will you? Okay?"

Just a normal garage, so far as he could tell, all the usual clutter. An old petrol can, a lawn mower, a tool bench with tatty old paint pots. A door at the back which obviously led through to the house, the utility room or something. Cowley would be coming through there. The R/T buzzed again and the old man's acerbic tones filtered into the van.

Are you in position yet, Bodie?

"Yes, sir. Quick getaway, is it?" His hand reached out for the ignition key.

You're not Double-O-Seven, man. Just sit there and wait. Could be another hour yet. At least!

Bodie did not clench his hand over the mouthpiece fast enough to prevent Doyle's groan making contact. *Is Doyle in pain, Bodie?*

"No, sir, he's - laughing." Bodie bit his lip, flicked a grimace Doyle's way, and Cowley did not keep them long in suspense -

Aye, well, tell him to make the most of it. Later on he may not have anything to laugh about came the grim prediction, and then their chief cut the line.

"Laughing!" Doyle rocked back in his seat, shaking his head.

"Best I could do," Bodie shrugged.

"He loves me really," Doyle said, and a little lazy grin flashed whitely, quickly.

"Wanna bet?" Bodie muttered morosely.

"Yeah. And so do you."

Beats of time clicked off in Bodie's head. He ordered himself to reply, roll out some comment, throwaway, meaningless, as meaningless and flippant as Doyle's. Nothing emerged. He heard, like some far off knell of doom, the timer run out.

Too late. Caught in the slips.

He met Doyle's eye. Saw Doyle catch on, take it in, work it out. But, for now, sparing him. Storing it up perhaps, for later fun.

Doyle leaned back in his seat, head back. A little smile played across his lips; one hand stroked, absently, the handle of the gun beneath his arm. "Where were we? Oh yeah - "

"How long d'you think he's gonna be?"

"Oh, ages, you know what he's like, no stopping 'im when 'e's on one of his hobby-horses... So. Tell me. What's good about doing it with fellas then, Bodie? Reckon I should give it a try?"

"Did he say - "

"*Bodie.*"

His nerves leapt in reflex action as Doyle's hand thudded down onto his knee; his gaze was dragged around, reluctant, to clash with Doyle's unwinking stare: "What's the matter with you? Never knew you were so shy."

"All right, Doyle," Bodie said very rapidly, "the fact is, some blokes like it and some wouldn't touch it to save their life, and since you've never had the slightest urge to try it before now I think we can safely say you're past the dangerous years, all right?"

"Who says I never had the urge to try it?" Doyle said, and cackled, flexing his fingers; such a game to him all this, an idle topic to toy with this morning, fill in the time. *Could be an hour. At least.* "I reckon there can't be a bloke alive who's never wondered what it's like, right?"

"Right. Go off and try it then, why not. Shouldn't tell Deborah though, if I was you. You might find she wasn't too keen on the idea of takin' you on afterwards."

"None of her business, mate," Doyle said lazily. "I don't ask her what she gets up to when she goes off for those weekends with her busty blonde girlfriend."

Bodie stared at him, raised a pained eyebrow. "They go to dog shows, Doyle. They show Pomeranians. That's what she - "

"Yeah, that's what she says," Doyle said promptly. "Ever seen her with a dog, have you? Never seen her with so much as a bag of Bonio, meself, let alone a bloody Pomeranian," and for a moment they were together, eyes meeting in quick, shared amusement, laughter bubbling up beneath. *Dog shows*. And then the laughter left his eyes though the smile remained, and he kept up the look, right into Bodie's eyes, very deep.

"I'm not joking, Bodie."

"Well, I'm not laughing, am I?" Bodie said, very low, very sober.

"I want - "

" - yeah, I get the message." He looked away, out of the window, bitter, embarrassed.

"So how about it then?" Doyle said coolly.

"I can't believe you just said that," Bodie said after a moment, and he did not look back.

"Look, what's the problem? I just can't see it. You swing both ways, and here's me in the mood to try it out."

"Thanks, Doyle. Sweet of you to give me first refusal."

"Don't be like that."

"How did you want me to be? Grateful?" He had to look back sometime and now he did, hard, hard eyes blazing out across the space between them. Doyle grinned back at him, easy, sweet, cool.

"'Willing', was the word I had in mind. Can't see why you're determined to play so hard to get."

"I *am* hard to get," Bodie jested grimly, but he wasn't out of the woods yet, he knew that. What did they always say about quicksand - ? No use struggling, only drowned you faster, stay upright, calm, and wait for help.

"Come on Bodie," Doyle drawled, watching him, "change your mind. Might never get another chance, y'know."

"What makes you think I'd want one?"

"Okay. You're not interested, message received and understood." Doyle grinned, sharp and quick and disbelieving. "But I'm in the mood to try it, 's been going through my head a while now. Don't want me getting into something I can't handle with some bloke I hardly know, do you?"

Doyle being possibly the most streetwise person he knew, aggressive, tough, self-confident and fast on his feet, to imagine him getting into something he couldn't handle was not the easiest of things. Bodie's voice swooped and dipped along a line of pure irony: "Won't wash, sunshine. I think you could look after yourself all right. You got quite a few things going for you, as if you didn't know."

Doyle smiled at him then, a smile which took his breath away. "But you know, Bodie, I think it'd be best to go for you. Keeps it in the family, so to speak. And more I think about it, more the idea grabs me. Good-lookin' fella, you are. I might even like it."

Doyle paused then, to think, possibly, and suspense made Bodie snap out: "You might like what, exactly? You want me to give you a quick blowjob while we're waiting, is that what you've got in mind?"

Sarcasm dripped off him; he was not expecting the look which, unrehearsed, fell across Doyle's fallen-angel face, the brief closure of the eyes, the quick breath, and the words which followed as Doyle looked across at him, almost in wonder:

"Well, you said it."

Things had moved too fast, he felt he was slipping, the world turning dizzily around him and the ground falling away beneath his feet. But he had to stay upright, and he had to think fast, and he had to stay one jump ahead: so in the end it was an easy step to take when Doyle said:

"Would you, Bodie? Would you do that?"

Bodie moistened his lips with the point of his tongue. "Go for that sort of thing, do you?"

"Yeah, I'd go for it," Doyle said, and he smiled at Bodie sideways, quite a sweet smile, unrehearsed.

"In the van - ? You think that's the best place for it?" he said, heavy with irony, heart pounding like a hammer on rock, "With Cowley about to walk in and all... 's gonna look odd if he turns up and your cock just happens to be down my throat, even you couldn't come up with something to breeze that away."

Deliberately provocative, the words seemed to stir the air between them; Doyle gazed at him and Bodie held that gaze, hard, sure, in control.

"Go on like that and I bet I could," Doyle breathed, husky, low.

Oh Jesus Christ, what was he getting into here? Things seemed to be moving too fast, galloping away from him and out of his control. But how long had he wanted Doyle to take flirtation that one step further, speak to him of things like these just like this? For him to ask Bodie for it, (flirt to be sucked off, for Chrissake), suggest that they have sex together in just such a free and easy manner as this - ? And didn't they always say - *Be careful what you wish for. You may just get it.*

He hesitated: then, reckless, dived right in. "An' you'd love it, sweetheart, wouldn't you just? You always look as if you need a mouth on your cock."

"And if it was your mouth," Doyle came back at him, fast, immediate, a tense smile in his voice: "use your tongue, would you?"

"You bet I would, sunshine. In all the right places. Send you to heaven and keep you there." And Bodie grinned without mirth, predatory like a dog baring its teeth, turning to gaze out of the side window, fingers tapping, drumming on the steering wheel.

And then he looked back. He had seen Doyle look that way before: a bright, soft haze to the eyes, lips parted, his breathing quick and light, his trigger clearly pulled and set to go off. No use to anyone right now. Thinking with his balls. Only one way to go. And Doyle went for it.

He wondered afterwards if he had imagined it, dreamed it up on a dark night as a fantasy. It might have been a fantasy: it was just the sort of thing he might come up with to turn himself on; Doyle, erect to the point of pain, asking him for it, begging, then doing it himself beside him in the van. He heard the sounds, the creak of the zipper, the little sigh, the settling in the seat; caught the edge of movements, the furious rhythmic grace of masturbation; and he turned his head to see it, blank with denial.

There wasn't much to see, clothing obscuring his view, and Doyle wasn't playing about, getting on with it hard and fast, leaning back in the seat, probably almost there already, hand blurring, face screwing in a grimace of extremity. It looked painful; obviously it was not.

Shock and passion shot through Bodie and lifted him, a throb of iron relentless at his loins; sudden sweat prickled on his skin. Pressure sang in his ears, and words and pictures ran fast-forward through his brain; he wanted to, oh, how he wanted to... But Doyle was way, way ahead of him, finishing with a choked whimper, convulsing sharply over his lap. It was all too much: Bodie could watch no longer.

"Sorry, Bodie, sorry, sorry, sorry." The mutter reached him at last; Bodie pressed hard fingertips one final time into his closed eyes then lifted his face from his hands. Doyle was looking at him, an odd mixture of wickedness and shame and as Bodie met his eyes he smiled, brazening it out, his voice gathering strength as he arched his back lazily, began to tuck in his shirt, refasten his jeans, looking at Bodie all the while. "One to you, mate. Got me going, didn't you?"

Bodie tried out his own voice, hearing it gratifyingly light and ironic. "Well, you were right. Learned me lesson, haven't I? I should have listened to you. Taken you back to the lovely Denise."

"Wha - ? Oh - Deborah." He shrugged, as if he too had almost forgotten her name. "That's not what I mean." He yawned, and stretched in his seat, arms clasping behind his neck. Getting over it fast, like a squashed plastic ball, dents popping out perkily all over him one by one, all systems go again. He gazed at Bodie calmly. Even glanced down at his sleeve, picked a hair off, and twiddled his fingers quickly to get rid of it. "Was you, talking sexy like that. Unfair, mate. Very unfair."

Bodie gazed at him, outraged. "What the hell did I - " Well, he did remember. Whatever had come over him? He could have defused it, he knew he could have done, shouldn't have led Doyle on the way he had, half-knowing what he was doing, even (perhaps) half-hoping to turn him on. In revenge. For all the times Doyle had turned him on, and walked away unknowing, uncaring, whatever. He tried to hang on to it, that sense of outrage he knew he would be justified to feel; after all, after all these years of worrying lest he let something slip to Doyle, in the end it had been Doyle who had disgraced himself. Amazing how things went sometimes.

"Reckon you owe me one," Doyle added, with a slow, queer little smile; his eyes met Bodie's wickedly. "And you can pay up now. Come on then, Bodie. I showed you, now you show me. Only fair."

"What you on about?" Bodie asked, though he knew. He felt quite unreal. He would not be surprised now if the van were to vanish, Doyle to turn into a giant banana with big googly eyes, and himself to wake up in his own bed sticky and disturbed. In the cramped little van he could smell the light odour of Doyle's sweat and behind it, just faintly as Doyle moved, the tang of sex. His senses took it in rapidly - oh christ - His body's response to the scent was direct and unambiguous and Doyle did not miss it, glancing at Bodie's groin, perhaps thinking about touching him though he did not, saying merely: "You're gonna burst through that fly any minute. Give it what it wants, Bodie. Go on."

Bodie had been thinking just the same thing, madly, wildly, but he retorted, "Flipped, have you? The Cow could appear through that door any moment ready for a quick getaway."

"Ah, c'mon. Take a chance. Danger gets you off, Bodie, and don't pretend it doesn't. 'S why we're in this job, innit?"

Devil's advocate. He knew exactly why Doyle was leading him on like this, softly, determinedly, working to get back the advantage, settle them on level ground again. He should say no. He shouldn't even be tempted. *Now who's thinking with his balls, eh, Bodie...?*

But what, after all, was so very new about that? Men did it all the time. Intelligent men, men with everything to lose, men who should know better. Politicians cruising King's Cross in search of whores. Famous actors caught with their cock in some tart's jaws. MPs cruising cottages to shove their shafts through a hole in the wall for a stranger's suck. Exposure. Ruination. Shame.

They had known the risks and still they chose to take them. Just like Doyle had, jerking off quick and urgent, his come cooling on his own belly even now...

His decision had made itself for him. "Would you do something for me?"

"Depends," he heard Doyle's wary answer, and that wrung a smile out of him even as he unzipped himself with quick, sure fingers.

"Don't worry, Doyle, I wasn't going to ask for your arse. Or your mouth, come to that." He had hold of his cock now, head turning to look out of the side window, and then back to Doyle, his mouth twisting into a quick, ironic smile as he saw Doyle's eyes fly down to his groin, watching the up-and-down movement of his fist. It felt good, comforting, strong and fine. It just was not enough.

He said again: "Do something for me? Touch your tits."

Doyle said nothing, leaned back, smiled. Perhaps such a request amused him. But anyway he opened his shirt, slipped his hand inside, stroked his own skin lazily, rubbing the thin flesh over the ribcage. Bodie looked; avid, hungry, beating his cock in a sweet fast blur.

"Look at this, Bodie," Doyle said, low, dirtily flirtatious, and he watched mesmerised as Doyle parted the shirt further to allow him a glimpse of silver chain lying on a smooth dark pelt of hair, and smiling right into his eyes rubbed one of his nipples between his fingertips, slowly, lovingly, rolling it around. Bodie came into his own hand, a sharp, furious explosion of pleasure, high-pressure jets into his palm, three, four, five, oh, the sweet, sweet, hell of it...

Almost at the same time the side door of the garage flew open, banged itself on the wall, and Cowley appeared. In five strides he would be at the van.

Doyle's stifled exclamation woke Bodie from a far-off world. His head was dizzy, spinning, his cock still throbbing sweetly and his hand wet. "Ge' in the back," Doyle hissed, and the garage door thumped shut. The mutter of voices outside. Bodie forced leaden limbs to vault into the back space just in time, rearranged his clothes behind the cover of the seats as Doyle, calmly buttoning his shirt one-handed, ushered Cowley into the passenger seat Doyle had just vacated, taking his time over it, overly fussing; even in his state Bodie could not help but register that his partner was overdoing it, that Cowley would suspect something, could not help but read sin and cover-up into this unusual courtesy.

But they were lucky; Cowley had other things on his mind. While Doyle took corners too fast, Bodie bounced around in the un-upholstered rear of the van and blanked his mind completely to past, present, future.

"Why isn't Bodie driving?" their boss asked at one point, voice acid with irritation. "That was my order, as I recall."

"Had a hard night, sir," Doyle answered, meekly insolent. "An' a hard morning," and his eyes

flashed up to the mirror to catch Bodie's there. For a moment, there was no-one else in the van, in the world. Doyle spoke only to Bodie, his voice rough still, even exhilarated, a sort of coded snapshot of a phrase which summed it up somehow, the sordid glory of it all:

"Breakfast at Tiffany's?"

And Bodie knew that this was not the last of it, no end but a beginning, and his eyes met Doyle's and picked up the challenge.

"You bet, mate. You bet. On me."

-- THE END --

January 1998

Zeropanic

Catharsis *Part 2 of the Adagio series*

Bodie carried the full glasses back to the table; but it was deserted.

Sitting down and taking a swig at his fresh pint, he let his eye roam around the throng of energetic dancers on the smoky crowded floor. Yes, there was Ray Doyle, giving it all he'd got. Bodie grinned and settled back to watch.

He was a good dancer, old Doyle, a right exhibitionist. You'd never think he had it in him, mused Bodie, watching Doyle's joyous fist punch the air in rhythm, the agile movements of his hips.

When he finally emerged, coming towards Bodie breathless and smiling, he had a girl on each arm. Bodie's eyebrow went up: Doyle had seemed to be dancing for himself alone, with the solitary absorption of one listening to an inner voice. He had eyes only for his partner as he indicated the full pint.

"Brought one for you."

"Me, too," said Doyle wryly, offloading the two girls into spare chairs between them. He gave a not-my-fault shrug at Bodie's questioning glance.

"So I see." Mindful of his manners, Bodie gave them a lady-killer smile. "Nice movin', mate," he added, to Doyle. "Very cool."

"You gotta stay cool," quoth Doyle, raising his glass in salute. "Can I get you ladies a drink?" He turned to them.

They opted for martinis, and Doyle went off to get them, pushing his way between tables. Bodie was left with the girls -- though girls they were not; must be at least Doyle's age, thought Bodie with an inner smile. He was, uncharacteristically, a little at a loss, not knowing how Doyle

wanted him to play this. It was just one of the untested areas of their still-new relationship; a relationship that Bodie was deadly serious about preserving.

"What you called?" said one of the girls, winking at her friend. This man with the good-looking fighter's face appealed to her every bit as much as his cheerful, mop-haired friend. They'd landed a stylish pair here and no mistake.

"Bodie."

She made a face. "Bodie what?"

"Just Bodie." And if you don't like it, stuff it, he thought with a hint of savagery.

"Wendy," she indicated her pal, "and I'm Carol."

He looked at them properly, making the usual quick assessment. Scrubbers -- basically; but pretty ones. One with dark curly hair and a thin, attractive face; the other a dyed blonde, hair to the waist, and a revealing cleavage over which peeped full white-skinned breasts. He felt a flicker of interest, put it down with no trouble. He didn't need it. He had all he wanted, and more than he'd ever dreamed of.

Still -- no harm in being civil --

When Doyle came back with their drinks, Bodie was swinging along nicely, his dark eyes flaring good humour.

"There you are, loves. Ice and lemon as ordered."

He sat down between them, opposite Bodie, and grinned around.

"You two mates, are you?" asked Wendy, the blonde breasty one.

Ray Doyle took a slow smacking swig of his lager. "Yeah."

She twinkled at him. "You men; I don't know. Always hunt in pairs."

Doyle shot an amused glance at Bodie from beneath his eyelashes. "We're not hunting."

"Go on," she said, clearly not believing a word of it.

A new number was starting up, fast and bouncy. Doyle pricked up his ears, alert as a cat. He looked, suddenly, sent.

"It's good, this. Dance?" He extended a hand to Carol, pulled her after him into the midst of the vigorous throng.

Bodie, left with Wendy, was now in a position where he could only do the same. He was not keen on dancing, feeling it to be vaguely beneath the dignity of a cool ex-SAS type; and he went into motion without noticeable enthusiasm. Ray Doyle, spinning past him with exuberance and flair, thumped him on the shoulder, winked; and the world turned lighter. He threw himself into the spirit of things and the evening took off.

A whirl of dance, fast chat, drink. He knew he was succeeding at being dry and witty; and everything Doyle said was sharp, amusing, right up there with him, their wits sparking off each other. He knew their two pretty, laughing companions were impressed with their style, and it was undeniably a pleasant feeling. Without being drunk, he was in a perfect state of depressed inhibition, and he was high on the atmosphere.

When, quite late in the evening, the two girls made a trip to the powder room, Doyle looked over at him and smiled, his eyes bright. Bodie smiled back, suddenly soft and full of love. He wanted to reach out and hold him, feel the warm hard-muscled strength through the soft material of Doyle's dark blue shirt; wanted to rub his face against Doyle's. He knew Doyle felt the same way because he leant forward abruptly, and his hand brushed Bodie's on the table. "All right mate?" he said quietly. Bodie lifted a finger, touched Doyle's hand gently; they both watched it. "I want to kiss you," he said, very deep in his throat.

Doyle's mouth lifted at the corners. "That'd set the place alight."

"And me." Doyle was so beautiful in the soft light. Bodie stared fascinated at his smooth pale skin, the tempting cupid's mouth of his partner. He shook his head. "I must be turning daft," he said aloud, amused at himself. "Soft in the head."

Doyle smiled a little, but his mind had moved on. "S'late. What do we do now?"

Bodie came down to reality with a bump, remembering. "Make our excuses and go?" he suggested, cautiously.

Doyle didn't look too bothered. "If you want. Or stay on a bit."

Suddenly all this had turned difficult again; he just did not know what Doyle had in mind. He bought time, saying: "What do you think of 'em?" He jerked his head towards the powder room.

"Not bad."

"You think they'd come across?" The old question of their night-hunting days of the past; set in a new context.

Doyle snorted, setting his glass down. "What do you think? They're expectin' it."

Bodie turned cool, cool as ice; his mouth set in a mutinous line. "Thought we weren't hunting."

"We're not," agreed Doyle. "But if you want us to take them home, no harm in it."

The music was very loud, a booming pulsing beat. It was hot in the room; Bodie pulled at the neck of his shirt. No harm in it...?

He thought of the night, weeks ago now, when Doyle had demanded total commitment from him; Doyle zapping out like a round of ammunition just what he expected of Bodie if they were to become lovers. He remembered his amusement, old Doyle laying down the options and turning down flat the idea of sex without commitment, just like any well-bred girl. Despite the quick amusement he hadn't gone into it in a light-hearted way. Doyle, with his beauty and his faults alike, had won Bodie's heart, swept it and him away to a degree of bemused emotion he hadn't known he was capable of feeling; and he'd pay any price Doyle asked. So he had agreed, and meant every word of his promises.

Now here was Doyle seemingly considering taking these two scrubbers home; attaching as much importance to the decision as whether or not to have cream on one's apple pie.

Doyle followed Bodie's thoughts, watching the conflicting expressions passing over Bodie's aggressively tilted face. "Ah, c'mon, now, Bodie," he said impatiently. "Don't make such heavy weather of it."

"You said --"

Like a marriage, Doyle had said.

"Yeah, I know what I said. I'm plannin' on sticking to it. But I didn't mean we had to deprive ourselves of female company for the rest of our lives."

"Didn't you," Bodie said at last. He lifted his glass, staring ahead.

Doyle had the feeling he was putting this badly, and Bodie was missing the point. "Look, Bodie. Fuckin' them -- do you think that would mean anything? They want us to take 'em home, pass an hour or so in bed, and all I'm tryin' to say is that we've got a choice. Whether we do or not, them or anyone else, it won't make any difference to us. To you an' me."

Bodie stared out into the crowd, his nostrils pinched, his mouth tight; all his certainties shattered.

Doyle struggled to express it right. "I'm just trying to give us more -- freedom," he said, and the moment he'd said it he knew what he'd done.

Bodie tossed back the rest of his pint. "You want freedom, sweetheart," he said savagely, "it's yours."

Doyle caught his arm, mad at himself.

"That was the wrong word. I put it badly. For chrissake, Bodie!" He was getting angry with

Bodie too, for his wilful misunderstanding. "I'm trying to be rational about this. It's an important part of our lives. We've no guidelines; we have to work it out, do what feels right -- for us. I could live without ever havin' a woman again, of course I damn well could. But we don't have to feel we've got to do that, if it looks like jeopardising everything else. That's all I'm tryin' to get across."

Too many mistakes; he had lost Bodie completely.

"Here they come," muttered Bodie out of the corner of his mouth, watching the two girls smiling at them, oblivious, making their way through the tables. "Time to make the pitch. What's mine called?"

"For *godsake* Bodie --"

Bodie ignored him, plunging on. "Wendy, that's it. Wouldn't want to get it wrong. Could be embarrassing. I might come out with 'oh Ray' at the wrong time," he mimicked, blindly hitting out wherever it would hurt most, cause pain as he himself had been wounded. He stared directly at Doyle, his chin jutting mutinously. "But you won't have that problem, will you? You never said it anyway."

Subtle, deadly and true, it hung in the air.

The two girls reached the table, freshly powdered and perfumed and having come to a satisfying mutual decision over the washbasins, in front of the mirrors. It was time for the denouement: the clinch, they figured with years of experience behind them, was about due.

It came, but not quite as they'd expected.

Ray Doyle stood up, springing to his feet in one hard, angry movement. His chair crashed down behind him but he didn't turn. "Goodnight loves," he said. He jumped Bodie, dragged him to his feet, got him in a hard arresting grip, one arm twisted tightly behind his back. "Get out," he hissed into Bodie's hair. "Just get out of here." He began to thrust Bodie hard for the exit.

Bodie was heavier, perhaps stronger, but he had been taken by surprise; and although he was bitterly hurt and violently angry he had enough sense left not to push Doyle any more. Doyle in a temper could be nasty, and this was a very public place. So he let himself go where Doyle pushed him. They went past the bouncers in the foyer, who looked at them in surprise but did nothing more since they were going in the right direction for troublemakers: through the door. Doyle hustled Bodie on round the corner, into a dark alley and pushed him to the wall, not gently. "For *godsake*, Bodie," he ground out from between clenched teeth, "will you *listen* to me?"

Bodie gazed back at him, not giving an inch, his face set, his eyes dark and unfathomable; perfectly, angrily mute.

Doyle gave up; released all the pressure and sagged forward, burying his head on Bodie's hard

shoulder. Slowly, after several seconds, Bodie's arms came up and held onto Doyle. He gripped Doyle's body against his with hands like steel, not caring that he was bruising the delicate flesh beneath the thick woollen sleeves. It was a gesture not of affection, nor passion; but a desperate assertion of possessiveness. He said nothing.

At long last Doyle raised his head. "Come on. Let's go home."

At the flat, Doyle slammed the door shut and leant against it, breathing hard. "Don't say anything."

They had said nothing all the way here. Bodie had wrenched the car about as if he were in line for Monte Carlo.

Bodie was on to him in a flash, gripping his shoulders, pinning him against the door, his face set in a twisted snarl of fury. "You're always pushing me around!" he yelled at Doyle. "Just put a bloody stop to it will you mate?" He was charged up, on fire with fury: jolts of energy running erratically through him like before a shoot-out began, demanding an explosive release. It was well-nigh impossible for the aggressive ex-para to simply defuse.

"Don't talk about it," continued Doyle, fighting to keep his own cool. "Want to show you something." He tensed his muscles, threw Bodie off and walked into the living room to the locked cabinet where they kept their maps and documents; took a key from his pocket and opened it. He extracted a page of notes he had made earlier about the case they were working on, a map and a newspaper; turned and held them out. "Look at these."

Bodie looked like a bull ready to go into a charge; at battle stance, his eyes flashing black anger, his nostrils pinched and his mouth set in an aggressive pout; you could almost hear the snorts of breath, see him pawing the ground.

Doyle shoved the papers at him again. "Read this. Something I want to go through. On the job, mate. Anything else waits."

Thrown off course, Bodie stared down at his overflowing hands. Doyle carried on, pressing the advantage in hard and quick. "Something struck me today. We 'aven't made much headway with these Securicor jobs. *How* they do it, fine. They get tipped off by our man about the route and the timing, lie in wait and move in armed to the teeth. We know who our man is --"

-- *think* we know," amended Bodie in a growl; but Doyle felt a quick flash of relief -- Bodie had taken the bait. After the disastrous evening they needed so badly to retreat to the part of their relationship they knew they could handle; to mark time there reaffirming its security before they could move on again.

-- yeah, we think we know who tips them off. And why. All we have to do is catch him at it."

"Not so easy," said Bodie darkly, "when we've tailed the bloke for two solid days and come up with nothing."

Doyle threw himself into a chair, hands behind his head; stared up at the frowning face of his partner. "Not nothing."

"Oh yeah. We know where he has breakfast. We know where he buys his bloody newspaper and where he gets his washing done. Every blasted place he goes into he hands over notes and gets something in return --"

"Yeah, really into give-an'-take, this bloke," agreed Doyle, stretching.

"Look, he can't be getting pay-offs everywhere!" said Bodie, fully into the frustrations of this particular case now. "It must be one of his regular calls. But which?"

"He's a little fish," Doyle said.

"Little?" Bodie snorted. "Listen mate, if it *is* our man, he's probably funding a letter-bomb campaign single-handed. He's betraying the organisation he works for, laying their money and good name on the line because of some bloody fanatic belief that the world'd be better off without nuclear weapons. I might bloody well agree with him, but I don't nick money, make bombs with it, and send 'em to people to make my point."

"Maybe not little. But still a fish."

"What?" Bodie caught onto Doyle's tone, sat down opposite him and stared.

"He swims a lot."

Doyle let his expression give vent to the little buzz of satisfaction that had been going around in his mind since this had occurred to him, long hours ago. He smiled. "Look at the map, Bodie."

There on the map it was, clearly marked, just one of the stops they'd made tailing the man called John Yip. The ULCF sports complex, a privately run, somewhat seedy place.

Bodie stared at it, unconvinced. "Yeah, he swims. He does judo. He takes Latin at evening classes. Busy man."

"Take a look at this list."

It was a list of names: a complete readout of the employees of ULCF from managing director to part-time cleaner. Doyle had requested it at 4.30 that afternoon when this idea had struck him; it was in his hands by 4.35, which said something for CI5's powers of efficient information-gathering. One name on it had stood out, to a selective computer of a criminal-scenting mind like that of any trained CI5 agent.

DeParry.

"No way. Coincidence," said Bodie at last. "He's behind bars safe for 20 years, after the Spalding hit job."

"Yeah, Joe's gone. Unusual name though. And Joe had a brother."

"Tarring them all with the same brush, Doyle?" But Bodie, who trusted his partner's intuition, was right up there with him.

"It's at the swimming pool," said Doyle, eyes gleaming with the certainty of a hunch that fitted. "Yip passes on the route for a selected job to DeParry or one of his lads; goes for a swim. DeParry's boys arm up, drive off, lie in wait until it's time to throw the lead about."

"Yeah, I reckon you're on to it. Stake out the place then; intercept the message and then --"

"Time to put on our well-known security men act --"

"While someone picks up Yip. Yeah. Swimming pool, though. Not easy to stake out a swimming pool. There's a limit to the number of lengths you can put in --"

Doyle merely grinned, reached for the newspaper he had taken from the cupboard, tossed it over. "Sits Vac."

Bodie found the column; peered quickly down it. He saw it at once; a half-page double spaced ad. of jobs awaiting applications in the local sporting admin. scene. There it was, in black and white.

He looked up at Doyle. "You or me?"

Doyle's smile stretched wider; he looked boyish and very appealing in the open-necked shirt. "Oh c'mon. All that mercenary work? Bet you had to swim across a croc-infested swamp or two. Bound to impress 'em."

"Not crocs," said Bodie glumly. "Midges."

Doyle thought about it, rising. "Make it crocs. Big ones. Sounds better. We'll get the documentation first thing."

"You've been stewing over this quite a while," said Bodie, suspiciously.

"S'right. I'll keep a tail, come for a dip when Yip does. No sweat, sunshine. Can't fail. Only, jump in and rescue me if I start drownin', will you? Hate cold water, myself."

Bodie didn't take it up. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"Didn't want to spoil your evening," said Doyle, with gentle, wry irony. He gave Bodie a tiny, apologetic shrug, his hands spread wide. After a stony silence, he said, "I'm going to bed."

Coming?"

Well, it had done the trick; diverted Bodie from instant action without thought. But it had still to be faced. Doyle lay in the dark, listening to Bodie performing all the last minute things, checking the locks, putting out the lights, anything to postpone the moment.

When Bodie finally appeared he snapped on the bedroom light. He was unsmiling, his eyes very dark and unreadable. "You want me to sleep on the couch?"

Doyle made it easy. "Nah, that's childish. Not for you and me, love."

For a moment he thought Bodie might argue, but then Bodie extinguished the overhead light, tight-lipped, and shut the door. He pulled off his clothes, dropping them onto a chair, and got into bed. He lay rigidly away from Doyle, not touching him.

"You're very insecure, Bodie," said Doyle aloud into the darkness.

No wonder, that Bodie was insecure. As far as Doyle could tell, from Bodie's rare half-confidences that revealed more in what he didn't say than what he did, no-one had ever loved him -- really loved him, stayed steady -- in the whole of his life, from infancy to maturity. Bodie's fault, of course, for presenting such an impenetrable front to the world, veering from flippancy to hard-bitten cynicism with few half-measures. There were reasons for that which Doyle of all people was well-placed to understand.

"But you don't need to be. I meant what I said."

"Oh yeah," Bodie muttered. "Sure you did."

"You don't believe me, do you?" Doyle gave it out as a simple statement of fact; one not to be bemoaned, but considered and dealt with, even if he did sigh. "Tonight -- I was just trying --"

"Look, Doyle," Bodie's voice cut in, belligerent and angry, "You want to screw women, okay, you go ahead. I won't bloody well stand in your way."

"For godsake, Bodie. Can't you see -- ? *You* were the great screw-em-all Romeo, and --"

"Yeah, an' you were the one on about commitment. Just a joke, was it? I'd've laughed if I'd known."

Doyle lay flat on his back, trying hard not to be exasperated. If he wasn't getting through to Bodie it couldn't be all Bodie's fault, tempting as it was to let fly and shake some sense into the sulky, obstinate so-and-so. Half the trouble, Doyle knew, was wrapped up in the phrase that Bodie, angry and feeling rejected, had hurled at him in the night-club-- *you never said it*.

It was true, he supposed. Doyle was not by nature romantically demonstrative; whereas Bodie had turned out to be surprisingly affectionate. He liked to touch, lots of close physical contact; he

said loving things when they came into his head. Doyle didn't mind any of it; it was easy to accept. In fact, he found the sometimes awkward, always heartfelt gestures of love coming from this man who turned such a hard, aggressive face on the world, touching.

But he didn't *need* it, as reassurance; Doyle knew quite well, even had Bodie never spoken a word, never reached out for him, that he was the recipient of all Bodie's turbulent devotion: it was there in the dark eyes, in the protective, watchful way Bodie guarded him from the hurt the world could inflict, believing perhaps rightly that Doyle was more vulnerable than he himself.

Yes, though it didn't displease him, he didn't need it. But maybe Bodie did. Maybe it was an unconscious sign that it was Bodie himself who desperately needed reassurance. He seemed unresponsive to all Doyle's attempts at explanation; it was time to try some other way.

He wasn't going to find it easy to reciprocate in kind. But if that was what Bodie needed, then that he must have.

So he propped himself up on one elbow, looking down into his partner's cool, hard face. He reached out, lifting threads of Bodie's surprisingly soft dark hair, running it through his fingers. "Such a tough-guy," he said gently, smiling.

Bodie's eyes opened, lightless and narrowed. Doyle continued, teasing softly, "You're such a tough-guy, Bodie. Don't need anyone, you don't -- you even told Cowley that." He let the hair fall, traced his fingers down Bodie's face. "It's all a lie."

He shifted so that he was sitting up, leaning over Bodie, one hand braced on the other man's hard smooth chest; his voice very low, very easy. "Trouble is, I keep seein' all the things that could go wrong for us." He touched Bodie's new scar, moved his fingers on down Bodie's muscular arm, stroking him, absorbed in the feel of the soft skin, the way the simple touch of his fingers raised goosebumps there, the tiny hairs rising in answer to the delicate stimulation. "An' I don't want this to go wrong, Bodie; because I need it more than I ever needed anything." He ran his fingers down the other man's wrist, touched the pulse that beat there, moved on to curl his hand around Bodie's so he was holding on tight. "One thing I can see happening is one or the other of us gettin' jealous, feeling like we're not enough, just because the other fancies some woman --" he squeezed Bodie's hand, hard -- "it's *bound* to happen. It'd be bloody stupid of us to fondly imagine we can switched off sexual feelings for women just like that. Tonight --" he dropped his head to press his lips to one temple, keeping up the gentle tactile reassurance all the time he was talking, "tonight I was trying to find a way to take the pressure off -- *before* it happens. To -- to establish that it doesn't matter that sometimes we fancy women -- it doesn't matter. That it won't ever make any difference to us."

Bodie looked as if he was about to speak. Doyle cut him off, raising his voice just a little. "But if it's not going to work for you that way, if you think we can cope the way things are -- then this is a two-way thing, Bodie. So I agree."

He dropped his head again, nuzzled Bodie's throat, slowly. He found an appealing hollow there and explored it softly with his tongue.

"Agree to what?" growled Bodie, totally fazed: by his emotions, by a gathering relief, by Doyle's unusual tenderness. It seemed too good to be real; more like a wistful dream of how he wanted Doyle to be than how he had come to accept that Doyle was.

"Just you and me," answered Doyle, licking his mate. Salt. Bodie always tasted salty. Sign of a good circulation, easy sweat. He felt a moment of totally vicarious pride, that his partner should have such an efficient body. "Just you an' me, sweetheart. If that's the way you want it, then so do I. We'll work it out."

Bodie felt, stupidly, an unfamiliar sharp stinging behind his eyelashes, telling him that if Doyle kept this up much longer he'd be in tears. He flung an arm up, over his eyes.

Watching him, Doyle made as if to brush it away; thought better of it. Leave Bodie that one dignity. "Tough guy," he murmured again, very low, a smile touching his lips; and turned away. He ran his palms over Bodie's chest; leant to touch his mouth to warm lips. "You're beautiful." He moved down, pushing the sheet away so he could see what he was doing. He rested his head over Bodie's heart, listening to its steady reassuring beat. He felt a hand rise to touch his hair, press his cheek, holding him there; so he stayed there for a moment, if that was what Bodie wanted. He too knew the joy of holding a lover close above you, their head below your chin, feeling the warm weight press you into the bed, protective and protected.

Then he turned his face, kissed Bodie's palm and moved on in his slow, sweet exploration, of Bodie's sensuality. To trail his tongue in the dark damp hair nestling in the armpit, running his other hand down Bodie's side to the powerful curve of the thigh. He ran his tongue over cool nipples, feeling them stiffen at his demand, hearing Bodie's sudden sharp intake of breath; and the first shock of arousal lit through his own body. He ignored it. Bodie's hands reached for him, but he evaded them, impatient. He wanted to give Bodie what Bodie had freely given him, so many times.

He stroked Bodie's thighs, his stomach, rubbing his fingers over the smooth skin of the lower belly: Bodie was so damn beautiful. "Shouldn't be allowed," he said in a shaky, laughing whisper. "You're a bloody menace to my sanity, mate..."

He slid his hands around Bodie's hips, underneath him, squeezed. Bodie liked that; he lifted his hips, his eyes tightly shut. Doyle watched his face, running his thumbs lightly between the cleft of the rounded buttocks. Bodie gasped, his thighs flopping apart. Doyle knew what Bodie was asking but he turned it away, bringing his hands around and up again, to play gently in the curls of silky dark hair adorning Bodie's groin.

Bodie had had enough playing. He seized one of Doyle's wandering hands and pushed it onto himself, breathing hard.

Doyle mentally notched up a plus point; it wasn't often he had managed to manoeuvre Bodie into such an open demand. Bodie was tight, guarded, hesitant about making his wishes clear -- afraid? Of what? Doyle wondered. He himself had never made love to another man, and yet he

had felt no inhibitions from the start; no hesitation to follow his instincts and the demands of his body to ask of Bodie whatever felt right; while Bodie, who claimed experience in the field, always seemed to be holding back, letting Doyle make all the running -- why?

Because he's afraid of reluctance on my part. Because, even now, he's not sure I won't reject him, came the blindingly clear answer, as his finger made gentle movements on Bodie, and Bodie sighed, his hands gripping the bed.

All a front then, all that smug self-assurance bordering on arrogance.

I had you all damn wrong, mate. All wrong...

His hand was wet. He took it away from Bodie, to look at it; rubbing the translucent slippery moisture of Bodie's excitement between finger and thumb. Curious, he tasted it: slightly salt. Again salt; he thought, vaguely amused, and then he bent his head and took Bodie into his mouth.

At first he used his tongue, in a way he knew would be intensely pleasurable from his own experience; he could imagine all too vividly what Bodie was experiencing, but he stilled his own growing desire; it wasn't his time. This was for Bodie; just for his beloved Bodie. As Bodie's tension grew more urgent, he sneaked a look up; saw Bodie's eyes still tightly shut, and felt surprise, gentle regret. Bodie should be watching this; he'd like it. It was a powerful erotic stimulus: he'd watched, through half-closed lids, Bodie doing this to him, and he knew just how arousing a sight it could be. *Next time*, he promised himself; and stopped teasing.

He sucked Bodie, hard. As his lips stretched around Bodie's hardness, he supposed vaguely that every man, however straight, wondered at some time just what it would be like to do this. Now he knew; because he was privileged; because Bodie trusted him, loved him enough to let him do this very private thing. It aroused him fiercely, not just because it was like suddenly being able to suck himself, every touch he made, every answering throb from the other man sending twinges down to his own groin; but because of the vast satisfaction of making Bodie respond to his caresses, the delight of feeling Bodie move beneath him, lost in excitement, hearing the deep wordless sounds of pleasure leaving parted lips; and knowing that he was the cause of all that helpless delight. It gave him a sense of power; he felt very necessary, very secure.

Bodie's hands left his hair, gripped his shoulders, his fingers closing in tight, nails digging into the soft skin. Doyle took a deep, shuddering breath, wanting more and harder, the small pain reaching his senses as a sharp sweet tang of pleasure. He released Bodie and muttered fiercely, "C'mon, Bodie. Give it to me. Come in my mouth. Do it..."

On a gasp, Bodie's hips lifted; he pushed himself up and deep into Doyle's throat. Doyle held on, not moving; with one hand he found Bodie's and twined his own fingers in it, wanting to share in it, be part of Bodie's coming.

He felt all Bodie's muscles straining, then holding perfectly still. He felt Bodie's warm seed pulsing down his throat in short, violent waves. He stayed still, accepting all of Bodie into him.

When Bodie's shuddering stopped, he lay for a moment on Bodie's belly, still gripping his hand, examining the strange taste in his mouth, the slight stinging sensation at the back of his throat, hearing Bodie's ragged breathing gradually slowing. Part of Bodie was his now; it couldn't be taken away.

Finally Bodie pulled him up to lie against him, holding him very close. They were both shaking, a little. Doyle's green eyes stared into Bodie's dark ones, fathomless. "Christ, Doyle," Bodie said very low, still breathless, "That was a beautiful thing to do..."

Doyle's lips moved. "You've done it for me."

"Not like that."

Doyle only gave a tiny, negatory shake of the head meaning yes, it had been like that. Bodie wrapped his arms tighter round the body of his mate, his love, and kissed him, ran his tongue around the curve of the lips, slipping it inside. "It's good, with you," he said intense and low, meaning not just the sex but everything. "It's good, Ray."

"An' you; you're good for me." He sighed, very conscious of Bodie's touch, the warm hand travelling down his side to his thighs. Bodie shifted, and touched his lips to Doyle's once more, lingering there because he loved the feel of Doyle's mouth against his; and then he moved down.

Doyle stayed him with a hand. He was trembling with banked-down arousal, fire in his blood; but he wanted Bodie to have tonight, what Doyle had done for him, all to himself.

Eyes half open, he looked down into Bodie's quizzical dark ones. "Not like that. Easy -- like the first time..."

And, understanding, Bodie looked up; saw the tender set of Ray Doyle's chin, the light of need in his heavy-lidded eyes. He would fight the entire world to give this complex, thoughtful man anything he wanted, anything at all. So he did as Doyle asked; but not before he traced a loving finger around the beautiful, bewitching mouth of the man who had captured his heart; and said; "I love you. I love you, Ray. More than my life."

Then, very gentle, very careful, he settled the length of his body along the smaller one beneath him, keeping Doyle safe from the world, moving against him gently, until he felt him tense; and Doyle, a moment later, releasing all his warm love, his tension, his desire to keep this right, forever, onto Bodie's waiting, welcoming nearness.

Doyle bounded up the steps three at a time, one hand lightly running along the iron banister. He felt very good this morning; relaxed and at peace with the world, and everything in it. He had a job to do; and he knew exactly where he was going.

He leaned on the doorbell of the second floor flat, hard; noting the cracks in the paintwork, the garbage overflowing from the disposal chute, the smell of cabbage. It took some moments before

he was answered: a sleepy-looking man in a grubby bathrobe scowling at him. Doyle judged him to be in his early forties; the lines on his face due more to stress than age. A time of depression could do that to a man.

Momentarily, he disliked himself for what he was about to do, saw in his mind the arrogant CI5 bully destroying a dream that this man must see; but he couldn't let that stop him. People were getting blown apart through one man's fanaticism; and this man here was an unfortunate casualty of the battle against it. It was part of the job.

So he flashed his ID, and sauntered past the startled half-awake man into the poky flat. The mail lay on the floor: a dismal scattering of brown official envelopes and one stiff, white one, standing out like a ray of hope.

"You're Frank Smith."

"That's right. Look --" He eyed the young CI5 agent with distrust and half-formed fear, not taken in by the casual air of the man, the attractive face. This was the heavy mob, the big boys. What the hell did they want with him?

"You applied for a job with the ULCF? Lifeguard?"

"That's right, but I --" So young-looking, his jeanclad hips lean and slender; but so hard with it, the cold grey-green eyes like stones on a wintry seashore.

"You want the good news or the bad news?" Doyle bent to pick up the white envelope, began to slit it open.

"Look here --" Smith began, outraged, but Doyle easily evaded the outstretched hand and stared at the sheet of paper he held. The information he'd been given at 8.00 a.m. had been correct. Not that one expected anything different from CI5's complex computer network.

"You got the job," he informed the man, and looked up to meet the confused brown eyes of Frank Smith.

"I got it?" He took the letter Doyle held out, saw the words. Through the rush of exhilaration, the unbelieving realisation that two years' unemployment were over, he became aware of the young agent's eyes on him.

"-- but you just resigned," Doyle told him, with a deep felt compassion that was not at all evident in his voice or his eyes; and then he steered the man into the living-room and told him exactly what he had to do.

The slouching attendant stared boredly up at the solid imposing man in track-suit and running shoes before him, and said: "Job's taken. Sorry, son."

"Ah c'mon, give me a chance mate. Closing date for applications is today -- can't be taken. Just

let me in to see the big man. Good qualifications --" Bodie winked and patted his pockets, offering something more interesting than a few certificates.

For a fiver the wheezing Drake was bought, and he led Bodie to the Manager's office, muttering tetchily, "Understand -- I can't promise you anything. I 'eard the job was gone."

Bodie assured him there would be no refunds required, and waited as Drake knocked.

Sam DeParry was a world-weary man in his late fifties, grizzled and grey and hard as they come. He radiated irritation as he looked up at the stunted figure of Ben Drake. "Not now, Ben. Busy," he enunciated, as if to an annoying toddler.

"E asked. About the position of lifeguard," muttered Drake, and backed out shutting the door behind him. He had earned his fiver.

DeParry had a flicker of interest about him: good, thought Bodie, noting it. Doyle had done his job. He faced DeParry over the intervening desk, and favoured him with a small, hopeful smile.

"Lifeguard?" The managing director of ULCF eyed the fit-looking dark-haired man in a tracksuit. "The position's being advertised. You can make an appointment at reception for an interview." He ran a hand through his hair. He'd thought all this tedious business cleared up; he'd picked his man out of the many applicants and then bloody fate had stepped in and rushed his blasted choice into hospital with appendicitis. Nothing shady about it either; always wary, he'd checked with the hospital first thing.

The dark man was unloading his pockets. "No need for that," he said with confident arrogance, "You won't want to look any further than me."

DeParry stared hard-eyed, wondering whether to kick the cocky so-and-so out without another thought. Bodie waited calmly. Finally DeParry's eyes dropped to the documents he held. "Well," he said at last, "you're certainly well-qualified for the job. See you did time in the army --" He looked up quickly, to a face that had varied its impassivity not one jot. "Why'd you leave?"

"Became a pacifist," intoned Bodie, with absolute economy of expression.

DeParry watched him keenly a moment longer; then he nodded slowly. "Then two years in this line -- Torquay, Butlins, Weston -- you been around."

Bodie allowed just a tiny quirk of satisfaction to inform his features; the satisfaction of a none-too-bright man with pride in his one talent.

DeParry made up his mind; he wanted to sweep the whole time-wasting matter out of the way and forget it. "You'll do."

"Thanks mate," said Bodie, with just the right amount of unsurprised smugness.

DeParry rose, stuffing the papers into his in-tray so he could make out the contract later and headed for the door, motioning Bodie to follow. "You didn't become too much of a pacifist, I hope."

"What?"

"-- sir?" gently prodded DeParry, who was the Big Man here.

A friendly 'nah, you don't need to call me that,' was on the tip of Bodie's wicked tongue, but he didn't say it. "Beg your pardon -- sir?"

"Not averse to the odd rough-house, are you?" clarified DeParry. "You might have to double as bouncer. Gets a bit rough in here sometimes. Want you in there sorting them out, not sitting on the sidelines quoting woolly white-livered ideals."

Bodie, frowning, appeared to set the cogs of his mind into grinding motion. He made DeParry wait. Then a slow smile spread across his lips, one capable fist slamming into his palm. "Tell you the truth, there's times I miss the old beat the hell out of 'em days."

Evidently satisfied, DeParry opened a drawer, gave Bodie a slip to sign. "You're on duty as from now. Anything you want to know, dinnerbreaks and so on, Drake'll fill you in." A thought struck him, and he ran his eyes over the solid dark man. "You bent?"

Bodie emitted incomprehension, resisting the temptation to scratch his head, goggle his eyes and let his jaw fall open, village idiot-wise.

"Bent, queer, gay, man," said DeParry impatiently.

Bodie's lips curled. He pinched his nostrils and hunched his shoulders. His eyes glared forth darkly. He looked very, very straight.

DeParry let out a bark of laughter, his guess half-confirmed. "No matter. We get plenty of 'em in here; it's a nelly's paradise. Just don't keep your eyes on the well-filled trunks to the exclusion of the people drowning." He chuckled again, amused by his own wit, and slapped his hand on Bodie's broad shoulder, appraising him frankly. He let the hand linger just a little longer than strictly necessary.

Bodie felt a shock-wave of cynical amusement rising in him. Well, if DeParry wanted him bent, he'd be bent. He'd got the job. Stage 2 was complete. He allowed his lips to curl in a little smile, not too much; and he very obviously didn't move away. He said: "Miss the drowning ones? Not bloody likely, mate, sir. Me, I enjoy givin' 'em the kiss of life too much." And he gave the older man a delightful leer, just managing to dodge away as DeParry, chuckling, made as if to make a lightning grope of his nether regions.

Doyle was discovering that it was extremely difficult to keep one's gun within easy reach at a swimming pool and not be an object of speculation.

He entered the steamy, tiled changing room delineated with stark lines of steel lockers, and knew instantly that this was a bad place. Bad for the soggy crumpled tissues, the old cans littering the dirty floor; bad for the stink of chlorine and urine that assailed his nostrils; bad for the groups of unsavoury looking men wandering about, the wino slumped in the corner swigging cider and singing drunkenly to himself; bad for the all too definable aura of seediness and dissolution. He kept half an eye on his man, who was laying down his towel and searching for an empty locker that still locked. Doyle did the same, a fair distance away. So far -- nothing. Yip had handed over his money and passed through the turnstile without a word to the attendant. Bodie should be here by now, if he'd done his bit. Between them they could keep Yip in constant sight. Doyle knew his hunch was right; all they had to do now was be sharp-eyed, spot the message being passed, improvise some way of sneaking a look at it without being noticed, and --

Easy, he told himself, ironically. No sweat.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Armstrong, the false, obvious trail; he was putting his things down near Yip, almost bumping into him as he turned for his locker, giving a casual eye inside. Don't overdo it, mate, thought Doyle: give him a chance to do what he's here for...and then he turned away. Armstrong knew his job. He looked around, saw some cubicles to one side of the slatted wooden benches. Like any normal young male, Doyle was not at all shy about stripping in an all-male changing room; it would simply never cross his mind to use a cubicle. However, beneath his jacket there reposed a gun, and the cubicles it had to be. It was going to look mighty odd, this sudden attack of coyness, reflected Doyle; especially since for some unknown reason he seemed to be the object of intense scrutiny for several of the half-clad males in the room.

He started off. Yip was only now taking off his shirt; plenty of time. He was brought up short by a round-faced man in trunks who appeared from nowhere to confront him. "Hey," said the man, slowly.

Doyle faced him out, giving nothing away though his mind was running fast on possibilities. Then his new friend smiled, free and easy. "You look fit. Nice body, kid. You interested in some action?" His hand dipped to touch his own nylon-clad crotch, and then was taken instantly away, a gesture so brief and insignificant you'd miss it if you weren't sure.

Doyle was sure all right. It wasn't the first time he'd been asked, no, not by a long way. At one time, when he was going through a wild and insecure 17-year-old phase, he'd wondered if it was something nancyish about him and thumped anyone who'd appeared to be trying it on: but as his experience of the world grew he'd come to see that if you were an attractive male the more butch you were, or appeared to be, the more likely you were to encounter this sort of thing.

"Not that kind of action, mate," he answered, and added to soften it, because the other's expression of disappointment was almost comical, "Thanks, all the same."

That was rich, really, he considered with dry amusement as he drew the ribboned curtain of the little cubicle across; considering what he did with Bodie, what he allowed Bodie to do to him, not to mention all the exciting things he'd dreamed up for them to do to each other just as soon as

he overcame Bodie's strange lack of confidence...

But that was Bodie; and he loved Bodie. However, not given much to self-delusion, Doyle had known for years he could, if he chose, find pleasure in sex with another male. Anyone probably could, if they wiped out years of ingrained repression and social taboos, for it all came down to the fact that making it with another warm, responsive human being regardless of their sex was a hell of a lot more fun than always making it alone. But he *hadn't* chosen to before, and that was important, because it was one thing to offer Bodie. Bodie who was having trouble handling this, despite all the predictions there might have been to the contrary. Devil-may-care, love 'em and leave 'em, take it as it comes and finish it without a backwards look when it seemed to be getting heavy: that had been Bodie. And then when he'd finally fallen, he'd fallen so hard it had destroyed all his defences at a stroke and left him insecure and foundering.

Finally fallen? I wonder, thought Doyle as he slipped off his holster and quickly wrapped it in his shirt. Maybe he's been this way before, loved someone who let him down. Like Ann, he thought tightly: *bitch*. Maybe Bodie had an Ann locked away somewhere deep within himself, someone who'd destroyed his faith in anything lasting ever again. He'd probe gently, when Bodie was at his more communicative; see if he could find out.

There was also, he considered as he slid off the last of his clothes and hustled himself into the tight navy trunks, one other thing he could offer Bodie which he hadn't yet. It was an idea that appealed to Doyle; it made him feel shivery inside just thinking about it. Bodie had made no moves that way; not that that meant anything. He pushed it all to the back of his mind, went through the curtain with his things. He noted that Yip looked just about ready to take the plunge, closing his locker. Armstrong was painstakingly checking the mechanism of his.

Doyle found an empty one, stashed his things inside, including the concealed gun; he hunted for a five pence piece, inserted it, slammed the door shut and removed the key, and then slipped the pink rubber bracelet it was attached to around his wrist. He would have to perform all those actions in reverse to retrieve the gun: hardly going to be the fastest draw in the West, is it, he thought with black humour.

At the poolside Yip dived straight in. Doyle paused for a while, testing the water, with one hand on the metal stair-rail. There was Bodie, looking every inch the part, tough and solid in a dark blue tracksuit and bare feet sitting on an observation chair. He was looking boredly around, his eyelids drooping in apparent disdain. Bloody cool, this water. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said he disliked swimming. In the Med, now: well, that was a different thing. Take his mate there one day...his mind began to fill with happy, day-dreamy images of himself and Bodie on a sun-warmed beach, with no Cowley, no CI5, no hurry; all the time in the world to be easy with one another -- He jerked back to attention as he realised he had lost sight of Yip, no sign anywhere of the dark head; he glanced at Bodie and saw his partner make an almost imperceptible motion of his head, and there was Yip, surfacing at the other side. And if he, Doyle, didn't take the plunge soon it was going to look mighty unenthusiastic for a man who had apparently been in the mood for a swim.

One thing for it; he could give Bodie a show. Bodie might think he was the slickest thing in the

water since Moby Dick; but Doyle knew a thing or two himself. He walked to the deep end, stood on the edge looking down into the greyish water for a moment. Then he tensed, and threw himself upwards, curving over and cleaving the water cleanly, its coldness on his warm skin making him gasp as he surfaced, and struck out smoothly for the length. Each time his face rose from the water he alternated his glances between Yip and Bodie, beginning to enjoy his own easy fast movements through the water. He felt as if he could keep this up forever. And might have to, he reflected ironically, watching Yip turning for yet another width, on a cross-pattern to his own path.

Bodie let his cool dark gaze roam constantly around the pool, ostensibly a man devoutly on the lookout for swimmers in trouble. That was a thought -- he sent up a faint prayer to Neptune, or whoever it was that looked after water devotees: since if he did have to plunge to the rescue the Magnum nestling snugly beneath his arm was likely to come off badly in the encounter. Not that he was expecting any trouble -- if there *was* any, and he needed the gun, it would mean he and Doyle had botched the job and he didn't fancy being the one who had to tell Cowley. He watched Doyle with ungrudging admiration -- Doyle was a pleasant sight, in action face down in the water, arm over sleek arm, his legs kicking out strongly in perfectly co-ordinated action, his neat navy-clad buttocks clenching and unclenching. Now there was a thought to conjure with...Bodie actually shivered as the image of a cool, wet Doyle came into mind; one passive in his hands.

Maybe one day...

Doyle neared the end of his eighth length, made a face at him that might have been the inadvertent water-choked grimace of a man nearing exhaustion -- or might have meant that Ray Doyle was fed up -- and turned to begin again.

Yip climbed the steps, both hands on the metal handrails, his white body goose-pimpled.

Bodie tensed; but Doyle was only halfway up the pool. How long would it take? Ten seconds from now maybe, if the contact was waiting? Armstrong, for whom Bodie had a grudging respect if only for having survived a fortnight working with Doyle, was scrambling out of the water, following.

Come on, Doyle. Bodie sweated it out, there on his high vantage point watching the lazy strokes of a tiring man, wondering how to attract Doyle's attention. Subconsciously, he was counting the seconds since Yip's departure: five...six...seven...

On 'ten,' Doyle, unhurried, reached the far end, turned as if to begin yet another length. Bodie groaned inwardly, could not get his partner's eye. Then, as if suddenly realising he'd had enough, Doyle changed his mind, reached for the grab rail and eased himself out of the water.

Go it, mate, thought Bodie, relaxing as he watched Doyle saunter for the changing room, dripping. I'm right there with you.

But he wasn't there with him, and he experienced a moment of apprehension, waiting...

He didn't have long to wait.

After a quick shower, Doyle towelled off vigorously. He opened his locker after a fight with the uncooperative rubber wrist band and the fiddly little key; took out his things and trotted off to the cubicles once more. Armstrong was already at his locker; Yip was still under the shower, head thrown back, eyes blissfully shut beneath the steaming spray. Must've been luckier than me, thought Doyle sourly; his own shower had been a limp, tepid trickle. Obviously being a regular helped. The changing rooms were quite crowded now. It was a funny place, this: although Doyle was confident he had done nothing to arouse suspicion there seemed to be eyes on him all the time and he wasn't quite sure why. He drew the curtain of his cubicle across and began to dress.

He was surprised a moment later by a piercing hiss. He looked down to see a hand under the wooden partition. It was holding a note.

Bemused, he took it. There was no writing on the scrap of paper, only a crudely-drawn, eyebrow-raisingly explicit picture, and Ray Doyle, holding it, was left to reflect ruefully on the motives unerringly assigned to people who took shameless public showers in the nude, then darted invitingly into the nearest cubicle...

Thoughtless, he cursed himself: but then he hadn't known this place was a meet for queers. Should have guessed, maybe, he berated himself, after the first encounter. He tossed the note back over the partition and said aloud: "Thanks, but no thanks."

Unfortunately his admirer, utterly bewitched by the vision of Ray Doyle in the shower, was not the type to give up easily. He appeared, in person, parting the plastic curtain, bright-eyed as he let his gaze run over the bare muscled thighs, the tight green briefs. "C'mon. You haven't even seen me. You came in here looking for some action, dincha?"

Doyle turned, disbelieving, arrested in the action of buttoning his shirt; his face was hard, his eyes chilly with anger as he surveyed the man standing before him. He was youngish, not unattractive in a beefy kind of way, but that didn't move Doyle, who was alight with fury on at least two counts -- the invasion of his privacy, and the interruption of his job.

"I said, 'no thanks,'" he said with deceptive calm. "You want me to put it less politely?"

"Bluff," decided the man, who had red hair, cheerily.

Doyle took a step towards him. "Then call it."

"Very macho," approved his admirer. "I like it." His eyes slid down to Doyle's groin; he seemed to have totally missed in Doyle's slender form that he was playing with fire in the presence of a volatile force greater than his own. He reached out his hand.

Doyle caught it before it got halfway, less than gently, since he just could not believe the effrontery of the man. He threw him off, with easy force.

The other, winded, glared up from where he'd been thrown; and then launched himself forward. Others, alerted by the sounds of conflict, were appearing from nowhere. Suddenly Ray Doyle was into a fight.

The wheezy dwarf-like Drake, whose office had a window into the changing room -- a perk of the job, given the many interesting things that went on there -- was breathily onto his microphone, in an instant.

Bodie lounged moodily at the poolside, heard the loudspeakers -- used for polo matches, and rarely at that -- crackle into action: "Lifeguard to the changing rooms -- lifeguard to the changing rooms --"

He was off his perch in a bound, scorning the ladder, landing neatly and pelting off for the scene of the trouble. As he'd expected, he found Doyle in the centre of it, wary-eyed, and cool in pants and shirt, backed into a corner; there were three men facing him and one held a broken bottle, its viciously jagged edge an inch from his throat.

Bodie took the man from behind, getting his wrist in a smooth stranglehold so that the bottle dropped quickly, from suddenly nerveless fingers. "All right -- what's all this about," he said, in his best threatening army style.

"Bloody maniac," snarled Doyle, reacting with what he felt was well-deserved fury. He charged blindly at the redhead, limbs flailing. Bodie caught him easily, threw him off. "No trouble. Not in *these* baths. This is a clean place and don't you forget it," he said forcefully, glowering around. He was a big, strong man. The situation defused.

Doyle, grumbling to himself and without a glance at Bodie, swung off back to his cubicle. Can't leave him alone for a minute, thought Bodie, not for the first time; and then he ran his eyes over the others and singled one out. He took the shoulder of the man who'd had the bottle and growled at him "You -- out." The man's feet left the ground. He found himself whisking along at high speed. Aggrieved, he twisted in his heavy aggressor's grip; Bodie didn't need to alter his stride. "My -- things --" gasped the ex-swimmer.

Bodie hoisted him over the turnstile, rather like shifting a sack of potatoes, watched by the astounded Drake from his attendant's position. The man landed with a thud and a whine. Bodie trotted back to the changing room and collected the only untenanted damp bundle of things, heedless of the curious glances at him from the other changers, noting as he did so that Doyle was now fully dressed and combing his hair. Returning, he threw the bundle over the turnstile. "Don't come back." And in an aside, "Hydrophobia," he confided to Drake.

As he did so, John Yip appeared. He saw Bodie there and busied himself looking at a noticeboard. A little light went on in Bodie's brain. He moved on without glancing Yip's way, and went unconcernedly back to his post. Or so he hoped they'd assume; in fact he never got there, ducking behind a line of lockers and peering cautiously out after a few seconds had passed. He could hear nothing of the conversation; it seemed low-key, but then Bodie, who had after all met Drake, could imagine why. And then he saw it. Yip extracted something from his pocket,

handed it to Drake, who took it and stashed it under the counter. There were people queuing for entry, and the whole affair was very casual. All the same, Bodie felt sure --

He was conscious of a light touch on his shoulder. Doyle, sauntering past. He stopped, reached into his bag for something, all without looking up at Bodie lurking in his hiding place.

"All done," muttered Bodie. "In the attendant's office somewhere." Yip was going out. They could forget him now, once and for all; he'd be picked up tomorrow sometime, when the action was over. "Looked like a green book. Up to you, sweetheart."

Doyle bounced his head once, muttered an audible 'damn' as he stared into his bag, as if he'd forgotten something, and turned once more for the area near the showers.

Drake wasn't looking. So Bodie used the moment to escape, passing Doyle on the way without a glance, and went back to his post.

Doyle hunted around for a moment or two, to give Bodie time to get well out of the way; then he went into action. Create a diversion. Easy. He caught sight of the unfortunate redhead who'd been unwary enough to try it on with him, and who was ignoring him pointedly, shrugging on his jacket, clearly hurt. It's not your lucky day at all, mate, thought Doyle with a hint of ruefulness; and he abandoned his shamming search.

He marched over to him, took him by the shirt collar in one strong hand. Green eyes blazed fury. "You ever try that again an' you're a dead man," he promised, loudly and aggressively, noting abstractly the heartening prickings of interest all around from other half-clad males. "Whaddya think I am, queer or somethin'? Well, do ya?" He pushed the man up against a wall and leaned on him.

"Look, kid --" He sounded coaxing, worried; Doyle suspected he really wasn't a bad chap. It was a shame...

"I'm gonna beat you into a pulp," Doyle threatened, and dodged easily as the expected knee-lunge at his groin came. "I'm gonna give you some action, all right. S'what you wanted, isn't it? I'd like to cut your balls off, you bleedin' pervert --" He let go of him suddenly and whirled around at the intrigued onlookers. "Yeah, an' all of you too!" He tangoed around the room, yanking open curtains to glare at startled twosomes, dislodging furtive couplings from nooks he hadn't previously noticed, really rather enjoying himself; a ferocious scowl plastered across his features. No-one moved, all transfixed by the fascinating sight of the wild green-eyed curly-headed creature creating a storm in their midst.

"You're all a load of fuckin' pansies!" Doyle yelled, coming to his climax, standing alone in the centre of the room.

It failed to erupt. Into the silence, Doyle started landing punches; airy wheeling jabs for the most part, darting here and there. Like a heavy lumbering animal, the room at last began to stir, to dislodge the itch of the mercurial flea. Doyle danced among them, having the time of his life,

inflaming tempers right and left, ducking neatly as fists began to fly, playing the part of the devil's advocate, rousing uncoordinated passions everywhere. Doyle stood between two men, one of whom was about to let fly at him. "Hit him for me mate," he said clearly, and ducked; above him, fist met jaw. The whole room was a free-for-all. He noted that the dutiful attendant had abandoned his post and was there on the outskirts; babbling and practically hopping from foot to foot in excitement. Bodie was there too by now, sorting things out with efficient brutality. Doyle picked his bag up and sauntered jauntily out. No-one noticed him go.

Jerking an eye around, he ducked into the little glass-walled attendant's cubicle, rifled through drawers at speed. He came across what he was looking for very soon, which was a relief since although Bodie would delay Drake's return as long as possible, he couldn't do it forever without arousing suspicion: it was a book of season tickets with the name Yip inscribed on the cover, needing renewal. On the back page was a pencilled message, which Doyle committed to memory; then he stuffed the book back where he'd found it.

"Hey."

Doyle's heart stopped. If they were blown now... He poked his head cautiously up.

"Two and a half," muttered a customer at him; and he thrust out a note and some coins.

"In you go, guv'nor," said Doyle in his best swimming-pool attendant style.

All sewn up. The raid, as restyled by CI5, had gone off exactly as planned. Instead of the surprised guards DeParry's heavies had been expecting, they met a thoroughly wised-up Bodie and Doyle, who were not at all put off by the screeching of tyres on their country-lane drive, nor the masked faces. They were safely delivered to the local nick. Armstrong was given the job of picking up Yip, who threw a fit of mental instability, screaming as he was taken away that it was all in a good cause, that the Big One would Drop while he was behind bars and everyone would remember him then, and respect what he'd been trying to do...

DeParry, cogitating ruefully on the sudden and unannounced resignation of the second lifeguard in two days -- and a damned good-looking one, at that -- was also picked up, and was secured in a jail not fifty miles away from his equally corrupt brother. The last trick of all came some weeks later, when under irresistible persuasion from that many-faceted organisation known as CI5, the new management of the ULCF sports complex contacted Frank Smith, unemployed, advising him that the position of lifeguard at the soon to be reopened swimming pool was his for the asking. Looking back over it all, Bodie and Doyle decided it had been -- well, an interesting experience.

"An' I tell you what, mate," said Doyle ruefully as he brought his lazy partner a drink, "I nearly lost my honour in there, I can tell you. I was as close as *that*" -- he snapped his fingers -- "to being thoroughly molested."

Bodie was all smugness and long-lashed disdainful eyes. "You were. Huh. Small queens --"

Doyle stared.

-- but I," Bodie told him, "I landed the Big Man."

And he smiled.

Doyle checked out; it was quite early but he'd done all he could for the day. Bodie was off somewhere coming the heavy; bullying information from an ex-lag with a record of violence who might know the whereabouts of the man they were after, and even if he'd forgotten no doubt Bodie would help him remember. It was all quite straightforward, no problem, two days' sweat at the most; and so Doyle was going home.

"All in order, 4.5. And by the way --" the duty agent smiled at his jeanclad colleague -- "Good news."

"Yeah?"

"There's someone waiting to see you. Bird."

Doyle wasn't into guessing games. He waited, cool-eyed.

"Nice, classy looking bit," allowed Simpson at last, a little disappointed. "Came in earlier looking for you; you were out. She decided to wait." He eyed the other speculatively; yeah, he supposed Ray Doyle had what it took, even for the likes of the beautiful girl who was so determined to see him.

"Name?" suggested Doyle coldly. As far as he knew there were no women involved in the current case.

Simpson gave up on the ribbing, and supplied, looking down a list: "Holly. Ann Holly."

She was just the same, fragile and stylishly dressed. His whole body responded in a surge to the sight of her, sitting there in CI5's stark waiting room, nervously twisting the strap of her cream leather handbag, hollow-cheeked and clear-eyed; but it was a different kind of reaction from two years ago. Two years, and now everything was impossibly different.

She rose, with natural elegance. "Hello, Ray."

He acknowledged it, still standing as she went on in a rush: "I'm sorry I had to come here. Am I disturbing you? I went to your old flat first, but --"

-- I'd moved," he said with a hard, polite smile. "Yeah, we do move around a bit." What did he have to say to her? "You back from the states?"

At the rhetorical question her eyes dropped. He noted every reaction, every nuance of expression very carefully, out of habit. "Love the old homeland too much I suppose...I couldn't

stay away too long."

He nodded, accepting the trite answer; took a turn around the room. "Why'd you want to see me?"

In the act of reseating herself, she looked up, startled and tense. He wondered cynically to himself if she'd expected this to be easy. "Of course I wanted to see you."

"Why?" he challenged, hard-eyed. "Now you've had two years to think about it, it's suddenly all right, is it? Or did your latest attachment fall off his pedestal too?"

Too much. She rose again, in a hurry, one hand scrabbling at her bag. "I see. Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you. Goodbye, Ray."

As she pushed past him, he saw, astoundingly, that her eyes were bright with sudden tears. He caught at her, stopped her with a hand. "Sorry," he said wearily. "CI5 habits... Been a long day."

She looked up at him, unsure. He was a stranger. "*I'm* sorry. I didn't mean to make things -- difficult for you. But I was -- here, and I thought I'd like to see you again. We were friends."

Friends. He'd been in love with her, bewitched by the sight of her, the scent, the touch of her cool narrow body, enchanted by the sharp tenderness of her mind...

With sudden, painful insight, he knew that that was how Bodie felt for him; he stepped out of himself as he looked at Ann, and saw Bodie looking at him. She was so slight in his hands, thin-wristed like a delicate fawn, her wide eyes looking up at him. Yes, like Bodie felt for him, but he had never really known Ann, understood her, nor felt her understand him the way it was with him and Bodie. He shook the comparison away. He'd loved her, but that was over, and now she could be a friend, one for whom he'd do a little more than most.

"Are you due anywhere?" he asked her, more gently. "We could go and have a drink. Tell me how it was out in the Bright Lights."

"Yes, I'd like that," she said seriously, then smiling, and he grinned back.

It was of course actually too early to drink. They had tea instead, something he hadn't done in months, in an upmarket tea-house; and she told him about New York, her hands wrapped around a bone-china teacup, leaning forward, a little flushed as she chatted on; too nervy.

"And how about you?" she ended up, after an awkward silence in which he, who had long since lost track of the long office anecdote she'd been telling, had raked around for something to say; he'd been idly wondering just why he never had tea out any more, his mind supplying the answer simultaneously with the picture of his rugged ex-para lover sitting where Ann now sat, a tiny teacup in one sturdy hand --

He grinned, dismissing the thought. "Oh, fine. Here and there; you know."

She looked away, down at her plate. "I wasn't very kind to you, Ray. I should have stayed -- talked about it. I was -- angry."

"You didn't trust me," he said lightly, but with a very real edge of cynicism. "Understandable."

"Yes," she agreed coolly. "I think it was. Since you didn't trust me, either."

He shrugged. "It's my job not to trust people, love. Take it or leave it. You made your choice."

They were still miles apart over that, it was obvious.

He signed to a passing waitress for the bill. She was watching him, his fey attractiveness stirring old memories; but she doubted, somehow, that he was remembering. "You've got someone else, of course. After all this time."

He didn't hedge it. "What'd you expect?" The bill arrived on a saucer, and he reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

It hurt her, though she'd known it must be. He had been so alone, so ready for her love-inspired onslaught; now he seemed self-contained -- complete, giving out nothing because he needed nothing in return. He was an attractive, hungry male: no use expecting him to be around and waiting when she broke the years of silence. She'd known all this before she came. But still, it hurt.

"Is it serious?" she asked, smiling over the pain.

"Terminal," he said with black humour. As it always did when he was uptight, something in him was wishing for Bodie even now, the enfolding dark grace of him, loving him, giving him the peace and contentment of understanding; no one else had ever done that for him. He placed a note on the saucer as she said, sincerely, "I'm glad for you."

"And you?" he asked, out of concerned curiosity as well as politeness. She dropped her head, fiddling with a teaspoon. Then she looked up, with a small smile. "I had someone. It didn't work out. But there's plenty of time."

Doyle was tired of the little hurt smiles, the nervous gestures, the wistful, urgent projection that all was not well. He was sure she was doing it unconsciously; but nonetheless, she was emitting all the signs of a cry for help with every minute that passed. He was about to speak when she rose abruptly to her feet. "It's been very nice, Ray, seeing you again. It really has, and thank you for the tea. I really must be off now, just look at the time."

Again that brittle little smile. He rose, too. "I'll take you home."

"No really, I --"

"Don't be daft," he said shortly, and put a hand under her elbow.

"It's only a short walk, honestly." Once again, he saw she was on the verge of tears; they were standing out brightly in her averted eyes. It was so unlike her. There was more to this than mere disappointment at finding a lover of two years past settled with someone else; if she'd loved him that much she'd never have left. He was sure of it. Christ, he'd hung on weeks expecting her to change her mind; and even now he wasn't sure he was out of the habit of searching the mail for a glimpse of her handwriting.

Outside the cafe he said, turning her to face him, "Are you in some sort of trouble?"

And caught her against him, startled, as she buried her face in his shoulder and wept.

He drove her to his own flat, the one he had not lived in for two months or more but had kept on not out of any doubts, but because of a vague feeling that it might come in handy. In any case, CI5 paid the rent, making only a nominal salary deduction.

And Ann would probably feel awkward with Bodie around, if she was going to unload her personal troubles, so all in all this seemed the best place to take her. It felt damp, and he got the central heating going; Ann settled in a chair with her coat around her knees. The next thing he did was call back to base, to let them know where he was in case Bodie needed him in a hurry. At one time he had believed, perhaps naively, that Bodie was as infallible as he made out; but these days he was never entirely happy when Bodie was out on his own, some feeling always nagging at him that Bodie, however competent, lacked Doyle's intuition, copper's nose, call it what you like; and might get into trouble.

There was nothing in the fridge, he'd cleared it out weeks ago, but there was drink around he hadn't yet bothered to move out. He poured whisky for Ann and himself and went in to her. She'd had time to recover herself, powder her nose and refresh her lipstick, and he smiled at her. She smiled back. "Right then, give," he said without preamble, sitting near her. "You're in some sort of trouble?" And when she said nothing, her styled auburn hair hanging loose around her profile, concealing her expression, he said impatiently, "Ah, c'mon, Ann. I've never seen you so uptight. It's not just seeing me again, is it? After two bloody years, you can handle that. So, what?"

And slowly, with many stops and starts, he got the story out of her. A nasty little tale; one he'd heard before, and would never have dreamed his capable ex-love would have got herself involved in.

"So," he said grimly, "you had an abortion."

She nodded. It was such a relief to be in the company of someone she knew could cope, might even be willing to help, that she was still inclined to be tearful, though she hoped she was concealing that from Ray.

"It wasn't *mine*, was it?" he asked, a new thought assailing him; he looked at her hard.

"No, of course not," she said quickly, seeing the look on his face. "This was months after you. It was -- an accident --"

"Aren't they always. So you needed money for that. And then you found a good Samaritan who was willing to give it to you."

He sounded cynical, angry. "He seemed all right. I thought he was a friend. I truly believed he was, Ray. He gave the money; I was going to pay it back, only things were difficult, I couldn't pay it all at once and he didn't press me for it, he was very understanding, or I thought he was, and it was months after that he turned unpleasant..."

"And then he persuaded you to smuggle drugs," he said tightly. The bastards, all of them; money-grabbing predators who homed in like ghouls on the unwary, the low and needy, life's losers, offering help -- and then pounced.

"I didn't know it was drugs, Ray, you've got to believe that, I didn't know; I knew, obviously I knew it wasn't legal, I thought it might be stolen goods or something, but he was threatening me, he'd changed, Ray. He said he had a gang of heavies who'd scare me into it, they'd hurt me if I went to the police, and I'd be put away for having an illegal abortion -- if I wasn't dead anyway... When I realised, I just gave in. I ran away." Her voice choked on a sob.

"Christ, Ann," he said tersely, "if it was money, you could have asked me right at the start, couldn't you?" It hurt him to think she hadn't been so deeply into it, even when it was over, as not to trust him to turn to for help if she were in trouble.

"Ray, I thought of you, really I did. But it was someone else's child -- and it was a lot of money. #3000 -- you'd never --"

"Of course I could," he said harshly, sick at the thought that all this had come about for lack of a sum he could have raised in an afternoon. "I may not talk like you but I'm not a bloody pauper, you know." He continued, after a pause, "It would have been much easier, that's all, if you'd asked me to help *then*."

She was clearly battling with tears again. Christ, she'd changed: it just proved yet again the wreck of character and life that contact, however indirect, with drugs could create. "If you can't do anything, Ray; honestly, I don't want you to feel --" she was about to say 'guilty,' but caught it in time -- "that you have to be involved. I just thought --"

He knew what she'd thought; could imagine what she'd built him up to be as the other hopes died. Well, he was strong, resourceful, and he knew his way around these things; her late, ironic trust wasn't misplaced in that way. He said wearily, "Yeah, I can do something. The first thing is to get you under protection; you said he threatened you? Right. You'll have to give them a full statement -- yeah, I know," he said, seeing her face, "It won't be a lot of fun, but believe me the guys who deal with these things, they've seen everything, heard it all. You won't be a person to them -- just a numbered file..." He made explanations, knowing that the matter-of-fact details would make it all seem less frightening; he poured her another drink when the first one was

gone, sitting beside her and putting an arm around her shoulders, feeling vastly protective as the thin fragility of her clung to him: yes, he'd missed this...

She raised her face to him, smudged dark circles around her eyes making them look huge and shadowy. She asked, huskily: "Ray -- will I get sent down?"

He hugged her tight. "It's not very likely. No; it's even less of a chance than that. Course you won't."

As she wept out six months of reined-in tension and fright against him, he held her close, ached for her and what she'd gone through; and even, distantly, for what he had lost, so that when she turned her mouth to his, blindly seeking, he was there with the comfort she needed, for the sake of what had been, and could never be again.

Bodie sauntered into the building that housed CI5, looking for Ray Doyle. He didn't find him, and since he had to make a report he got that out of the way fast, twenty lines of the clipped unembellished notation he was accustomed to use in these circumstances. Then he rang the flat. No reply; and still no sign of Doyle. He should have been back hours ago. Bodie went to the duty office to enquire, recognising the ridiculous twinges of apprehension in him. "Doyle been in?" he asked of the operative on duty.

The other looked up. "Yeah. And out."

"Gone home," nodded Bodie with relief and prepared to turn. Doyle must have been on his way home when Bodie'd rung. "How long ago?" he was prompted to ask.

"Few hours," replied the man laconically. He stretched out his legs and unfolded a newspaper.

"*Hours?*"

"Yeah, that's right," said Allen distractedly; he'd just come on duty, he was here until dawn, and he always had a race with himself on night shifts to see if he could get every clue filled in before the deadline.

Bodie pushed both palms onto the desk, thrust his dark head close to the other agent. "You're telling me," he snapped, low and dangerous, "4.5 told you he was going home hours ago?"

Allen put down the newspaper, paying attention with a wary eye. 3.7's unstable temper was well-known, and respected if you had any sense. "That's right. Not me, personally," he said placatingly. "It's here on the sheet -- he checked in at 4.15, left 4.30, rang in at 5.35 to say he was at home."

It was now after 6. "I rang him 5 minutes ago, and he wasn't in," said Bodie; tightly.

Allen winked. "Too busy to answer the phone."

Bodie was in no mood to play around. "C'mon mate," he snarled. "He's a bloody CI5 agent, and he *answers the phone*."

"Did you let it ring long enough?" asked Allen. "He might have been at an -- er -- awkward moment."

Bodie made a face of absolute exasperation. "I'd better get round there. Thanks for all the help," he said with pointed sarcasm, and turned again for the door.

Allen was also a CI5 agent, and hadn't given up on the problem, despite appearances. Something suddenly struck him. "Wait a mo., 3.7."

Bodie turned, with a face like thunder. "I think I see what's up. He's been staying with you, hasn't he?"

Bodie acknowledged it, cold-eyed, though Allen hadn't given the words any unwanted significance; it was a common thing for CI5 teams to put up together for periods, made things a hell of a lot simpler in many ways. "Well, there we are then," said Allen triumphantly. "When I said he'd rung in to say he was home, the number he gave was for *his* flat, not yours. It was your flat you rang just now, wasn't it? Well, that's why he wasn't in."

So that was it. Doyle had gone to his own flat for an hour or two; check it out, fetch something, the reason didn't matter. Relieved, Bodie just glanced at the sheet Allen held out, seeing the telephone number beside Doyle's name on the current call list: and nodded. "OK. Thanks, mate. I'm clockin' out, then."

"Stands to reason," said Allen, "there's things he'd feel a bit inhibited about getting up to in your flat. When you might walk in at any minute."

Bodie paid it no attention, about to leave, but Allen was full of all-male gossip as he contemplated his lonely newspaper, the long black hours that stretched ahead of him when folk in their right minds -- and who didn't work nights for CI5 -- were warm in bed, snuggled close to the one they loved... "Simpson said she was a real looker," he said wistfully, shaking his head. "Real class. Much too good for a roughie like Ray Doyle."

Bodie turned his head, emitting a single, growled word, "What?"

"The girl waiting for him," explained Allen patiently. "The girl he left here with. He must have taken her to his flat."

"What," said Bodie, "are you on about?" He was gripped with disbelief; and also a sickening, dawning sense of inevitability; like cancer it was the thing one feared, told oneself one was foolish to worry about -- and was fatalistically sure one would get, in the end.

"There was a girl here, waiting to see him -- that's what Simpson told me." Allen was getting edgy, at the way his moody dark colleague looked. He rummaged among the day's sheets, keen

to offer proof though he wasn't sure why, stabbing a finger at the relevant note as he held it out. "Look. Ann something."

The proof was there, in black and white.

Bodie's anger, fear, misery, had built until he was barely rational. He had tried to stop it; had given Doyle time, gone to his own flat and waited. There had been no word, and no message left. The facts were undeniable. It was now nearly 8 p.m. Doyle had left CI5 with the girl he had loved, and spent nearly four hours with her in his own flat. Bodie ached, and burned at the same time. What price now the scrubbers in the night-club? At least they would have been together; there would have been nothing to hide. If Ray needed women, Bodie could have given him that, should have done, as Ray had wanted.

But this -- this furtive encounter, not with a mere female body which would afford satisfaction and nothing more, but with a girl Doyle had loved, been in love with, and so shaken by her leaving him it had taken months for him to recover, months before Bodie, patient beyond his own understanding at the time, had won more than the most mechanical of smiles from him...

Oh yes, this was something else again.

It was a betrayal that hurt him, broke his heart; and with the sadness came an unerring anger.

Riding high on fury, Bodie slammed shut the door of his empty flat with such force that it refused to catch; did it again with gritted teeth, and strode to his car, hands thrust angrily into his pockets.

Doyle finally peeled Ann away from him, but gently. The touch of her clinging, shaking body, the touching wetness of her face as she pressed it against his, had roused in him tenderness; and desire too, but it was an echo only, easily put aside with only gentle regrets; and those were for her, not himself. "Hey, c'mon now," he said, taking her shoulders and turning her face up, "We're on your side. You'll be all right." He checked his watch, nearly bolting out of his seat as he took in its message. *Christ*, Bodie'd be going mad.

"Where are you going?"

"Quick phonecall," he answered as he dialled, frowning when there was no reply. Bodie should have been back hours ago. A quick worry slid into his mind and threatened to grow -- what if things had gone wrong? He'd better call Control. And if they didn't know, he'd have to get moving, and fast, for Bodie's last known location. He was his partner, for godsake; if there was trouble he should have been there. Behind him, a voice said: "I'll be in the bathroom, all right Ray?"

He hardly took it in, punching the button that would connect him instantly with CI5; and then he heard an instantly recognisable sound -- a key, turning in a lock.

Bodie, had to be.

He turned, with relief. "I was gettin' worried --" he was about to say; but the words stilled on his lips.

Bodie, cold-eyed, with a face that spoke of something terribly wrong though it showed nothing at all. He said only one thing; but it was enough to open up the rift between them.

"Cosy."

"Look, mate --" Doyle began, only uneasy, mildly exasperated, as yet.

"Might be useful to keep two places on," said Bodie, looking around at the low lights, the two glasses. "Yes, I'm beginning to see that it might be. For you."

He knew Bodie in this mood. So quiet you knew there was chaos beneath; so controlled you knew the storm was close. Doyle also flipped gear. "Ease up," he warned: two words, in the same dangerous tone.

"Yeah, why not. You warned me, after all." He took a prow around the room. A predatory jungle fighter geared up for revenge.

Doyle took a deep breath, needing to. He'd summed up the nature of this from the start, seen how wrong it was, how carefully his volatile partner needed handling; and yet his own temper was on the move, beginning to react to the lack of trust that smacked into him as surely as betrayal. The betrayal that Bodie had assumed in him, without asking for one word of explanation. Bodie was waiting; his whole attitude one Doyle knew well, and one he had never expected to see directed at him.

"Calm down. It's not what you think."

Bodie ignored him. "Where is she? In the wardrobe? How conventional. Expected more guts from you, Doyle."

Suddenly he picked up one of the glasses from the table. He eyed it with deadness. "Too many clues." He threw it, quite dispassionately, back onto the tabletop where it shattered instantly.

The other man had one last try. Perhaps it wasn't too late to redeem disaster; send this unnecessary hell back to its spawning ground. But Doyle, who knew himself, was already chillingly conscious of the fact that even if that were to be, it was the creeping death that had started now in Doyle himself, the death of trust and with it, the beginning of the death of love, that Bodie would have to fight from now on.

"One chance," he said, soft and deadly, watching Bodie intently from low-fringed green eyes. "You've got one chance to let me explain."

Bodie laughed. It was an unpleasant, chilling sound. "A few weeks blissful screwing with you

haven't made me forget the way it goes. I don't need your explanations, my sunshine. I can work it out quite well for myself."

Startled by the noise of breaking glass, Ann appeared at the door, in the middle of combing her hair. "And here is the pretty lady," said Bodie amiably. "Was he good?"

"Hello, Bodie." She was clearly puzzled by all this, her eyes flicking uneasily between the two men, but she remembered him all right. She'd never liked him much and felt that it was mutual, but she'd known that Ray was close to his enigmatic dark partner and therefore he had to be endured.

"I asked you, was he good?" Bodie repeated, unevenly; and this time the unbearable tension crackled like a live wire into being; it would not be stopped now. "Oh, but he always is. Silly question. Inventive."

Bodie had killed it. It was over, finished; and unlike the words of the poet, not with a whimper, oh, not at all. Doyle was in a blaze of fury and he wanted Bodie to blaze too, he wanted them to go out in one glorious and final inferno of destruction. He kicked the table out of the way with a deft lunge, and, yelling, charged Bodie head on.

Bodie saw it coming, was not distracted by his own anger, nor by Ann's sudden noise of surprise. He rammed Doyle's onrush out of the way, blocking him and twisting him, shaking the treacherous body with uncaring violence; he drew back his arm to let fly.

Whipcord muscles straining, Doyle broke free with a hiss of effort, catching Bodie's arm and wrenching it around. "Not me," he whispered while he had Bodie close in a terrible parody of a lover's embrace, a malevolent smile twisting his lips. "Not me, sweetheart. I'm as good as you; with you all the way --"

He leaned back and delivered a vicious blow into Bodie's belly, past all caring, past anything but obeying the efficient training of his body to inflict disabling damage, to win at all cost; coupled to the need to hurt, to exact penance for the wrong done to him. It was a dangerous mixture; and that Bodie was running on identical instincts and emotions, and the same training, was all that could prevent them from killing each other, here tonight. He watched Bodie crumple, with black, sick pleasure. But it wasn't over yet, he knew that. Bodie was already rising, and he could hear Ann, shouting at them to stop it, stop it, stop it...

Doyle sent a vicious kick flying at Bodie's ribs, too quick to be caught by Bodie's snaking hand. He smiled devilishly as he dodged easily out of reach; Bodie must think he was a fool to be caught by that one.

Bodie, painfully winded, watched that arrogant smile curve over Doyle's lips, and exploded into murderous action. Years of gut-fights like this ruled him; he was on a line to kill, or die trying. Doyle had had his moment of advantage; Bodie waded in. One fist thudded into the soft flesh of Doyle's mouth -- that wiped the smile away, to be replaced by a smear of blood that welled, and trickled, and was splattered by Bodie's next punch, one to his chin, two, three more, following

fast as he pressed Doyle back. Someone grabbed him from behind, a light and insubstantial grasp he was free of in a moment with one impatient, flying blow. But it had delayed him and Doyle was in there again, grim-faced, curly head down, landing punches right and left.

The world exploded in Bodie's face; he was gasping on pain and nausea. He made a forward lunge, almost blind, grabbed the slighter man and hung on until he could throw him back far enough for a vicious delivery at gut-level. He felt his bunched, rock-hard fist slam into something soft, and knew it must be over.

The other man doubled over, fell to the floor, one hand curling around his stomach. The predator triumphant stood aloft.

Bodie moved in for the kill.

Stood over his wheezing opponent, ready to finish it; saw the tight hard gasps for air racking his opponent, the screwed-up agony of the face, the hand pathetically wrapped around himself, trying desperately to hold away the pain --

Reality arrived, slamming on the brakes and shocking him into awareness. His nose was throbbing, and itching. He raised a hand to it, and it came away running with blood. He stared dazedly down at Doyle and made as if to kneel.

"Don't you dare touch him!" came a loud screech. Startled -- he had forgotten there was anyone else in the world -- he caught sight of Ann Holly, viewed her with perfect dispassion, saw her disbelieving anger, the mark on her face, and did not even know that it was he who had inflicted it on her.

"You bastard." She was shaking, and glaring at him. "You -- *bastard* --"

He didn't care. Not about her. Didn't answer. The real agony came when Doyle, crumpled and fallen, pushed his anxious, fumbling hands away.

"Leave me alone," he wheezed; and the anger came through even the weakness. "Jus' leave me alone. If you touch me, I'll throw up on you, so help me, I swear it."

He ignored Ann, pushed her hands away too as he dragged himself up, that betraying hand still clutching his tender guts. Then he was on his feet, swaying a little, cold hatred gleaming out at Bodie, his shirt disarranged, his face a mess. Bodie looked little better but he was unaware of it as he looked at Ray Doyle, who was spectacularly marked, two bruised cheekbones now, the skin around one eye beginning to darken, his lips swollen, a ragged red trail of blood at the corner of his mouth. But more than all that stood out the force of his eyes.

"You fuckin' bastard."

The words fell between them, and the rift was secured; made true.

Bodie wiped a hand around his face, not even conscious of doing so, looking around for the jacket he had not taken off. They had damn near tried to kill each other. "And I talked about love," was all he said, with bitter cynicism.

"Love," yelled Doyle, in a temper, astounded at Bodie's stupidity. "You don't love *shit*, Bodie. You don't know the first fuckin' thing about love, you don't."

He became conscious of something cold and wet, flapping at him. Ann, dabbing at him with a cloth. He threw her off too, with the same channelled anger. From now on he was on his own, and better that way. His coldly contemptuous gaze raked them both with the wounded miscomprehension of one twice betrayed; he had loved them both, made his vows to each of these two, given himself with full-hearted determination; and each of them had been unable to trust him. He stared at them; saw Bodie dark and ruffled, bloody nostrils still flared with the dregs of anger; Ann confused and shaken -- and he hated them.

"If I were you," he said, deliberate and icy though his stomach was heaving and he felt bruised and hurt all over, "you two: I'd make do with each other. You're an ideal match, I'd've thought." He snatched up his jacket, and paused at the door for the final thrust, looking back at his two ex-lovers. "And you can swap notes, on just how *good* I was."

The door slammed. Bodie was left with Ann, wordless.

"I'm going home," she said, in a sudden flurry of temper. "You big violent -- *oaf*, you might have killed him." She marched around collecting her things.

Bodie ran for the door.

He caught up with Doyle before he reached the bottom of the stairs, grabbed his shoulders, turned him around. "Ray --" He stopped, aghast. His partner looked terrible. Bodie was full of a lot of things right now, but deep shock at what his violent temper might have led him into doing was foremost.

Doyle wrenched away. "Don't *touch* me. Don't ever, ever touch me again." He backed off, his face twisted up in anguish, of a pain that was not merely physical, and the harder to deal with because of that; amazingly, Bodie saw that there were tears running freely down his face, mingling with the blood. "Go away," snarled Doyle, his eyes dilated wide and gleaming with tears of anger, pride, hurt; tears that he had not intended Bodie to see. "Just go away. If you come near me tonight I'll kill you. I don't need you anymore. Too -- bloody -- unreliable --"

His voice choked. He sniffed hard, hunched his shoulders into his jacket and walked away, unsteady on his feet. Bodie followed him out of the building, but Doyle didn't turn. With brooding eyes Bodie watched him lean one arm on a wall, as if suddenly too exhausted to go on, dropping his head onto his sleeve in an attitude of utter defeat. But even now, the rigidity of his tensed pose seemed to yell, 'keep off.'

With a sudden, angry motion Bodie thrust his hands into his pockets and walked away.

Fuck Doyle anyhow. He marched around his own flat angrily, drinking whisky, sitting down, getting up, his stomach in a balled knot of tension. He was restless, completely unable to relax, or to stop the confused jumble of thoughts running ceaselessly through his head. Crazy words like unfaithful...untrue...kept mocking at him; he was wounded and bitter and aching and most of all --

He was very, very miserable. He had lost Doyle.

Doyle had betrayed him, let him down; turned all those fancy-sounding phrases and promises into something meaningless and trashy, a mere Excuse to Fuck. He fancied you and he had you. Did you seriously expect he'd be content with you, just you, forever more?

No, he hadn't expected that. But Doyle, unasked, had said so -- "just you an' me" -- and sounded as if meant every word. *Fuck Doyle*. His tired, bitter mind repeated the meaningless phrase, over and over; but it couldn't stop the thoughts. He ached all over; his whole body and mind felt like one big raw wound.

Have a bath, soak away the aches, go to bed and in the morning it would all be...

He couldn't sleep.

His thoughts had taken a new, and frightening turn. He had hit Doyle, and hurt him. Saw again that vicious jab to the belly, watched Doyle fall again to the ground, his hand clutching the agony that Bodie, his mate, his partner, had violently rammed into him, as deliberate and brutal as a rapist. In the dark of the bedroom he squeezed his eyes shut, denying himself, Doyle, Ann Holly, everything -- but still he felt his fist lance again into the softness that was Doyle, saw him fall, wheezing and defeated, the sharp sick agony etched into the screwed-up face; endless visual and tactile replays of the pain and hurt he, the stronger and heavier, had deliberately inflicted on the slighter man. And then simply let him walk, or rather stagger, away.

"Goddamn you!" he yelled aloud, surprising even himself, and then he threw the pillow violently aside and threw himself out of bed.

He dialled Doyle's flat; let it ring -- one, two...fifteen, twenty times.

He broke the connection, tried once more against the small chance of having wrongly dialled; but there was still no reply. He was beginning to worry, badly. He forced himself to keep a tight grip and got hold of Control, recognising Allen's voice at the other end. "3.7. The Holly woman," he rapped out, peremptory. "She leave a phone number? Address?"

"Lost him again?" drawled Allen's voice. "Tut-tut, three seven. Ever considered a ball and chain?"

Bodie ignored it. He was at his limit. "If you've got the bloody number mate, *give it to me.*"

"She didn't leave it. Could probably trace it. Want me to run a check?"

"You'd better."

Bodie only had to wait a few minutes but it seemed forever as his angry foot kicked restlessly at the phone table, and his free hand thumped into his thigh.

He got the number, scribbled it down. "OK. If 4.5 calls in let me know, OK?"

"OK, I'll make a note. Look, what is --"

"Forget it!" snapped Bodie down the line, and then he thumped down the phone and tried calling Doyle on the R/T, but he knew it was only a slim chance and was unsurprised when it remained unanswered. He called Ann Holly's number. Christ, if Doyle *were* with her, he'd be mad as hell at Bodie's further intrusion. But he only knew he suddenly, desperately needed to know that Doyle was safe. Even with you; he said silently to himself as the ringing tone began, even with you, loving you. Just so long as he's safe...

"Yes?" She sounded curt.

"Bodie. Is Ray there?"

Astounded at the effrontery, and fully charged up with belatedly coherent anger, she drew breath to reply. After all, it wasn't every day one got the chance to let fly with all the things one, fuming, has formed into words since the encounter with an opponent where one had been left speechless.

He made several attempts to interrupt, but it was useless. Finally his temper snapped and he fairly yelled down the phone, "Will you listen to me! It's important!"

"What?"

"*Is Ray there?*" he demanded. "Just tell me yes or no; and I'll hang up. I won't come round."

"Of course he isn't here," she snapped, matching him for irritation.

That was all he needed to know. Oh Christ. He forced himself to be calm, to think things through. "If he turns up, will you tell him to call base? Just that."

"If he turns up," came the brittle voice, "he's going back right where he came from. What I saw tonight --"

"*Just tell him.* And if you don't, love, I'll have a CI5 obstruction notice slapped on you so fast you'll be having your bloody breakfast behind bars, is that clear?" he promised, viciously, and put down the phone.

He'd probably gone a bit too far. No time to worry about it now; he was riding high on panic. He rushed himself into his clothes, shrugging on his holster and his jacket last of all and dashed out of the flat. It was midnight.

Doyle's apartment was the first call, but it was dark and empty, the signs of the scuffle unsmoothed out, the table lying where Doyle had kicked it. It must have been Ann who shut the place up; the door had a Yale lock that would catch when it was pulled to. He left the place. Outside in the cooling summer-end air he walked along the path Doyle had taken, coming to the wall where Doyle had leant his head in that terrible taut pose of a hurt animal defending its position with the last, the very last shred of defiant determination.

He looked over the place he thought Doyle had stood, moved along a few feet, and came across what he had half been expecting, fearing to find.

There was a shiny trail down the wall, a dark puddle beneath, gleaming dully in the lamplight. Doyle had been sick here, alone and untended, heaved his guts up with Bodie walking away. He crouched on his heels and examined it with ruthless efficiency, but it was difficult to tell in the confusing shades of streetlight whether the vomit contained blood, or not. He thought not, but that relieved his frantic anxiety no more than a little. He should have been here. He cursed himself endlessly and repeatedly; he had caused this to happen to Doyle, his own uncontrolled violence had done this totally unnecessary thing; and he had not even been there, he had turned and walked away while Doyle, alone and hurting, had lost control and chucked his guts up against a wall. His own stomach clenched; he hated himself more in that moment than ever before. Should've stayed out in the bloody jungle, mate. With the other animals. That way he'd never have met me -- never got hurt --

It was going to be a sleepless night. He was already running, blindly searching as if he might come across Doyle at any moment, slumped in a gutter, huddled by a wall; but already there were alleys branching off everywhere, he was hours too late, and way off course.

He forced himself to stop, breathing hard; and think, about what he was doing, what needed to be done. First thing. He was hunting. Hunting Doyle, who was not at his own flat, nor Bodie's, nor at Ann Holly's; nor had he left his whereabouts known to base. That was all fact. Negative information, but it gave him somewhere to start from. What came next? Find other possibilities, check them out, eliminate them one by one until the end of the trail was reached.

This was better. He was thinking straight at last, now he had something to do, something positive to concentrate on. Possibilities. Since he had not gone home, Doyle had most likely gone to get drunk. Bodie, a twin mind, had earlier seriously considered that himself. It was now after midnight, and all the pubs were long closed; but if Ray Doyle didn't know places where one could buy drink after hours then no-one did. Bodie knew them too. Far too many of them. He needed reinforcements. That was the next thing to do. He ran back to his car and drove off, taking corners too fast.

He was pounding on the door before he knew it, fidgety with impatient frustration and worry. "OK, OK. Don't break the door down. Who is it?"

"3.7. Open up, for godsake."

Bolts being drawn back. Murph opened the door, dark hair ruffled, the light of duty springing into his lazy eyes. He was wearing a dressing-gown, and holding his gun. Sensible precaution to take, with callers after midnight.

He stared down at Bodie. "What the hell...?"

"Doyle's missing. Get dressed -- need you to help look for him."

"Missing?"

"Maybe hurt. Hurry up, Murph, for chrissake!"

Bodie's urgency transmitted itself. "OK, OK. Where?"

"No idea. You try the late-night Chelsea dives, low profile, don't ruffle any feathers. Keep in touch." Then he was gone, flying down the stairs. Murphy called after him but he didn't turn, and Murph watched the big dark man disappearing down the stairwell with bafflement. All he knew was, he had to go looking for Ray Doyle, Bodie's oh-so-cool partner whom no-one got close to -- with the exception of Bodie, one presumed. In fact, Murph privately assumed quite a lot, about that particular relationship, and wasn't any fonder of 4.5 for his assumptions. But he had a healthy respect for the ex-SAS man, as well as a genuine liking, and he abandoned all thoughts of sleep with reluctance as he went to climb into his clothes and join in the search.

Three hours and ten hellholes later he'd got nowhere. In the heat of the moment, he'd taken all this on remarkably unbriefed, he belatedly realised. Trailing round hordes of drunken jerks in smoky rooms in the middle of the night was not his idea of fun, nor did it seem to be getting him any nearer agent 4.5. He called up Bodie and demanded more information. Bodie happened to be within a mile of his location; they met up with a screeching of tyres.

"Look, Bodie," he began, slamming his door and going towards the other CI5 agent -- who looked distraught, he noted with some surprise -- "You're going to have to give me more details on this one, it's like looking for a bloody pin in the desert. So he's missing. Who's got him?"

"We had -- a row. I hit him --"

"What?" The prosaic Murphy was no more enlightened by this, but he saw in the dim light from a nearby streetlamp that his tough colleague, the one with the most violent past, the worst reputation, the foulest temper; the most nearly insane of them all -- was shaking.

"We had a row," repeated Bodie in a monotone. "I hit him. I can't find him."

Murphy, who was tired, and soured by the fruitless search, and very conscious that there were too few hours until CI5's early morning call summoned him to duty, erupted. "You mean," he

roared, "you had a *row*? You mean, I'm scouring the bloody streets all night because you and your partner had some blasted punch-up and now he's gone off in a mood? Oh christ, Bodie, now I've heard it all. Loosen the fucking apron strings, for chrissake." He turned on his heel, fuming, got into the car and slammed the door with a resolutely final thud. He was going home to bed.

Bodie stood and watched his colleague drive off. Nobody understood. He had to find Doyle, he had hurt him; but no-one understood.

Dawn was breaking when Bodie, half-mad, remembered who might understand how important it was to find Doyle.

Doyle was singing. He didn't know the words, but the tune seemed familiar so he was belting along with the best of them anyway. He knew he was very drunk. It felt wonderful. It felt wonderful because the creeping agony at the back of his mind had receded until he could no longer remember why it was there; and even the pain in his body was a hazy thing now that he was sprawled along a soft carpet, utterly relaxed. The man beside him passed along the bottle; he took a healthy swig and held it out to the next, resuming the song with gusto. There was an annoying bleeping noise ruining his concentration on the tune; he felt carefully inside his jacket with a scowl on his face, hoisted out the plaintive R/T, stared at it with disfavour.

Bodie

The name lanced through his fuddled mind and let in the pain.

He threw the offending object with all his strength at the opposite wall. He heard the casing crack; and then it fell silent where it lay. That was that.

All around, people were leaning and looking at him with owlish surprise. Firmly, Doyle relinked arms with the men at either side of him and resumed the sing-song.

*Oh, Santa's just come down the chimney
It made quite a mess on the hearth*

Cowley was not asleep when the call came, even though it was only four in the morning; he'd woken suddenly, lain staring at the ceiling for a while and then decided that Morpheus was likely to remain elusive for the remainder of the night. He was just pouring boiling water onto warmed Ceylon leaves when the phone rang.

His sparse sandy brows drew into a frown almost immediately.

"-- not a very good show, is it, Major? He was carrying ID, and we picked up his damaged R/T in the vicinity. Not good, not good at all."

Cowley met it without compromise, but allowing a note of chilly politeness into his voice; the only concession the police officer was likely to get. "I quite agree. Did he give any explanation?"

"You must be joking. Passed out cold." The officer was resolute in his determination not to use 'sir.' It wasn't often one got the chance to prod at CI5 like this. He spoke with self-righteous reproach as he continued --"Been brawling, from the look of him --"

"Is he hurt?" Cowley cut in, sharply.

"Minor injuries. You appreciate my position, Major. A senior operative from an organisation supposedly dedicated to keeping the muck off the streets, picked up during a raid on an illegal drinking establishment --"

"Where was this, exactly?"

"Henry Dan's place, North Circular Road."

"I know it." Cowley's lips pursed in distaste and irritation. A seedy dive, indeed; and certainly not the kind of place one expected one's crack agents to disport themselves. "Where is he now?"

"Dan?"

"No," Cowley ground out, "Doyle."

"Behind bars," said the man, not without some pleasure. This would be whitewashed over, of course; like any government organisation CI5 had to be kept lily-white and smelling pure even if it meant bending the rules. But he didn't see why there shouldn't be a little bit of private needling. "On a very hard bed. I hope you'll see to it that he's suitably reprimanded, Major. But it'll take a while to get the alcohol out of his system --"

"Aye, and I know just the way," prophesied Cowley grimly; and then he set out to pick up his severely out-of-line young agent.

Ray Doyle looked a mess. He had to be shaken awake and half-dragged to his feet from the narrow bed where he'd been dumped; he was unshaven and his skin was a greyish colour, relieved only by the colourful array of bruising around his cheekbones and jaw; his shirt was stained and he stank, of sweat, smoke and stale alcohol; his eyes were bloodshot and unfocussed.

Cowley's nostrils wrinkled, but he didn't say a word. He let the young uniformed policeman assist Doyle from the cells, watching with a hard eye as Doyle, swearing, pushed him off and completed the journey to the car on his own two feet, which showed an alarming tendency not to co-operate. He half-fell into the rear seat of Cowley's car; his boss threw the plastic bag containing his possessions in after him and drove off. It would take a conciliatory letter to smooth this over, and Cowley did not like having to crawl with apologies to the police force; he didn't like it at all.

The object of blame sat slumped in the rear seat, his head in one hand, leaning forward. All Cowley could see in the mirror was a downward-slanted cap of wayward curls. Doyle was saying nothing, either; and he was wise there because Cowley had enough in him for both of them.

Nevertheless, when the car rolled up against the kerb outside the Victorian house he was currently occupying, his touch was not rough as he took Doyle's elbow and helped him out of the car. The younger man stopped when they were just inside the gate; he was breathing hard.

"Doyle -- ?"

Without a word, the man leant over and was neatly, comprehensively sick over the flowerbed. When it was over, Cowley said acidly: "If those tulips fail to come up in spring you'll be scrubbing CI5 ablutions for a week."

It roused nothing. Not a tremor of response from this man, who had an answer for everything; whose reactions were usually underplayed, sharp, exactly timed; nothing. He simply stood there, trembling in the cool dawn air, head down; he looked a strangely vulnerable figure.

Some of Cowley's anger vanished; though more of it remained. "Come on, man," he said roughly, taking Doyle's elbow, "I think we've amused the neighbours long enough."

Doyle detached the hand with efficiency; but he followed Cowley up the path and inside the old gothic mansion. Cowley's first, icy-tempered ideas about how to run this interview had undergone a radical change, in the face of Doyle's obvious distress. Obvious to him. Anyone else would think the young, tough man was coping, and coping sullenly, with a difficult situation in which it was wisest to keep a low profile. Cowley saw something else; he saw that there was nothing but misery in the way Doyle was reacting. He was operating from the void of one who has seen the way to hell; and no way back.

Anyone else -- but there was, after all, someone else who knew Doyle, even better than Cowley did. And where were you, thought Cowley grimly, where were you when your young love was running wild and loose in the night? He showed Doyle to the bathroom -- ridiculous, with its big four-footed bath and cranky old-fashioned geyser -- and rang Bodie's flat. No reply. He tried CI5 -- and learnt that agent 3.7 was apparently out searching for his partner, for some reason no-one seemed quite clear about. He left instructions for Bodie to call him the moment he showed up, but he did not try any further measures to contact him; he was beginning to wonder --

Doyle reappeared; he had wrung out his soiled shirt in clean water and put it back on, damp beneath his jacket. He had washed his hair, too; it stood out in fluffy light-brown curls around his white, landscaped face. In view of the damp shirt Cowley set him in the chair nearest the big ungainly radiator that hugged the wall beneath the window, and gave him a mug of tea. He asked one question, brusque and unemotional: "Are you fit to talk?"

After a moment, Doyle gave a nod, wrapping his hands tighter around the mug as if to warm them. He still hadn't looked at Cowley, without deliberately avoiding his eyes; he seemed to have his attention totally elsewhere, locked onto some bleak, inner vision. Cowley took a deep breath. Time for business. To demand, with freezing contempt, just why his unruly young agent had allowed himself to get into a helplessly drunken state in an illegal drinking parlour with ID on him; he prepared to launch a flood of scathing invective that would reduce the man to the sour

awareness that he was nothing, save the head of CI5 willed it so --

Not one word of it ever emerged as he surveyed the pale young agent slumped opposite him. He looked exhausted, as if he'd gone ten rounds with Macklin. How long since he had been shot through the heart? Little over two years.

"Come on, laddie. To bed," he said, as gently as he knew how; and then, when Doyle's dull eyes met his, added more sternly, "No repetition of this, that's understood; and we'll have it out some other time."

He surprised even himself, sometimes.

Bodie leaned on the doorbell. He had been up all night; he had been in a fight; he had suffered one of the worst emotional shocks of his life. He was conscious of none of it; of nothing, save the one burning resolution left.

He had to find Ray Doyle, and time was running out.

Eyes red-rimmed, face grim with purpose, he pushed past the slight older man as if he didn't exist. The jungle-fighter in him had never seemed more predominant; though his hands were empty you could almost see the cocked rifle held there, scent the danger of his cat-like alert, the restless sweep of his eyes.

It reminded Cowley once more of just how close to the edge his two top agents were; the tense complex one, and the single-track fighting man; how little it would take to push them into insanity. He'd seen it happen before, with men both greater and meaner in spirit than these two; it could happen to any of them. He, George Cowley, ran them on a knife-edge, fostered that haunted intensity; that tightly reined nerve; he fostered it for the sake of CI5. And if he let it go? Slackened the reins and set them free? They'd run down, along with the sharp fighting edge, the keen, almost premonitive intuition: they would lose too the oddness that set them apart, the oddness that always hovered, to threaten their eventual sanity.

Or would they lose that difference? Was it already too late with them for life to set them apart?

Either way, he'd hoped that the strange, fierce love they'd conceived for one another might steady them down; and it had seemed for a while to be working out that way. They had been calmer, more relaxed; just as tuned-in to the realities of CI5 life and death, just the same excellent team; yet one step further away from the permanent isolation of madness. In insanity, no-one has a partner.

"Bodie," he said aloud. He was getting old.

Bodie turned to face him in the hall. He looked terrible. "I've -- lost Doyle. Have to find him -- sir --"

That pathetic 'sir,' recalled with an obvious effort and used under stress, touched Cowley's heart.

He took Bodie's leather-clad arm, led him into the living room. "Doyle's safe," he said without preamble. "Come and sit down. He's safe."

"Where is he? Is he hurt?" Bodie had tensed all over, rigid with alert.

"No," said Cowley, who'd made sure of that as he leaned over Doyle and watched him drift into an exhausted sleep, still drugged with alcohol; then searched him with expert hands. "Not seriously."

"Where is he?" demanded Bodie. "I need to see him."

"Better not, laddie." Cowley said it gently, but it was a bad tactical move. Bodie sensed weakness, moved in, eyes glittering, repeating: "Where is he?"

Cowley was not afraid of Bodie, not even this Bodie. His patience snapped.

"3.7! Believe it or not, I have better things to do than nursemaid your partner through the night and then face an insubordinate inquisition from you. He is *safe*, Bodie, you have my word on it, and that's all that need concern you at the moment. Dammit, man, you're in no state for anything and neither is he. Go home and get some sleep. Has it occurred to you that you are on duty in three hours?"

For a moment, he thought the other man was about to unleash the madness on him, the dark eyes bright with cold temper; and it crossed his mind that Bodie too must have been through a very special kind of hell that night.

Then Bodie turned away. "I have to see him, sir," he said in a quiet voice. "You don't understand."

"No, but I'm beginning to," snapped Cowley. "And I don't like it. In fact it's probably to your advantage if I *don't* understand -- too much. Are you with me, 3.7?"

Bodie was not with anyone, right then. He struggled to regain his tattered self-control. Doyle was safe; Cowley had said so and so it must be true, because he trusted Cowley implicitly. That particular madness, of fearing Doyle dead at his hands had obsessed him throughout the blurred images of the long night; now it subsided. What he had forgotten was that it didn't end there.

He had forgotten that Doyle's safe recovery, desperately welcome though it was, only heralded a new set of problems. His, Bodie's, ruinous uncontrolled violence had been directed against the man he loved; he had done his best to hurt him, beat physical penance out of him without a thought for the consequences. However could he trust himself again?

That was irrelevant. What mattered was that Doyle would certainly never trust him again.

He persisted, to this hard inflexible man: "Is he here?"

Cowley hesitated, too long.

"If I could just see him, sir," said Bodie; and it was with amazement Cowley heard a note in the other man's voice he had never heard before, "Just see him. I won't --" his voice changed, but he caught it instantly and went on quite steadily, "I expect he's asleep, is he sir? I won't wake him up."

Unusually dumb, Cowley showed him where Ray Doyle was, and stayed with him. Bodie had found his partner.

Gentle in sleep, Doyle lay on Cowley's pristine spare-room bed, covered with a quilt. Bodie leant over him intently, seeing the dark bruising with a pang of guilt, regret: the closed eyelids and the spiked doll's lashes, feeling the warm breath stirring against his own skin -- Doyle was alive.

Cowley pulled on his arm, steady and insistent. Bodie went with him.

Cowley looked at him with a kind of pity, and weariness too. How long had it lasted? Twelve weeks, or a little more? They'd done well, then -- he'd privately given it a matter of days when it had begun. Then, as time went on, he began to be conscious of a cautious surprise -- they were so well-matched, so tuned to one another, that if one of them were female there would be no doubt, none at all, that here was a pair of lovers who would outlive the first passion, and settle to an easy belonging that would last them their lifetime --

All fantasy, wiped out; and he was proved, bleakly, right.

He said, quite gently, "Come on, laddie. Go home. Get some rest. I'll have you called."

Bodie nodded, looking as if he didn't know quite where he was, nor where he was supposed to go. His hand reached for his car keys, held on to them as if they were a guideline, and he headed for the door without another word.

From the wide window Cowley watched his agent going down the path, easing himself into the Capri, slamming the door briskly and driving off. He sighed, and shook his head irritably. Someone should be with him. But Cowley couldn't be in two places at once. Who else did they have? Only each other, and it seemed they had lost even that.

When Doyle awoke, he was stiff, and sore, and had a raging headache that pounded sickeningly when he moved, threatening to unsettle his stomach violently. His mouth tasted foul, thick as a navvy's sock; and, worse than any of that, he remembered even before he opened his eyes exactly why he was here. He flung his arm up over his eyes in instinctive defence against the crowding memories; and after a moment of lying there very still he got up to face the day.

It was after ten. He washed, thoroughly, in the antique bathroom and then took a quick check around the house. No sign of Cowley. He hardly remembered the events of the morning, except that he had been sick over the tulips and the old man had been gentle with him. No doubt that

would soon be rectified. In the kitchen he found a note -- 'Doyle -- my office as soon as you arrive' -- which was Cowley's way of giving him the morning off, and a bottle of aspirin prominently displayed beside it which might have amused him on any other day but this. And all the days to come.

He used his boss's razor ruthlessly, wincing as the lather stung his bruised skin; but he balked at using Cowley's toothbrush. He had to get home. Not home, he corrected himself; and then he remembered that he had no car. His own he had parked outside his own flat hours before it all began, and it was presumably still there. Nothing else for it, he'd have to call a taxi. It was then that he noticed the keys left out on the table, with a Rover tag. The old man had left his car for him.

When he let himself into Bodie's flat he stood for a moment, quietly listening, but there was no sound from the inner rooms. He went first to the bathroom, to clean his teeth, spitting out the water with satisfying venom into Bodie's ice-blue porcelain bowl; and then he went into the bedroom for a clean shirt and underwear.

He stopped short.

Bodie lay there on the bed, fully dressed, sprawled out on his stomach. After the first shock, Doyle went quickly over and examined him. He was breathing deep and even; peaceful and at rest.

Nice for you, mate; Doyle thought savagely, staring down at the dark cropped hair, the fists tangled in the bedding, the closed eyes. Sleep sweet, sunshine, sleep sweet.

Noiselessly, he removed what he needed from the drawers packed with his clothes, changed swiftly in the bathroom, and left for work. The reason why Bodie should be asleep and at home at this hour eluded him, and didn't bother him much.

He reported to Cowley's office. The old man looked tired this morning, but any sympathy one might have had for him was instantly dispelled at the undiluted crispness of his tone. He made no reference to the events of the night before, apart from a routine enquiry into Doyle's state of health, answered with equal economy. No mention was made, either, of Doyle's missing partner, and Cowley outlined the day's assignment -- a routine shepherding of new recruits around the shooting ranges, the psychological couches, the fitness, perception and alertness trials, all grounds they'd come to know well should they decide to undergo the rigorous selection procedure of CI5.

In other words, a day released from duty. He supposed he ought to feel either grateful, or resentful; but he felt nothing much at all. He supposed, also, that Cowley was saving the big lecture until he had the two of them together.

Cowley was ready to dismiss him, but he had another duty to perform; another pay-off to make.

He requested, very formally, that Cowley allot him time to lay a matter of semi-personal

consideration before him, either now or at some prearranged appointment; and when his boss gestured to him to go ahead, gave him Ann Holly's story in flat, unemotional language.

It was clearly not what Cowley had been expecting. Doyle could read little in his face save the usual hard concentration. At the end of it, the controller of CI5 leant back in his chair, taking off his glasses and holding them in one hand. "It's not CI5 business."

"No sir. Police brief -- Drugs Squad --"

"Are you requesting permission to deal with it personally?"

"No, sir. But I need your authority to involve the relevant authorities," said Doyle, patiently quoting the small print.

"You have it," said Cowley briskly, adding, "Handle the matter in your free time, 4.5 -- you've used up your goodwill in this department for the next ten years."

And with that chilling notification, Ray Doyle was dismissed.

He ran into Murph on his way to the waiting room where he would collect the rookies. Murphy was in a difficult mood. Skittish and resentful all at once. He took Doyle by the arm and pushed him to the wall. "Don't get lost again," he said with heavy-handed mockery.

Doyle stared at the hand on his arm until it disengaged itself. Then he looked up. Staring into chill green, Murphy felt a flicker of unease. He stepped back, making an effort to redeem the situation with a more light-hearted approach.

"Keep close to him in future. He gets twitchy when you're out of sight. Ever thought of marrying him? He'd be happier knowing where you spend your nights, you know."

"You'd better tell me what you're on about," said Doyle with deadly quiet. "And make it quick."

Murph felt a very real sense of grievance, and despite the droll tone, his own eyes were hard. "Your partner," he said with deliberation, "took it into his head to be up all night looking for you. Probably wanted your recipe for lasagne, or something. So he dragged me into the search. We had a nice time of hide and seek around London until the small hours. Where were you? Fucking your way through the phone book?"

"No," said Doyle with terrible restraint, "but I might be next time. So do everyone a favour and lay him out cold if he tries it again, will you? Big lad like you, Murph, no problem."

He walked on, leaving Murph to stare after him, shaking his head. It was better to work solo; Murphy was quite convinced of that.

It was news to Doyle that Bodie'd been up all night looking for him. He didn't let it touch him. But the new would-be recruits to CI5 were impressed one and all by the hardness, the underlying

viciousness of the established agent who showed them the ropes; and wondered if they, should they be fortunate enough to be accepted, would become as cold, hard-eyed and fine-drawn with tension as this hard-bitten man assigned to their care.

It was well into afternoon when he met Bodie. He was whisking his recruits around the training hall; watching their disbelief, first at the scruffiness of it all, then by the finely-honed efficiency, the fast unthinking skill of the men who worked out here, which wiped out the earlier impression of laxity, never to return.

"-- you don't call me sir," he was saying for the fifth time to one recruit who was fresh-faced and bright-eyed and who reminded him vaguely of Tony Miller, long dead, when he saw Bodie; pale, remarkably spruce, watching him from the other end of the spacious building.

"Are we expected to reach that standard?" asked the recruit, gawping at a far off cardboard cutout.

"Yep, an' if you don't they line you up over there and use you in gun fight as target practice. Want a demonstration?" Without waiting for their answer, he picked up the rifle he'd signed out of armoury on the way here, weighed it in his hand. Some perversity of his mood made him change his decision. He called Bodie over.

Bodie was very unreadable, very remote this afternoon. Doyle matched him for that all the way. He nodded coolly at his band of would-be merry men. "The rookies need a demo, supershot. Here." And he threw him the rifle.

Bodie caught it, swung it to his shoulder. Wasting no time, he let rip, following the line of targets with economic bursts of ammunition, his eyes screwed up in careful concentration; and each one fell in turn. The men watching were impressed, or discouraged, or enthused by the academically perfect performance, each according to his nature. Doyle was conscious that he himself was singularly lifted, pleased by it; he had wanted Bodie to come up to expectation. He wanted Bodie to be superb at all things, a match for himself.

Bodie misunderstood the impetus, however; he assumed that Doyle had been hoping he would make a fool of himself, and he chucked the rifle over at him with a terse: "Sorry to disappoint you."

Their eyes met. Each took in the signs of change in the other, and knew himself to be the cause. To Doyle, Bodie looked guilty and hurt, angry -- and bewildered. There was something pathetic about Bodie. Doyle, who knew all the facts of the misunderstanding whereas Bodie only had access to a few, having dreamed up the rest, felt vaguely sorry for him. But he still had no forgiveness in him to offer.

"Tea break," he ordered, sensing that his inattention to the recruits was becoming noticed, and swung off, leaving them to follow.

Bodie was beside him. They talked quietly as they went along, in a kind of intermittent verbal

shorthand.

"Cowley wants to see us."

"Are you surprised?"

"4.30."

"I'll be there," he said with a kind of mad gaiety.

Bodie gave him a quick glance. "You OK?"

"Nope. Never felt worse since the cat got the guppies, how about you? After your nice long lie-in?"

"I was up all the bloody night."

"Murphy too, so he says. He thinks we ought to get married, what do you say?"

"Where *were* you?"

"Screwing all my ex-girlfriends, of course."

"One by one? Or all together?"

"Make up your own story, sweetheart; you're the one with the wonderful imagination."

Fast-paced, they had come to the end of the building and all they had to say. Bodie looked Doyle over slowly, quelling his own tense anger; his partner met his gaze steadily, hands stuffed into jeans pockets, the wind scudding through his brown hair, feet in white kickers planted firmly apart. Behind him, a respectful way off, the potential recruits clustered like sheep, waiting for the pack dog to make a move. It struck Bodie that Doyle was taking all this calmly, too calmly: the anger in him running too deep to show. He said only: "Enjoy yourself with the kiddies. See you 4.30."

"It's a date."

The image of him standing there remained with Bodie a long time.

Cowley's office, 16.30 hours. Bodie was on time, Doyle late. They stood for the duration of the lecture.

Cowley did not seem angry; but he was totally distant. No sign now of the understanding he had earlier shown. He was cold, and hard, and he explained anew to them exactly what they meant to him. Which was that they were CI5 agents, paid to do the job they were assigned to do, and anything that stood in the way of their efficiency as CI5 agents must be instantly and finally

removed. The alternative was very clear: dismissal. He had tolerated their relationship -- he used the word coolly, with no overtones -- on the promise and the understanding that it would not affect their performance and the discharging of their duty to him in the smallest degree. The mistake in trusting them to keep to that understanding had been his; and he did not like making mistakes. Therefore he was giving them one final chance. Any recurrence of the events of the previous night, or anything like it, and they were through with CI5. Dismissed.

They were silent as they left the office. There was nothing to say. Except the tying up of loose ends.

"I'll be around to collect my things."

"When?"

Doyle slanted him a glance. "Does it matter? If you're not there, I've got a key; I'll leave it when I go."

"It's over then," said Bodie. Strangely, unbelievably, he found he wanted to weep, bawl his eyes out in a way he hadn't done since he was a kid, and not often then. It had all happened so fast. This time yesterday, 24 hours ago, he had been driving back home, his mind on the job; and at the back of it the warm secure knowledge that soon he would be home with Ray.

But even then, Doyle had been making his assignation with Ann Holly.

"I don't know," said Doyle, staring away.

Bodie had lost the thread of the conversation, and had to struggle to collect it. He balled his fists, looked the other way, angry. "Whaddya mean, you don't *know*," he jeered. "You mean, you might come back to me when you've screwed the Holly woman out of your system?" Anger, he told himself, savagely, that's what he needed, to hold off the shaming stupidity of tears...

Doyle began to walk away without speaking. Bodie went after him, made as if to grab his arm, caught back the gesture in time. "Where the hell are you going?"

Cool eyes met his, assessed him as dispassionately as if he were a total stranger. "It's a waste of time being with you right now. When you feel like talking sense, you can come round to my place."

"Don't count on it," snarled Bodie, and they split up.

Doyle went to see Ann; at the door of her flat he was stopped by a plainclothes officer who materialised apparently from nowhere if you were an ordinary member of the public; and probably from the curtained flat beneath if you were a CI5 agent with your eyes open. He was allowed in on production of his ID.

She received him with surprise; he noted that she didn't seem unduly pleased to see him. He

declined the offer of a drink and questioned her briefly on the police arrangements.

"Well, I certainly feel safer. But I can't say it's pleasant living constantly under the eye of Big Brother," she said, with all the old acerbity he remembered returned in full. Then, her eye met his and slid uneasily away. "I suppose I ought to thank you." It came out grudging in the extreme.

He made a brief, mocking gesture of dismissal. "Nah, don't feel like that."

Suddenly repentant, she said: "I'm sorry, Ray. I *am* grateful. But -- after that night, I suppose I thought you'd forget all about it."

He shook his head, his eyes on a bruise -- maybe one, two days old -- disfiguring her right cheek. "The fuzz knock you about?" he asked, not because he suspected it but to draw her out.

She was unsmiling as she replied: "No. Your friend -- Bodie."

"Bodie hit you?" He frowned. Now that he couldn't imagine.

"Not deliberately, I suppose. It just happened while you and he --"

He understood. "Yeah. Does it hurt?"

"Not much. Ray -- ?"

"-- don't ask."

"I was only going to say, he rang me up that night. At about midnight, or just before."

"Did he now. Ask you for a date, did he?"

"He was looking for you. He sounded -- wild."

"Don't worry love, he's found me now. He won't trouble you again."

She was watching him, eyes narrowed in puzzlement and calculation. "I don't understand what --"

He cut her off, brusquely. "I'm not askin' you to understand. I'm sorry you got involved that night. I just wanted to check you were okay, in good hands. Any worries?"

If she had, he guessed she wouldn't unburden herself to him. Not any more.

"I've got a good lawyer."

"I'll keep an eye on the way things turn out."

"Yes." Suddenly she smiled, but there was no humour in it. "You can always bring me a cake with a file baked inside it..."

"It won't come to that." As if sensing that this was their final farewell, she made a move towards him but he side-stepped it. He felt as if it would be a very long time before he would ever actively want someone to touch him again. So they said goodbye without the dimension of contact, and as he left her flat he knew it was very unlikely he would ever see her again.

Bodie turned up that night around ten. He was dressed in his silver-grey anorak affair, a sloppy roll-neck sweater, and creased cords. He was red-eyed and unshaven. He looked a mess.

He was carrying two suitcases which, when Doyle let him in, he dropped on the living room floor.

"Brought your stuff."

"Saved me a trip. Thanks."

"The little woman will be unpacking for you, I presume," said Bodie, looking around.

Doyle didn't reply to that. Any thought he might have had that this would be a rational discussion, setting the stage for forgiveness and the healing of wounds -- if that was going to be possible, and he doubted it -- instantly died.

"You've done what you came for," he said without looking at Bodie. "Now get out of here."

"Like hell I bloody will."

Bodie advanced on him. Doyle didn't move. He made each word very clear, very precise, because if he wasn't calm he'd be yelling and they'd be into a replay of the other night's violence. "If you're going to stay in this mood, then you can get out. I've had enough of your bloody caveman tactics to last a fuckin' lifetime. If you think you can manage to keep your fists off me, and talk sense, and listen, and think, then you can stay. Otherwise --" he made a wide gesture towards the door -- "you go, Bodie."

Bodie made an effort to slam a hold on his turbulent emotions. He halted where he was. "We need to talk."

Doyle's lip curled. "Yeah, talk, fine. If talk means communication and not more of your mindless abuse. It doesn't take much to get us going, Bodie, we found that out the other night." He threw himself into a chair, not looking Bodie's way.

Bodie looked him over silently, seeing anew the bruises: there would be others too, beneath the concealing sweatshirt. "Are you okay?"

"You asked me that already. There are only two responses to being beaten up, Bodie; either you

die or you don't. I didn't, so you can cut out the guilty concern."

Bodie took a deep breath. There were thousands of questions running around in his head. Weary, he asked the simplest:

"What are we going to do?"

And Doyle, turning his head, looking at him with wide lightless eyes, answered: "I don't know."

There was silence between them for several moments. Bodie sighed to quell the rising frustration, paced edgily round the room. Hands shoved into his pockets his back to Doyle, he asked: "Are you still seeing Ann?"

"Probably not," Doyle stopped and thought. He saw no reason to enlighten Bodie over the facts of that affair; Bodie's betrayal still rankled too keenly, calling forth an answering streak of cruelty in himself. But neither was it fair to deliberately delude the other man over the way his relationship with Ann was going. So he added coldly, "If you mean 'see her' in a social-cum-sexual sense, then no, I'm not, nor am I ever likely to be so you can get that out of your head."

Bodie thought about this. He had a headache coming on. "Then why --"

But maybe, if Doyle was telling the truth, it would be better to leave Ann out of this. He was hurt and angry and bitterly jealous, but when it came down to it Bodie wanted more than anything for them to be able to salvage something from this. If Doyle was no longer involved with Ann Holly, then that was maybe all that mattered. So he took a cautious step forward. "Ray -- if it's over with her, then maybe we could try again. I could forgive you that, it wouldn't need to --"

Doyle's head came up. "Oh, you could forgive me, could you," he repeated, very low, very controlled.

"Yes, but that's not the only --"

"You're too bloody right it isn't!" yelled Doyle, startling Bodie. He stared into Doyle's bitter, hard eyes. "Ray --"

Doyle was about to shout again, but he forced himself to breathe deeply, regaining a measure of calm. "Go away, Bodie. Just go away. We're not gettin' anywhere and it's -- it's all too close. Just get out of here before I --"

Before I give way to the fury running loose in me and hit you again, pound it into you as violently as I can just what you've done, you stupid, thoughtless bastard...

Bodie had grievances of his own. "Before you what?" he sneered. "Somehow I get the feeling you're blaming *me* for all this. Christ, mate, you really take the biscuit, you do. Coming all over the injured party. Yeah, I know I hit you and I'm sorry, but you're the one who bloody well made

all the promises and you're the one who broke them."

"Yeah," agreed Doyle with a little, cynical smile. "Totally untrustworthy."

Bodie was hardly listening, pacing angrily around the room. "If you'd wanted to see her again...I could have understood that. I'd've given you time. But you --"

He stopped. Doyle threw himself into a chair, looked up, and prompted: "I?"

"Oh bloody hell, Doyle!" exploded the other man. "You know what I mean. You -- it was all so furtive, Ray! If you'd only told me first --"

Doyle laughed. "Yeah, stupid of me, wasn't it? I must need my head examined. Not like me, was it? After what I said an' all. About the commitment, and that. And you don't even know the most stupid thing I did of all, Bodie."

Bodie stared down at him, beginning to realise that Doyle, although outwardly calm, brazening it out, was running on fury with a tension so great it was threatening his rationality.

"The most stupid thing I did was to worry about you," Doyle was continuing way out on his own line of thought. He wore a grim, provocative smile. "I left my number for you in case you were in trouble, you might need to find me in a hurry. That's what was on my mind that night, bloody funny, isn't it. A real fuckin' laugh. You think about it, sunshine. Go home and think about it and then laugh yourself sick."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll do that," said Bodie slowly. His head was really pounding now; he wanted to go home and sleep. "And when I've laughed myself into thinking straight, I'm going to do what I should have done two days ago. I'm going to go to Cowley and bloody well sign myself free of you."

He turned. Doyle grabbed his arm from behind, yanked him around and let him go. He was whey-faced, stony-eyed, and absolutely determined. "No you don't. You selfish bastard, don't you *ever* think of anyone but yourself? You ram this down Cowley's throat any more and that's the end, I swear that. We promised him we wouldn't let this make any difference to him, and I'm not havin' you implicatin' me in lettin' him down. We're a goddamn team and we stick together and we do our bloody job until Cowley says otherwise." He fixed Bodie with a glare. "Cowley, not you or me for some fuckin' personal hitch, not unless you want us turning into two bitchy queen types, do you want that Bodie? Well, do you?" he fairly shouted, glowering at him. "You want us to stage a big scene in Cowley's office screaming about how we had a big fight and we can't work together any more?" He stopped, and went on a little more calmly, "You're the big pal of the old man. Do you wanna do that to him? You want him to think that about us? For godsake will you say something!"

Bodie was about to let fly, yell back at him, but he shut his mouth and turned away. "No, I don't want that," he said quietly, his back to Doyle. Legs braced aggressively apart, hands thrust into pockets, the broad sweep of his shoulders, he looked a tough, invulnerable figure. But Doyle saw

the downcast head, and he was forcibly reminded that they had come to this crisis because of the insecurity of Bodie's nature; the very insecurity that had drawn Doyle to him, made him want to protect him, give him a measure of love and happiness in the time they had left. It made him gentler as he said: "Then you meet me tomorrow at CI5 and we get on with the job; and we don't talk about this or think about it, not ever, not while we're on duty. I'd like to think we still had some bloody honour left. D'you understand? Otherwise, I'm telling you, I'll go, Bodie. It'll be over then once an' for all."

"Isn't it over now?" demanded Bodie, bitterly. "Well, isn't it?"

Doyle turned away, suddenly weary. "I don't know. I don't know, Bodie. I hope not."

"You're assuming, I note, that I'll want you back?" Bodie was incensed, that Doyle, to his mind the party with the larger share of guilt, should be so sure of him.

Doyle gave him a harsh, tremulous laugh. "Yes, that's one thing I am sure of. About the only thing I'm sure of in this whole fuckin' mess is that you'll be back 'ere beggin' me in less than a week."

"You really think so, do you."

"Yeah." Doyle stared at him, looked into misery-dark eyes belying the arrogance of the angry voice, the aggressive pose. He wished he could explain how he felt; as hurt and angry and betrayed as Bodie himself, but more important than that, it wasn't that he was trying to punish Bodie for the hurt. It was that he couldn't override his own resentment, his own sense of failure, enough to let Bodie through.

"Bodie -- I said at the beginning I couldn't handle this. Then it was good with us, and I thought, yeah, maybe it's going to work out. But you -- " he screwed up his face with the necessary concentration to express himself -- "you're so bloody emotionally immature. I can't fight it any more. I got enough problems of my own, without yours as well." And, seeing Bodie's stark-white face, the numb expression, he said: "Go home, Bodie. Let's just give it a rest for a while."

There seemed nothing that Bodie could say.

The next day back at work he had thought would be difficult. Knowing Doyle expected him to be awkward, he gritted his teeth and sat on every impulse save those connected with his job. And he was taken by surprise at the end of the day, to realise that it hadn't been so difficult; they still worked together well, still interreacted with the same near-perfect intuition and response. He had quite simply forgotten, or put aside, their personal differences during the course of the day, during which Cowley had kept them inordinately busy. He was glad that it was so. Although they were emotionally estranged, they were still just as close.

Now it was only the nights he had to worry about.

Nights when he was by turns angry, lonely, resentful, guilty. One emotion only remained

constant; his unhappiness. He wasn't happy without Doyle, and it wasn't any good trying to deny it; he missed him. Not just in the big empty bed -- the pillow still smelt of his hair -- to wake and find his arms empty, missing the snuffling and scents and warmth of the once well-known body next to his; not just the fevered excitement of Doyle, sensual and abandoned, leading him on to wild, crazy heat; and the warm gentleness that followed, when, damp and sated and tired they lay together in unspoken gratitude, and love.

Yes, he missed all those things, and sometimes the longing was almost unbearable, but also he just missed having Doyle around. His clothes, missing from the wardrobe, the scent of piny aftershave he sometimes used which had come to permeate the bathroom; the weight of him as they watched TV at night, leaning on Bodie's arm; the noise he'd made; yes, the silence of the place obsessed Bodie. No-one ever spoke, or sang, in the flat now.

To assuage it, he began to spend more time out; in bars, clubs, anonymous places where he could be ignored. Inevitably he met a woman, a tall creature with long red hair who chatted with him for the evening. Bodie had never been conscious of loneliness in his life until he had come to know what it was to be free of it, having Doyle always with him. Irritating he could be at times, but mostly it just seemed -- right. Natural, and good. Now he had lost all that and he was lonely; a keen aching tang in his guts every time he stepped through his front door and knew he would be alone until he left for work the next morning.

So he took the girl home, and for the first time in weeks the flat was full of talk, and laughter, and later, love.

Only it wasn't the same, and he couldn't sleep after; he left the naked length of her on his bed and sat in the living room open-eyed until dawn.

It was soon after this, and perhaps because of it, he began to think again about Ann Holly. As Doyle had demanded, they did not speak of it in the day, and never met off duty. But Doyle had asked that Bodie think about Ann, and when it was not too painful any more he did, wondering why Doyle had not told him he was seeing her again; it was just not like Doyle to be furtive.

Well, that was obvious. Doyle hadn't had time; Bodie knew that she had turned up at CI5 and waited for him. If Doyle had not been expecting her, and now Bodie thought about it, there was no evidence that he *had* been, rather the reverse since she would not then have needed to come to CI5 at all, then he would not have had time to contact Bodie even if he'd wanted to.

Doyle had loved Ann, had really fallen for her in a big way; and so Bodie had assumed he'd been delighted, all his dreams made true, when she'd arrived unexpectedly on the scene. And so he had taken her away, and made love to her, without a backwards glance at his newer relationship?

Bodie frowned, his tired bitter mind sensing that something was wrong, but unable to cope with it. He backtracked, trying logic where emotion had failed. You had to take the facts to arrive at the truth of something. So, take them. Ann Holly had arrived at CI5. Doyle had gone with her to his own flat.

Of course he did, thought Bodie, sidetracked; how could he not? I'm second best to him. He'd have married Ann and been happy; only she copped out and I was next on the scene. Not a very good substitute, maybe -- Bodie laughed mockingly at himself -- but he was ready for someone to love him, after Ann left, and Bodie had fulfilled that need in generous measure.

But Doyle, so serious, so determined to have commitment; making safeguards all the way -- why?

Because he didn't want me to walk out the way she did.

Bodie frowned. Doyle had *wanted* this relationship to work. He had done all he could to make sure that it would, not trusting to luck and love like his more haphazard partner. Yet, after all that, it had been Doyle himself who had --

The cycle seemed endless. Bodie couldn't make sense of it, but, patient in his desperation, he tried again from the beginning. Everything fitted. Everything was out of synch. He had to find the flaw.

Eventually, he narrowed it down. Either Doyle had been using him to fill a gap, a substitute he'd make do with until something better came up -- and Bodie not only didn't want to believe that, he *couldn't* believe it, knowing Doyle as he did -- or Bodie had been wrong, all wrong, about the Ann Holly business.

There seemed to be only two ways to find out. One he rejected instantly, since he never wanted to see Ann again. The other he finally carried out.

Doyle answered the entry phone, and let him in. He was pale, very serious, in a white T-shirt and jeans. It struck Bodie, looking at him properly for the first time in days, that Doyle was thinner, more delicate looking than he remembered him; and it drove other thoughts temporarily from his mind.

"You all right?" he asked, vaguely uneasy.

Doyle ignored him, pushing past and going into the lounge, leaving Bodie to follow. "Okay, what did you come here to say?" He threw himself into a chair and looked up. His eyes looked tired, almost bruised with fatigue.

It was then that Bodie asked the question he should have asked at the start, or, if he had fully trusted Doyle, never needed to ask at all; and, sparing him nothing, Doyle gave him the answer.

It was too much to take in.

So it had been he, not Doyle, who had broken everything, smashed their fragile new love, as thoughtless and vengeful as a blundering child entrusted with something too precious for it.

"Why didn't you tell me," he said, very low. His fist slammed down onto the sideboard and his voice rose almost to a shout. "Oh christ Ray, why didn't you tell me!"

Doyle stayed calm. He had retreated, in fact, to a state where he was never anything else. "When? At the time? I tried to. You weren't in the mood to listen, you were so sure of my devious two-timing nature. Or since? It didn't seem important any more. Too late."

"I'm sorry." Bodie meant it; it came from the bottom of his heart. He came over, stood in front of Doyle looking down, eyes very dark. "I'm sorry mate."

Doyle made a sound, halfway between a groan and a laugh. "Yeah, I'm sure you are." He met Bodie's eyes. There was no resentment there, nor reproach, just a hurt so deep it struck straight to Bodie's heart.

"You forgive me?"

Doyle's considered answer, quite flat, came moments later. "I can't."

Bodie was arrested by a new shock. He had, oh god, he didn't know, expected that Doyle would say something very different. "Never? That's a bit hard, isn't it?"

Doyle sounded almost disinterested. "You'll do it again. You've done it before, remember? You thought I wanted those women in the night-club, can't live without 'em I can't, according to you. You'll never think any different will you, you'll never trust me. She didn't, either," he added.

"But I'm not her," said Bodie, hopelessly, stupidly.

Doyle glanced at him. "I know that. I thought you were different. Maybe you are. But I'm the same, obviously."

The hopelessness there hurt Bodie more than the thought of Doyle with Ann had; he had the sudden, crazy wish that if only it were possible to take back the days, wipe them out, and start again...He shut his eyes, squeezed his lids down hard. "Ray --"

"I know. You want a drink," said Doyle with faint, insane humour, and he got to his feet. Bodie put out a hand, blindly; Doyle watched it but made no move to take it.

"We could try again," said Bodie, very low. "Ray, please. You could let me try."

He could hardly believe it was his voice he heard, let alone what he was saying. In his entire life Bodie had never begged anyone, nor suffered more than a passing regret at their default. He didn't care. His hand went out, touched the wall behind him. Not knowing what he was doing, he dropped to his knees.

Doyle stayed where he was, looking down at him, wide green eyes thoughtful. He shook his head. "No --"

"Ray," said Bodie between gritted teeth, "For god's sake. I made a mistake. I'm sorry. You want me to beg? So help me, mate, I'd do that if that's what you want. Do you want that?" Defiant of the loss of pride, he sniffed hard and stared up, unrepentant of the wetness around his eyes. This was a hell the like of which he'd never dreamed.

Doyle slipped to his knees, too, looking into his eyes with a kind of rare, impatient tenderness. He reached out, touched Bodie's face, rubbed the wetness between his fingers. "No," he told him gently, "I don't want you to beg. It'd make a pretty picture, Bodie, but then I gave up pretty pictures long ago."

Bodie made a convulsive movement to get away, anywhere.

"You're such a poseur, Bodie," Doyle said, watching him. "All that passion at the start, then the paranoia, then the wounded anger, and now the sorrowful martyrdom. What next? Attempted suicide?"

Bodie turned on him, sharp as a whipping snake, brutal, humiliated anger clear in his eyes. He grabbed Doyle's shoulders and pushed him to the floor and stayed above him, breathing hard.

Doyle laughed up at him, infuriating, staring up with wide clear eyes. "Oh, more violence now is it? Go on, hit me again. I shan't fight this time. Or is rape more what you've got in mind? Carry on, sunshine --" the soft word bit -- "just carry on. Rape me. I dare you to." Some devil made him add, betraying lost unspoken secrets of the dark, sorrows shared and stored aside to be solved -- together -- "It won't take long. It doesn't usually."

Something broke free inside him, some searing whiplash band of cruelty, and something else writhed in horror -- *oh god how low we've come -- I've come* -- and at the same moment Bodie tore himself free and rushed for the door.

Helpless sobs of laughter shook Doyle as he lay there watching the empty room; eventually they changed to the harsh sounds of misery.

"You want to go for a drink?" Bodie asked, off-hand, as he switched off the engine.

He was surprised when Doyle made an equally low-key acceptance, but made no comment. The weeks passed by, they were as close as working partners could be, and as far apart as they had ever been.

They sipped warmish beer slowly, in a nondescript pub off the Strand, without looking at one another. Doyle seemed far away, very remote, lost in his own thoughts or lack of them. Bodie watched his averted face in a mirror to one side; too strung up and too busy to notice much on the job, he noticed now that Doyle was not looking well. In short, he did not look as if he were thriving. No love being entirely unselfish, a small, unworthy part of Bodie was pleased by that; he had been rocked to the limits of his innate insecurity and desperately needed reassurance that Doyle missed him in some way, but he killed that satisfaction instantly because he loved Doyle

and wished him no unhappiness. And Doyle *was* unhappy, he could see that. Or if not, he was simply allowing no emotion through, he was just existing, and Bodie was troubled as he watched him, that October evening.

He had forgiven Doyle by now for the hurt Doyle had so deliberately given him at his flat many days ago; he understood all too well the reasons behind it, and he had done the same thing himself in different ways. Nor was it to be forgotten that all this was Bodie's fault. Everything would be all right if only Doyle would agree to try again. But Doyle was not going that way. Bodie had made many tentative openings in that direction, from stubborn bullying tactics to reasonable persuasion, refusing to give up; but Doyle remained firmly, politely impenetrable, rejecting every advance. It made things no easier for Bodie to see the hell Doyle was putting himself through. Nor could he see any way out. Christ, Doyle looked as if he were living a nightmare. What did he see in all this that Bodie had not seen? The death of his chance of ever being loved again? Bodie knew himself to be more resilient than Doyle in some ways; Doyle shouted less but felt it more. He leant a little nearer his fragile companion, every protective instinct in him on full alert.

"You okay, mate?" he asked quietly. "Life all right, is it?"

Skin clear as honey, eyes translucent as glass, Doyle turned to look at him. He had a puzzled, faintly hostile air, as if Bodie had set him a question way beyond his understanding, or alternatively, too simple to be worth considering. He didn't say anything. What Bodie wanted to do, very badly, was to snatch him up, hold him fiercely close and tell him over and over that he was loved, that Bodie was sorry, desperately sorry, and would do anything at all if Doyle would only let him try again.

He did nothing of the sort, having tried it before. Doyle was wary now of any such declarations; Bodie had lost the right to his trust.

"You know I'm moving?" he heard himself say.

Doyle stirred. The last of the afternoon sunlight filtered through dusty paned glass and picked out autumn tints in his hair. "Yeah. I was there when Cowley told you, remember?"

"Yeah. So you were."

Leaving the flat they had shared, moving on to another which would be as anonymous as the other one had been, until Doyle had come along and brought it to life, infused it with his own personality, the gentle, fierce pleasure of their union. They had made love for the first time there.

Bodie was glad to be leaving it.

"How about coming back with me?" he asked, with near-diffidence.

Doyle shrugged. "What for?" He drained his glass and looked up.

"Why not?" said Bodie, suddenly angry. "Why not, for god's sake? We're mates, we work together. You wanted me to stay working with you and I've done that. So I can ask you back to my place for a bloody drink, can't I?"

"Not tonight, thanks," Doyle said mechanically and got to his feet, shoving his hands into his pockets. He stayed there for a moment, looking down, seeming to look through Bodie rather than at him.

"See you around."

Bodie watched him go, pushing through the swing doors of the pub, vanishing from sight. He got himself another drink, and then another, and did not leave for a very long time.

The doorbell rang, late at night. Bodie had packed up his things ready for the move; all that remained to do when the van came was shift it all down the stairs.

He showed his visitor in, wordless. Cowley picked his way through the clutter of boxes; crates and strewn packing material with precision, and took a seat.

"It's very late, sir," said Bodie, who was not in the mood for company.

"I'm well aware of the time, laddie," Cowley returned, but without the usual acid bite. He seemed preoccupied, and as disinclined as ever for small talk. He accepted a whisky and took several sips in silence before he came to the point.

"I'm not happy about 4.5."

Bodie stiffened. He'd just known the sniffy old bastard wouldn't be able to bear being left out of it much longer. Normally he cautiously welcomed any of Cowley's small overtures of friendship, if such they could be called; he genuinely liked the old sod. But this was hallowed ground; keep out, stay off the turf. His stony face gave over the message with perfect clarity. His boss made an impatient gesture.

"Och, Bodie! Leaving anything else out of it, he's your partner, and you'd do well to remember that. His well-being is your concern, and should be if you've any sense, or you'll be ending up with a bullet in your back because Dreamy Jack there lapsed into one of his increasingly frequent moments of introspection and forgot to watch it for you. I'm not here for my own amusement, man. 4.5 is one of my best operatives and anything that affects him is my concern as well as yours, because *any* weak link in my organisation is my concern. And 4.5 is well on the way to becoming just that -- a weak link."

"He has a name," said Bodie tightly.

"Aye, and that name's going to be emblazoned on a tombstone before very long if you two don't sort yourselves out!" blazed Cowley, eyes piercing over the rim of the glass; he set it down very deliberately, on a pile of books tied together with string. "What's the *matter* with Doyle, Bodie?"

Can't you see it? Have you looked at him lately?"

All the time, thought Bodie; I look at him all the time. Catching Cowley's eye on him he picked up his own glass, taking refuge behind it, and in the harsh taste of the liquid. Then he said, slowly, "I know he hasn't been himself lately. But he hasn't made any mistakes on the job. He just needs time."

"Time!" Cowley waved a hand in angry rebuttal. "How much time does he need? Another six weeks? Bodie, Bodie; look at him. He's like a man stumbling along in the dark; how long will it be before he pitches over the edge?" His voice had changed, and Bodie, startled, clearly caught the harsh urgency in it. "One mistake. That's all it takes. One mistake, and he could be lying dead at your feet. Like Allinson. Like Miller. Like Cook. Too late then, laddie. Too late then to dry his eyes and listen to his troubles and set him on his feet again. You think about it."

He stopped abruptly. Bodie just stared, dumbly. The old man cared; he might try to hide it under a flim-flam facade of hard-lining concern for the organisation; but he cared. He was worried about Doyle; he knew, better than any of them, how short time was, how few chances one was given. Cowley had watched too many young men die.

Cowley got stiffly to his feet, his thin sandy hair dishevelled when he'd run a hand through it in his anxiety to get through to Bodie. "I've said what I came to say." He was brusque, now, annoyed at having lost his cool. He had in his briefcase a sheaf of reports compiled over the last few weeks that catalogued Doyle's increasingly low morale; he had intended to lay them starkly before the man's partner and let Bodie draw his own conclusions.

Well, what he had done was maybe just as good, in its way. He looked at Bodie, waiting for some reaction.

"I'll keep it in mind, sir," said Bodie, at last. He took a deep breath, suddenly wanting to be honest with the old man. "I've tried, but I made a bad mistake with him, and he took it very hard -- he's been let down before, sir, and he --"

Bodie stopped, having found it harder than he'd thought. He discovered that there was no way he wanted to talk about his relationship with Doyle to Cowley. Cowley merely nodded briskly. "He's a stubborn character. And he feels things very deeply, keeps it all bottled up inside. Don't give him too much time, Bodie. That's my advice."

He walked to the door. Bodie followed to see him out. Just before he left Cowley said, seemingly inconsequentially: "That Holly girl. Never brought the lad anything but bad luck --"

Bodie shut the door. Troubled and indecisive, he leant against it, wondering what to do. The easiest course of action seemed to be to go and get another drink; which he did, and sat amid chaos, thinking. He was as worried about Ray as Cowley was, and yet there seemed nothing left to try that he hadn't already tried, and failed with. It was very late. Maybe tomorrow -- yes, tomorrow he'd talk to him again, make him see sense.

He went to bed.

The phone was ringing. Swearing, he grabbed for it as he surfaced from deep sleep, knocked the receiver off the table with a jarring crash, retrieved it, fumbling frantically. Phonecalls in the middle of the night always meant trouble.

"Bodie?"

He was still breathless from the struggle. "Yeah, sorry mate, I --"

Doyle misunderstood the delay, and the apology. "Look, I don't care if you've got a whole bloody harem round there, just get round 'ere."

Bodie felt no exhilaration, more a stab of fear -- Doyle sounded quietly desperate. "What's up, mate?" he said, sharp with urgency. "Ray?"

"Get round here," Doyle only repeated; and the line went dead.

The car screeched to a halt, burning rubber against the kerb. Bodie wrenched on the handbrake, grabbed the keys, slammed the door, raced into the building. The door was unlocked. He was up the stairs four at a time, his heart thudding with fear, apprehension. He burst into Doyle's flat, through the living room door; and came to a sudden halt.

Doyle was by the window, his back to his visitor, one hand holding the curtain. He appeared to be staring out, though the glass showed him only the blackness of a moonless night.

"Ray?" said Bodie gently. And as his partner did not reply he crossed the room in three angry strides, taking Doyle by the shoulders, all his fear and tension breaking out as he turned Doyle hard to face him, snapping: "Oh come on Doyle, for chrissake! What is it?"

The man in Bodie's hands did not move, simply surveyed him with unnatural calm. Bodie looked him over in return, angrily. Doyle was wearing grey-green slacks widebanded on narrow hips; a matching shirt open at the neck, and a thick cream wool zip-up jacket; for all that, he looked cold, his marked face very pale, and there were shadows under the green eyes not altogether due to the wavering long lashes. He was taut as a bow, and the silver chain resting on his throat jumped with tension. Bodie, moved as ever by the vulnerability, the mysterious cool beauty of his mate, wanted only to hold him tight: wrap reassuring arms around him, cradling Doyle's head on his shoulder, telling him over and over that everything would be all right.

But he couldn't say that; because he had failed before to make everything right for Ray Doyle, he had sworn to himself a deep silent vow to keep him safe, never to let him down; and he would never again trust himself to make Doyle that promise.

So Bodie stayed silent a moment longer, holding the slighter man's body in his hands a safe distance away. Then he said, struggling to sound quiet, normal: "You're cold. Come and sit down, eh? I'll get you a sweater, make a cup of tea. What happened? Someone try to get in or

something?"

That was a thought. In the blind panic he'd been in since Doyle's telephoned cry for help, he'd abandoned all his usual fighter's caution; for all he knew Doyle might be under fire from a terrorist; there might be someone in the bedroom; he might have walked into a trap. He glanced around; but there was silence; nothing. All as it should be. Except Ray Doyle on the verge of collapse.

He turned back to face him, eyes dark with trouble. Doyle said, very quietly, "I can't go on, Bodie."

Bodie's insides clenched; took a sudden drop. He'd been expecting this for weeks; yet clung on to some frail hope that refused to die, fuelled by his own stubborn yearning love that would not, even now, take defeat. He supposed bleakly he'd even been hoping, on the frantic drive here tonight, that maybe... But it was not to be; now he'd heard it from Doyle's lips, not in some black nightmare he'd awake from crying Doyle's name to an empty room; but in reality. He'd gambled; and lost. Time to make the pay-off. He felt sick; and swallowed.

He dropped his hands from his partner's shoulders, releasing him with finality. Doyle would very likely have some idea in mind about resigning; but Bodie knew he was the one who had to go. He said, very low, very calm, "All right. It's my fault, mate; so don't go blaming yourself. I'm sorry for -- everything. I can get in touch with Cowley right away, leave the minute I've sorted it out with him --"

Where would he go? He dismissed the absurd question impatiently; who cared: You could drive on and on through endless roads until the night came to an end and your life or all that mattered of it, ended with it. Out of the deadness he looked at Doyle, waiting for some last word; some tinge of surprise touching him when he saw from the flickering green eyes that Doyle hadn't heard a word he'd said.

Instead, Doyle moved forward, until he was within an inch of Bodie. He said, with furious intensity, "You hurt me. Christ, Bodie!" His voice had risen, so he was almost shouting. "You hurt me so -- bloody -- bad --" He clenched a hand onto the lapel of Bodie's jacket, pushed him. Bodie took a step backwards, in a whirl of bemusement as Doyle went on, the words coming out more like harsh sobs, "I tried every bloody way I could to convince you, I kept on and on tryin', but you wouldn't listen, you never believed a word I said --" He continued to push Bodie backwards, with careless, frustrated fury, his breathing uneven, his face twisted up with anguish. "You're so screwed up inside you couldn't trust me, an' you didn't *want* to trust me Bodie, it didn't need to be Ann, it could've been anyone, anyone at all to give you an excuse to run off panickin' and lashing out --"

"No," said Bodie when Doyle drew a ragged breath, "No, it wasn't like that Ray, I --"

"Shut up!" hurled Doyle at him. "No excuses. Just *shuddup*, will you?" He gave Bodie a vicious jab with his elbow, knocking him onto the settee, and fell on top of him, pinning him there.

For a moment, Bodie thought Doyle was going to try rape; and though his instincts crowded up in revolt -- *not like this* -- he forced himself not to resist; to be still. If Doyle needed that, to force this from Bodie as some sort of penance for the hurt, then Bodie would give it; though he knew it was no way out; an ugly answer that was no real answer at all. But Doyle only lay on him, gripping him tightly in cold hands, shivering; he pushed his face into Bodie's neck.

"I can't go on, Bodie," he whispered painfully. "I can't go on without you."

Bodie fought to deal with it, struggling with confused emotions. He was conscious of Doyle's weight pressing him into the settee; the scent of Doyle's hair close to his; the feel of wool beneath his hands; Doyle's heart pounding like a fluttering bird through the thin shirt against his chest. He forced himself not to move; not to do anything that might distress Doyle any more; he just didn't trust himself to do the right thing. He was way past sexual desire. And Doyle was crying; tears running down his face and sliding around Bodie's neck. He seemed unconscious of them as he continued in a near whisper, "I can't live without you, but I can't live with you. It scares the hell out of me, but --"

Bodie had words at last, because if one thing emerged coherently from the harrowing wreck they seemed to be making of their lives, of the love he had meant Doyle to find only happiness in, it was that Doyle was not, after all, sending him away. He touched his face, gently, tentatively. "I know," he whispered, "I know. It's the same for me too. Don't let it frighten you. I wanted you to be happy..."

Doyle went on, unheeding: "-- but it's all I've got."

They lay that way awhile, in the silence of the post-midnight hours, holding each other close with desperate, gripping strength. Bodie began to hope, a tremulous, fragile hope, that maybe, after all, it was all going to be all right...

Finally Doyle raised his head. "No more promises, Bodie," he said, savagely. He sniffed hard, and brushed his hand over his eyes; it came away damp and he stared at it without surprise. "No promises. It didn't work that way before, an' maybe it wouldn't again --"

"Ray --" said Bodie, drawing a breath.

"No," said Doyle, harshly. "I don't trust your promises any more, just like you don't trust me." There was a silence. Then he added, "We'll live apart for a while, see how it goes. I couldn't take being under your eye yet, worryin' all the time in case I was a few minutes late home an' you were takin' London apart with your hands thinking I was havin' a quick one with some bird --"

Bodie couldn't take any more; he'd come through despair to hope, and now this bleak vision of their future coming from the lips of this hard stranger. Years of trained, automatic repression snapped, whipped away; and he broke.

He rolled away from Doyle and dropped to the floor. Curled into a ball he lay staring ahead in blind, dead misery. He heard someone crying and he didn't care that it was himself; for he owned

all emotions now and was master of none of them.

Doyle raised himself and stared. Bodie, on the floor, oblivious; terrible harsh sounds of grief tearing loose from the bottom of his throat; all his pride lost; that last dignity stripped away. *I did this...*

Dear god, no.

He was there, holding him, struggling to release Bodie from the terrifying foetal position, refusing to give up; and finally his determination, his desperation won out and Bodie was in his arms, clinging on to him. Doyle kissed him, over and over, his tongue rubbing away the tears, never letting his grip relax, murmuring fierce, foolish words. Presently, he slid Bodie's clothes away, and then, because Bodie seemed to want him to, and because they needed closeness so badly, he laid his face on Bodie's tear-wet one and took him, with no violence, only tenderness and a love so deep it seemed they might destroy each other with it. It was a union born more of need than passion, a struggle to complete, but he did it; and eventually they were both released into calm, and finally, sleep.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Zeroplanic

Down to the Waterline

Sebastian

I had been visiting my daughter in London at Christmas and left by coach in darkness, travelling through the streets still busy with shoppers, lit by Christmas lights. Weary, I laid my head against the coach window as we swept around by the Chelsea Veteran's Hospital and moved slowly along the Embankment in rush-hour traffic, giving ample time to peer curiously into the houseboats, lit up, each window framing a little scene of teatime domesticity. Christmas, cosiness, the stark chill of cold and a strange, alien world out there with people in it I would never know, who lived lives very different to mine, but who still put the kettle on at teatime... The sparkle of the dark, wide, mysterious Thames... little snatches of children's rhymes half-understood but ripe with atmosphere, with imagery... the story was written by the time the coach rolled up at home, 100 miles away.

=====|||=====

'Your hands are cold -- but your lips are warm.' My very good friend Felicity M. Parkinson finally got tired of hearing me going on about the story, since I never actually got down to writing it, and wrote it for me -- a beautiful little piece entitled 'Sweet Surrender'. Here, ten -- or is it twelve! -- years later, is my version -- a Christmas Eve delivery.

=====|||=====

It was seasonably cold, the sky black and clear, the stars bright and chill, a stark forecast of frost. In the darkness Doyle walked along the embankment, hands in pockets, briskly; it was not the weather to dawdle. Bodie strode along at his side, keeping up without effort. Terse white puffs of conversation smoked in the air.

"Christmas Eve. Believe that?"

"Done your Christmas shopping?"

"Two days off!" Doyle shook his head, unable to believe it.

"Unless--" Bodie sucked in a breath, adopted the accent of a Thunderbirds villain, "--Our Country Needs Us."

Doyle rolled his eyes. He stopped by the coping for a moment, slapping his hands gently together to warm them, looking out at the view. Behind them, across the wide road, were the old and venerable almshouses given to Chelsea pensioners for services rendered in the war; almost every window glowed with golden light, and behind it, no doubt, a veteran pottering, making cocoa perhaps, ready to watch the News at Ten. Cosy: Doyle looked out, instead, across the width of the Thames to the other bank. A narrow bridge spanned the river at this point, white skeletal struts rearing to the sky, and beneath it the water was dark and rippling, its little waves catching and reflecting the bitter moonlight. London had its unsung glories, a moment to be captured every now and then.

Bodie, beside him, looked out too, a little frown on his face, keeping his thoughts to himself. Doyle kicked the base of the wall as he leaned out and looked across as things, impressions rather than thoughts, raced across the surface of his mind -- Christmas -- carol singers, little Victorian girls, narrow streets and alleys behind him almost unchanged from Dickens' time. And the river before him: less wide now than in Roman times when this old city had been founded. The houseboats in front of him, beached on tidal mud, rode atop, no doubt, many a hidden treasure of antiquity.

The houseboats. Some in darkness, others ablaze with light, and intriguing little glimpses on view within of ordinary domestic life, a bar, a TV picture, a man with a kettle in his hand, his mouth moving, speaking to some unseen partner. Idly following his partner's gaze Bodie nudged him and pointed:

"That one's a pub. Fancy a wassail cup?"

A good idea, one of his best that day. Warmed by whisky, Doyle gazed upon the sleek dark head of his partner and wondered. About Bodie. A man he knew so very well. Or then again, perhaps hardly at all. Bodie seemed quiet tonight: melancholy, possibly, Christmas was not the best of times perhaps for a man whose life seemed structured by his job of work rather than anything he had at home. What, after all, did he have at home? Like Doyle himself: nothing. He sipped the fiery stuff and let it flow warmly through his heart and his mind and his blood. Bodie's knee knocked his beneath the small round table and Bodie made a routine apology.

"You've done worse to me and survived," Doyle answered, also routine: in fact, his inner soul seemed detached from his brain, the words he spoke startling him as if they were someone else's. Drunk. Already. Nothing to eat since a cheese sandwich at noon and endless cups of machine coffee; the whisky had happily set up home alone and whizzed around his bloodstream

intoxicating him.

Close by, some merry ruddy businessmen began a drunken chorus -- Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer... Surely the lone extra reindeer, however bright his nose, would have unbalanced the sleigh a bit...? Doyle considered the problem and wondered whether to share it with Bodie. He looked over the table at him. Bodie's eyes were dark as the night outside the windows and as dark as his soul within. All of a sudden Doyle felt exhilarated, excited, full of dread: though why he didn't know. Christmas... he supposed: Santa's sleigh due tonight, the mysterious ting of a bell to freeze you with horror and delight, the brief sweet visit of the reindeer to the roof, the presents like a treasurehouse of glory in a wrap of red and green and silvergilt. You've been a good boy all year...

"Have I?" Bodie answered another question, eyes and voice hollow, and Doyle woke up from the past, and looked into the eyes of a man who expected nothing at all.

He stood up. "Let's go."

Down by the waterline the river tides lapped the landing stages. The air smelt dank, rotting wood and dark water: fleeting stenches blasted pure by frosty night air. Doyle leaned in a hooker's pose against the rough bricks of the wall behind him and opened his jacket and fingered his silver chain and looked into the blackest depths of Bodie's eyes. No moonlight there, though it shone across the water. Something light brushed against his face; he turned his eyes up to the sky, saw, unbelievably, that it was starting to snow. White flakes whirling out of the blackness. A White Christmas: that famous and fabled beast!

He turned his eyes back to Bodie. And caught what he was not meant to see.

Bodie kept his head up. Looked at him, angry, tempted. Tossing his car keys up and down, undecided.

"Go on," Doyle said, closing his eyes.

"Go on -- what?"

"-- Whatever."

Bodie's breath, light and quick, fell on his face. "Why?"

"It's Christmas, dammit. Gotta live a bit, at Christmas..."

Bodie's hands were cold, but his lips were warm as fire on Doyle's cheek, his throat, taking his mouth softly, then suddenly, fiercely.

The kiss was far the sweeter for the knowledge that they should not do it, must not do it, that tomorrow they would wish they never had. It was so dark here, so unreal, a little corner out of time; they were not in the real world at all. And it was Christmas Eve. There had to be magic

abroad on Christmas Eve, waiting to paint stolen kisses with the tincture of enchantment as the reindeer arched in the sky across the face of the moon.

As they struggled, Doyle unzipped his own jeans, then Bodie's, easy as fantasy. Their skin seemed hot, electric, wherever it touched. His hips thrust neatly, elegantly, as he slipped his arms around Bodie's waist and urged an answering thrust, steering the movements of Bodie's body with his fingertips as he opened his mouth thirstily to Bodie's staking tongue, tipping his head back in abandon as he felt a lion's desire lift his loins. Wherever he turned his head Bodie's mouth chased his and caught it. Months of wanting, wishing whipped up into the fiercest of fires:

"Go to the car, shall we?" Bodie's voice touched his ear, the slightest of caresses, and it made him shiver. Somewhere a mournful foghorn blew, long and sad, as some trawler dredged its weary way along the Thames' bottom. And between the hard magnetism of their bodies Bodie's hand made entry, gripped them both tightly together, rigid, while his thumb slid slowly, sweetly, over the tip of Doyle's cock.

Doyle closed his eyes, a long deep shudder raking him from top to toe, not from the bitter cold chasing him around his neck and his ears and his jaw, but sheer delight. And inside he was not cold, but warm, lighting up with a long slow burn of bliss.

"Not the car. Here." As romantic a setting as he had any right to expect.

And, as romantic the dialogue: "Want me to suck you?" Bodie murmured against his ear.

He squeezed his eyes shut and grinned, or grimaced, the very idea a violent turn-on: "Now that just might get us arrested." He wrapped his own hand around Bodie's and squeezed them both tight, tighter almost to the point of pain. Bodie bent his head to kiss him again, eager, hungry. The foghorn sounded again, closer this time, a melancholy boom reaching out into the night. This time Doyle did not hear it.

And it was Bodie who saw the trawler's lights play across his face to highlight the expression there, rapt, the length of Doyle's lashes wavering up and down as he listened to the inner music; Bodie had it now, the right key to play him with, and he employed his skills almost ruthlessly, jerking him off as swiftly and expertly as if Doyle's precious flesh and blood was his own.

As it was, in a way.

They owned each other.

Even though Doyle would never admit it.

And he watched Doyle to the last, his own expression detached, almost cruel as Doyle convulsed and spilled a secret bliss into his hand. Bodie closed his fingers on it, tight, protective.

The foghorn blew one final time, quieter, more plaintive, going away from them into the darkness. The cold wind blew around them, and the snow danced on their faces, and the cosy

glow of lights across the road seemed very far away, as if they had gone beyond the edge of civilisation, passed on out into the chilly wilderness without a backwards look at comfort and shelter, a long journey ahead of them: how many miles to Babylon? Threescore miles and ten...

Doyle pulled away from him. Began to rearrange his clothing, head down. This brief encounter, thrilling, shocking, short: not yet over, but now he wished that it was, for one disloyal moment he knew that someday he would pay for. And the moment came sooner than he expected.

"Lemme fuck you, Doyle," Bodie said tensely, tightly. Eyes searching out his, dark, desperate.

"Okay," Doyle said after a moment, and he turned and braced himself against the wall, obedient. Bodie slid two hands around his waist, fumbled at his jeans and dragged them down beyond his thighs, found the dark crevice with his finger, rubbed it with spit. Doyle made no sound, except at the first, most violent, thrust: and then again at the last. He couldn't help it, any more than Bodie could help this desperate roughness, too hungry for too long.

The night was still young, despite the dark and the cold, the traffic -- late Christmas shoppers going home with the boot full of carrier-bags -- a steady sweep along the road. Snow was coming down thick and fast now, a whirling white blizzard. Doyle's swagger as he nonchalantly crossed between the hooting cars was irritating Bodie, but he said nothing about it.

"Christmas day tomorrow," Doyle yawned; he leaned upon the car, and winced, and shifted his position, watching Bodie search in his pockets of the keys.

"Yeah, can't believe it, can you? Comes round so fast."

"Got any plans?"

Time stopped: the chill wind blew around them as the paths of probability diverged. In an infinite universe, all things were possible.

And in this one -- ?

Bodie unlocked the car door. They drove off together.

-- THE END --

Christmas Eve, 1995

Zeroplanic

Et In Italia Ego

Sebastian

I love this story and am glad that others seem to, too. I began writing it the day after I returned from an awful, amazing, wonderful, terrible trip to Italy by coach, the sights and smells still fresh in my head. The boys travelled with me on that coach, in the seats across the aisle and just behind, I couldn't see them, but I knew they were there.

This is the story I have pledged to sequel, and someday will. Watch this space :)

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“WE’LL TAKE the coach to Rome,” Doyle had said, and after half a litre of red wine it had sounded like a brilliant idea, a storming idea, quite possibly the best idea Ray Doyle had ever had in a lifetime of good ideas: sun, splendour, Ray Doyle, all in one cheap and cheerful package.

Bodie couldn’t remember actually giving the journey itself any consideration at all: taking a *bus* to *Rome*. Of course he had realised that, as journeys go, it would hardly be on a par with, say, the tube to Shepherd’s Bush. But then again, neither would it be on the scale of a donkey trek through the Hindu Kush. In his mind’s eye he had seen a road: and, at the end of it, Rome.

After the first twenty-two hours on the coach, Bodie remembered the tube: such a neat idea, and only seconds between stops.

Meanwhile the road went on: and Rome was not yet in sight. The scenery rose, flattened, rose again. Incomprehensible road signs sprang up out of nowhere, then vanished too quickly for Bodie to get a grip on the sense of them. And another inch of the map crawled by.

Only ten more inches to go till the bottom of page 31. And then they could progress to page 36!

Bodie was looking forward to page 36. They had been on page 31 a long, long time. The man from CI5 was hot, tired, bored, sweaty, uncomfortable, and he already hated all the other passengers, who ranged from about 82 right down to the youngsters of 65. Oh, not forgetting—the child. The one three seats behind. The one whose voice was pitched so exactly at the frequency of a chainsaw.

And then there was Ray Doyle, in the window seat (of course) though from Bodie's observations he had not yet looked out once. Instead his eyes behind the Armani shades were closed in bliss, his head nodding and his foot tapping as he absorbed the bassy emanations from the Walkman clamped to his ears. Ray too was scruffy, sweaty, and unkempt—but that style suited Ray Doyle, from the stubble on his chin to the well-worn look of his jeans and the light drifting odour of his sweat: While Bodie, in creased cords, mouth like a vulture's crotch, felt rank and bristly. He had in fact many complaints, and from time to time he would list them all in his head, a little entertainment for himself. For example: they had left home at seven this morning—correction, yesterday morning—and it was now five AM the next morning. They had been travelling 22 hours: they would not arrive at their destination until seven tonight. He wanted a shower. He needed a beer. He had never needed a beer more. There was of course no beer, but instead the grumpy driver's assistant would arrive by each seat every five hours offering cups of boiling water, brownish in hue, which he called coffee: he would then take fifty pence from you and slop the drink into your lap. Bodie felt the man could learn a lot from air hostesses—

“Let's fly next time, Doyle,” Bodie said aloud.

“Me wings get too tired,” came the mumbled reply.

Presumably conditions were similar in the many other coaches which were all part of this ongoing convoy bound for Rome. Their own coach was number 99, which seemed somehow to suggest it was a bit of a failure of a coach, undistinguished, not even smart enough for triple figures. Its occupants were all packed as close together as 64 sardines in a sardine tin. Bags and plastic carriers spilled everywhere, in every free centimetre of space. Everyone else seemed to eat more or less constantly, crunching and munching their way through vast mounds of provisions. When they weren't eating they were asleep, dozing, mouths agape, heads lolling to one side, snoring, or in their brief moments of consciousness having rivetting conversations about the weather and kids' TV programmes from the 1960s.

Bodie looked down at the map again. 9” inches till page 36. It's Hell, Bodie thought with conviction, that must be it: he'd died and gone to Hell. The coach would never arrive. It would just travel on, and on, into Eternity.

Inches and hours and continents later, when the door of the coach finally opened to disgorge its bleary-eyed, unshaven, unwashed passengers it was 8 PM Italian time.

Ray Doyle unfolded himself like a flower beneath the sun, breathed in the fresh Italian air, and grinned as he bounced on the balls of his feet.

“This is a bit of all right, isn't it?”

“Yeah,” croaked Bodie, stumbling along behind him on woolly legs, one huge grip bag in each hand. Doyle lightly tossed his Walkman from hand to hand and looked around. “No, look, Bodie. It’s brilliant.”

From somewhere Bodie found the energy to lift his hanging head.

All around them, reaching high to each side, were snowtipped mountains, little redtiled houses perching on the slopes as far up as the eye could see, nearly up to the clouds. They were standing in a little piazza, the sun was shining, and the scent of fresh coffee was in the air. Bodie’s nose lifted. Doyle was watching him, grinning.

“Glad you came?” and behind them the coach, unloaded, melted away as if it had never been.

Neither of them spoke a word of Italian. In the clean, sparse bedroom allotted to them they were surprised to find not two beds, but one.

Admittedly it was a huge bed, five feet or more across. Bodie was already on it, stretching out, really luxuriating for the first time in 36 long, cramped hours. They had their own little bathroom and a small wrought-iron balcony with views to the mountains and the little piazza below. But Doyle was not happy.

“Does it really matter, Doyle?” Bodie yawned, a hand over his eyes.

“Yes, it does. If you think I’m sleeping in there with you—! You need all that space, my son.”

So, after they had showered—no shower curtain, indeed, no shower tray, the water flooded the bathroom floor and drained slowly into a hole in the corner—the two agents went down to the lobby to explain the problem to the grimfaced Italian proprietor.

“One bed,” Bodie shouted. He pointed at Doyle, then turned the finger towards his own chest. “Two of us.”

Like an opera star the proprietor made a flamboyant gesture in the air, and all but spat on the floor. “Maricones!”

“He doesn’t get it,” Doyle said, amused now, from where he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. “In fact, I think he thinks you’re saying we’re the sort of fellas who *want* one bed.”

Bodie turned violent at that. He grabbed the proprietor’s jacket, puce in the face. “Look, mate. We’ve got one bed. One—fucking—bed. We need two—fucking—beds.” He accompanied this with a double-fingered depiction of the numbers involved. The proprietor appeared to misinterpret this.

Doyle would have separated them earlier, but laughter prevented him. They ended up back in the room some minutes later.

“Looks like one bed then, mate.” Bodie still wasn’t over it. He slouched about, brooding. “If that greasy eyetie’s not careful, I’ll bloody well remind him about Italy’s performance in the last bloody world war.”

Doyle tilted his head. “It’s Germans you mustn’t mention the war to, innit?”

“This isn’t Fawlty Towers, Doyle. Come to think of it though—”

“Don’t think we’d better eat here, mind, d’you?”

Sitting, not even chilled, at a pavement cafe while the stars came out, a pint of good beer in front of him, replete with pasta and roast veal and potatoes, Bodie felt—bloody wonderful.

“This is good, innit, Doyle?”

“Makes a change, yeah,” Doyle agreed, leaning back in his chair, finishing the last of his coffee, picking up his glass of red wine.

Bodie felt mellow and relaxed; almost too relaxed. Muzzyheaded with the beer and fatigue. “About time we got back, innit?” he yawned.

Doyle looked disappointed. “Can’t stand the pace, eh?”

“All right for those who slept nearly all the way,” Bodie pointed out waspishly, but Doyle merely smiled enigmatically. “Where we off to tomorrow, then?”

Doyle extricated from his wallet a yellow square of itinerary, unfolding it and scanning. “Pompeii in the morning. Some monastery in the afternoon.”

“Mm,” grunted Bodie, who had vaguely interpreted ‘Italy’ as a beach, and comely young women in bikinis.

Afterwards they walked in the town for a while, through the territory of flowery squares and pavement cafes until they came to a more commercial area, hotels everywhere. Stopping at a tiny, very foreign ‘supermarket’ they bought some bottled water and a litre of whisky for nightcaps. Bodie also stocked up on bread and cheese and some vacuum-packed sausage—somehow he had a premonition about breakfast. All this came to 18,000 lire. Doyle nearly threw an apoplectic fit.

“About £6,” Bodie said, amused at him. Doyle calmed down and stopped feverishly checking his wallet. “And you’re paying for the next meal, matey, because I paid for tonight’s—in case you’d forgotten.” He felt—bone-weary. No-one would believe that sitting down in a coach all day could wring you out so limp.

They were walking back now, towards their own little pensione. “Gonna hit the town tonight,

then?” Doyle was asking, swinging along at Bodie’s side. “Find some signorinas?”

They were entering the doors now, Doyle plucking their room key off the hook at Reception, dodging the lift shaft where five morose old people queued, leaping up the stairs with Bodie behind him. “Not me, mate,” Bodie answered secretly into his ear as he often did. “I couldn’t get up a ladder tonight, let alone anything else.”

Doyle sighed. “Wish I could say the same. However—” the key went into the lock, turned— “I can manage by myself for one night.”

Bodie was amused by him. “Sex with someone you really love, Doyle?”

They were passing in through the door now, into their own clean, white little room. “You’re not kidding,” Doyle observed seriously.

The bed beckoned like a vision of paradise. Bodie threw himself across it and yawned hugely. “Well. You could always have me. If you don’t mind the fact that I’m a fella.”

“Yeah?”

“Just don’t wake me up till you’ve finished, okay.” His mind clouded thickly with sleep: the bizarre wanderings of dreamtime began.

“D’you mean it?” Doyle asked casually.

Bodie’s eyes sprang wide open. “Mean what?”

“Doesn’t matter. You sounded for a minute like you meant it, that’s all.”

“Come off it, Doyle.”

“Okay, okay, don’t make a big thing out of it.”

Sleep had flown away. Bodie stared across the room at Doyle’s back. “And what if I had? Don’t tell me you were going to say ‘right, here I come then’, were you?”

“Well, you’ll never know now, will you?” Doyle was in the bathroom by now, stripping off his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor while he cleaned his teeth, then sweeping them up, grimacing as he found them damp. Too tired to care, he threw them over the chair by the desk and then lay down next to Bodie naked, on top of the covers.

Bodie’s turn to get up now to strip. “Remember Captain Pugwash,” he remarked, his mind replaying a conversation he had overheard on the coach.

“What?”

“Ever watch that when you were a kid?”

Doyle la-la-ed the theme music slowly and tiredly in answer. Bodie had to cut in after a minute—

“—was very risqué, y’know. Dunno how they got away with it, but it was the ’60s—they were so bloody innocent in those days, they never noticed.”

“Noticed what?” Doyle was kicking down the covers by now, scrambling in and drawing up the sheet over his shoulder as he turned onto one side to face the middle of the bed. Bodie grinned at him as he got in on the other side.

“You obviously don’t remember old Puggers shouting: ‘Roger the cabin boy!’”

Doyle wasn’t convinced. “Just your dirty mind, that, mate.”

“Yeah? Well, what about the first mate—remember him? Master Bates.”

A crease appeared in Doyle’s cheek, a flash of white teeth. “Really?”

“Not forgetting,” Bodie played his trump card with a flourish, “good old Seaman Staines—!”

Doyle choked on a gurgle of laughter. “You’re kidding me.”

“—I’m not.”

“Seaman Staines!” Doyle chuckled, rolling onto his back.

“Logical, innit? Master Bates, Seaman Staines,” Bodie grinned with him, highly delighted, but Doyle’s laughter subsided into a sudden groan.

“Well, thanks, Bodie.”

“Wha’for?”

“There I was, tryin’ to keep me thoughts on the straight an’ narrow. I’ll have to do it now, never get to sleep otherwise.”

Doyle was flinging back the covers, a lean and compact figure darkly shadowed at chest and groin. He stalked into the bathroom, but he didn’t shut the door, and tossed himself off standing there, ten or twelve fast strokes, used a piece of toilet paper, chucked it down the loo, washed his hands, came back and got into bed where he settled himself down, turning this way and that until he got comfortable, said ‘night’ and closed his eyes.

Bodie’s heart was still thudding with shock. Well, that just about took the prize for cool, didn’t it?

Cool—or kinky.

He was forever getting little hints about Ray Doyle's offbeat sexuality, just little things, the way Doyle never missed the chance to take a look at Bodie's cock, for example: nothing furtive at all, just that in the men's room Doyle would stand nearby, back against the wall, might even keep talking, and his eyes would move down and never leave until Bodie tucked himself away and zipped himself up.

Bodie had lost count of the times Doyle had done that.

Well, everyone had their own little quirks. Bodie himself had a bit of a thing about women in football shorts. Not an obsession, exactly, nothing as strong as that. Just he found it a fierce turn-on, that was all.

But to toss yourself off, five feet away from another man then walk back into the room as cool as you like...

Weird? Or not?

Doyle might have his kinks, okay. But it didn't stop one of Bodie's girlfriends, who had gone out with Doyle some months before, from describing him as the sexiest man she had ever made it with. Given Bodie something to live up to, anyway. Never knew whether he'd succeeded or not, but he'd risen to the challenge. Yeah, Doyle had it all right. Knew how to turn a woman on.

Bodie too, right at this moment. He wanted nothing so much as an action replay as he lay there in the near-dark, eyes closed, feigning sleep while his heart pounded with excitement and his body ached for him to touch it. It had happened too quickly, it was already fading in his mind, the little movements of Doyle's elbow as his hand blurred on his cock, the tiny sounds he had made, the way, practical, he had held the tissue to the end of his cock as he came, wiped off the spunk, and dumped it down the pan.

Wouldn't he, if he'd been lying down in the bed and alone, have played with it for a while? Bodie would have expected him to dabble with it, admire the silken slippery texture of it, maybe even the milky taste—

But perhaps that was kinky. Maybe Ray Doyle would think that more perverted than what he had just done.

Bodie fell asleep, into restless dreams.

Breakfast time at the Pensione Alberto. Bacon, eggs and a fried slice he had not been expecting. But the little basket of stony bread with two stamp-sized butter pats and a thimbleful of yellow jam—

Doyle eyed it without appetite. "No thanks. Think I'll wait for the cereal."

“Doyle,” Bodie said patiently, “there isn’t going to be any cereal.”

“Sausages?” Doyle hazarded.

“Coffee,” Bodie said, and held out his cup meaningfully as a haughty dark-eyed woman passed by with two steaming jugs. She had done several circuits of the tables, he reckoned, without ever actually pausing to fill anyone’s cup. It was a little game, probably: she would try to evade his eye for as long as possible, but when it persisted she would have to capitulate and fill his cup without a grudge. And yes: she did. First round to Bodie, then. But one battle won didn’t mean the end of the war: there was still the matter of the refill.

“Where’d you say we were going today?”

“Pompeii. And we’re leaving in—” Bodie checked his watch— “five minutes.”

No refill.

Doyle swung himself into the seat by the window. Bodie grimaced as he folded himself in next to him. The coach was filling rapidly with their fellow passengers, all bright and bouncy as veterans can be on holiday after a good night’s sleep. Some of them were sporting tracksuits, with baseball caps on their bald heads: a nod to the holiday feel. Doyle, however, was wearing faded Levis, a sage green T-shirt, shades, and a white jacket which he had folded and put in the overhead rack. Bodie had gone for a white shirt. The climate was difficult at this time of year: here in this spa town high in the mountains there was snow on the ground in places, yet the April sun was warm enough for shirtsleeves. In Coach 99, however, you would not feel underdressed in bathing trunks and flippers.

The coach engine sprang into life. Bodie settled back into his seat. His body knew it by now. He opened up the map. Pompeii was a little tiny dot on the map the other side of Naples. Which was—six inches away. On— god—page 37.

Despite intentions it wasn’t long before Bodie found himself engaging in a little social intercourse with some other passengers: the tightlipped British rule of the first day, that you might address only your seat partner, and then in muted tones, was gradually giving way to some tentative feelers of communication across the aisles. Clearly some baptism of fire had been undergone: 36 hours in the hot hell of Coach 99 had felled them, but only momentarily: they were British, they had arisen, they had come down for breakfast ready to fight another day. They did not like it when Coach 98 or Coach 100 arrived before them and got a better parking spot. They were, by now, a team.

The lady in front of Bodie’s seat was very large: she took up one and a half seats. Her husband, however, only took up half a seat: perhaps she had selected him as her lifetime partner on that basis. A friendly couple, they took a fancy to Bodie and seemed to decide that he needed feeding. He had already noticed that they travelled everywhere with not one but two large square cool-boxes, from which was produced an astonishing succession of rolls, cakes, fruit, sweets, etcetera.

After Bodie had politely refused several offers, the moment came when it would have been rude to refuse again; in any case, after this morning's stone bread regime he was glad to accept (an egg and lettuce roll) and found himself included thereafter in any round of snack-time, roughly every hour and a half. He discovered that they had two grown-up daughters, five grandchildren, that Fred was retired and Edna worked as a dinner lady in the local primary school.

Meanwhile Doyle listened to his Walkman, stared out of the window beneath his shades, and refused all offerings except a Polo.

"He doesn't eat much, does he?" Edna commented.

"Keep Fit fanatic," Bodie said; Doyle's flat belly and narrow thighs were on a tighter scale altogether than his own bulkier musculature. It was still hot in the coach, but Doyle looked the epitome of cool in his shades. Except that beneath each armpit was a dark green patch of sweat.

By midmorning they had arrived at Pompeii, and left the coach in a carpark called 'Pliny', which name they were advised to remember, since there were apparently 6000 coaches expected in Pompeii today. Bodie, who had vaguely expected a small archaeological site atop a hill and themselves the only visitors, found this evidence of mechanical rollover tourism depressing, and also the fact that on first appearance Pompeii, a name which conjured up so many notions of antiquity, looked so far exactly like every other Italian town they had passed through.

They crossed the wide road through two streams of fast and evil Italian traffic, turned through a park, and began to climb a hill. And suddenly it was there. Appearing out of the hillside was ancient Roman Italy, unmistakable, just like the reruns of Quo Vadis had conditioned him to expect. Magical. Bodie scarcely noticed the thronging crowds at the ticket barriers, so entranced was he by the climb to the walls and the city gates.

The place was a marvel: an ancient city sheared off at the shoulder. Every column, every wall, all truncated. And yet it was all miraculously preserved, the market square, the temples, the cobbled cart-tracks with stepping stones so that long-dead citizens could keep their feet dry in the rain. Shops with seats for patrons, stone vats for wine still there beneath the ground.

And there at the end of every street loomed a dark mountain lopped off at the top. Vesuvius. Sleeping, as it must have slept while this city prospered. The citizens must have seen it every day of their lives, from the temples, the houses, the market place, framed by temple columns, imprinted as a backdrop against the azure sky. A landmark, a local curiosity, but nothing more. Until the night it awoke in monstrous mood, spat fire and lava to douse the life of the doomed little city and its people and buried them. To lie undisturbed for two thousand years, now disinterred for modern man to get his eerie kicks.

Those people had been real once, and here was the proof. There was a rich man's villa, with a pool, a garden, and frescos on the walls. One of the paintings was very rude. At Bodie's side Doyle looked at Priapus weighing his overlarge male organ on a pair of scales and laughed crudely with him.

“Looks like yours,” Doyle snorted, hitting him on the arm, and Bodie noticed one or two people in their party glance their way. Next stop was a little house with a low doorway: this was, their guide explained, one of the many brothels in the town. And indeed, remarkably preserved and explicit pictures on the wall depicted the many and varied services Pompeiian man might like to avail himself of on the way home to the wife. And all for the price of a cup of wine.

“Isn’t it open today?” Doyle mourned into Bodie’s ear as they jostled for position in the crowd for a better look. Again several people heard him and smiled; Bodie thought that at least it might wipe out the effect of Doyle’s earlier remark which seemed destined to mark them out as a pair of nancys.

He sighed. “Can’t do without it for one bloody week, can you?” Abruptly he remembered last night, and his eyes flew open wide.

“We’ll see, won’t we?” was Doyle’s reply, and the dark glasses which shadowed his eyes made him enigmatic as the sphinx.

The tour was topped off by a visit to the museum. Here, plaster poured into the holes in the lava where bodies had long ago rotted away meant that one could view the death agonies of many citizens in nastily graphic detail. Bodie turned away from the cast of a dog, teeth bared in rictus, legs frozen as they paddled in panic while the boiling lava melted its skin—

“Bit creepy, this, innit?”

“Don’t let it put you off your lunch.”

“Nothing puts me off my lunch, Doyle.” And they left the haunting, timeless drama of the ruined city behind and passed out through the City Gates, there to run the gauntlet of the countless souvenir stalls manned by small dark hyperactive Italians grabbing at them, pestering them to look, to hold, to buy. The driver of Coach 99 informed his passengers that there would be a three-course meal available at a nearby hotel for a very reasonable price. Bodie was tempted by the thought of it, tablecloths, waitresses, a hearty main course between two tasty fripperies, but Doyle didn’t fancy it so instead they bought warm pizzas and a beer at a roadside stall and sat on a wall to watch the world go by.

A happy interlude: the pizza was filling and tasty, the beer cold and moreish. So moreish, in fact, that they had another bottle. After all, they were on holiday, the sun was warm, the air fresh, and they had had a rare glimpse into precious antiquity this morning. It was all a long, long way from the hot plastic aroma of CI5, the tensions there: the ‘keep your wits about you or you die’ frame they lived in day by day. This was what normal people did: sat in the sun, drank a beer.

“We could come back in October,” Doyle said, uncanny, right there with him, sunglasses dangling idly from one hand.

“Yeah,” Bodie drawled, uncomplicatedly happy, and on a swift alcohol high he slung his arm around Doyle’s shoulders. It was only after a moment he realised that Doyle’s green eyes were

dwelling curiously on him as if he were mad.

He withdrew his arm so quickly it seemed to enhance the awkwardness of the moment; did Doyle think that was some kind of a pass at him or something?

“Next time we’ll bring some birds along,” Doyle said, reflectively, which only seemed to confirm it.

He ought to feel sorry for Doyle really. Bodie had met people like him before, far too many of them, never content with what they had in the here and now, a pint of beer and a full belly and the sun on your back and the company you had, instead of the company you wished for.

He didn’t reply. Doyle nudged him after a moment. “Agreed, eh? Next time we bring Sylvie and whatsername along.”

Bodie got down from the wall and began to dust himself off. “Shall we go? About time we meet up with the coach, I reckon.”

“Don’t you fancy it, then?” Doyle asked him as they trekked down the hot dusty street towards the coach park.

“Fancy what? There. Pliny.”

“Coming back in October.”

“Ah, come off it, Doyle. Can’t look that far ahead. Carpe diem, and all that.”

“It was you who said we ought to come back.”

“Yeah, pipe dream.” Try as he might, standing in a hot carpark in a long queue for a stinking urinal, he couldn’t recapture the euphoria that had made him suggest it in the first place.

“Bit bitter and twisted all of a sudden?” Doyle was jogging gently on the spot, the beer obviously on its way through.

“Look, Doyle, you can tell yourself anything you like. Don’t need my say-so, do you? Let’s see, bringing Sylvie, aren’t you? Ideal. Perfect. Don’t forget to send me a postcard.”

Getting the vibes, Doyle withdrew from the conversation. They reboarded Coach 99, sitting patiently beside Coach 96 today, and probably feeling superior.

There had been a bit of a reshuffle since the journey began 2000 miles ago. Some people would clearly be dissatisfied wherever they were seated, but some wheeling and dealing and squabbling and swapping had resulted in a new pair of companions across the aisle from Bodie. His eye slid across to them as the coach pulled out of the carpark: youngish, good-looking. Fred and Edna in front were opening up the coolbox and offering biscuits all round. Bodie made a particular

epicurean feast of his Bourbon cream, bulging his eyes and crunching loudly in the hope of annoying Doyle, who was under his Walkman again and leafing through a guidebook he had bought at Pompeii, clearly not open to conversation.

Suki and Gianni across the aisle were better value: Suki a sharp little woman with Oriental blood, Gianni a meek and disconsolate type often in trouble, large frame drooping as Suki berated him for some misdemeanour. It wasn't long before Bodie learned that they were Londoners, had yuppie-style jobs with names like 'marketing research developer' and 'systems support analyst', and were an entertaining pair, Gianni Italian by birth and Suki Indian, but both spoke very cultured English with a flat Northern accent.

"What do you do?" Suki asked him, sharp brown eyes peering over her spectacles.

"Civil servant." Bodie snapped out his standard reply, but Suki burst into laughter.

"I thought you were going to say something exciting."

"Why?"

"You look exciting."

"Thanks. Any kids?" Usually a good diversion when speaking to women.

"No—childfree, actually."

"Dinkies," Doyle said profoundly, unexpectedly joining in the conversation.

"What?" Suki probed, leaning forward.

"They're dinkies," Doyle nodded across the aisle. "Dual Income—No Kids—right?"

It turned out that Gianni and Suki had never heard of this particular coding of pairs; it amused not only them but several people in the surrounding seats, and started off quite a lively group discussion—

"What about you and him?" Suki nodded at them— "Two blokes, no kids—I suppose you're Twinkies?"

Her voice was unusually clear and penetrating, and it caused a ripple of mirth to spread outwards beyond the immediate circle. Bodie shifted in his seat.

"What would that stand for, then?" Gianni was pondering.

Suki's reply was a highly audible mutter which had herself and Gianni and several others around convulsed:

“Two winks!”

Bodie took his cue from Doyle his partner, who grinned widely and said nothing, leaning back in his seat at ease, settling the headphones back over his ears.

The coach left the main road soon after and began a winding trail up the side of a mountain. From the window next to Doyle there would be only a high stone wall visible, and then the coach would turn through a hairpin bend, and suddenly instead of the wall there would be a dizzying drop, the ground falling away, a tiny toy-town far, far beneath them with miniature cars crawling along like ants on a log. It was quite startling even for someone used to swooping low and high in a bareboned army chopper open to the air.

“Where are we going?”

“Monastery—remember?”

Doyle yawned and leaned back, interest fading.

But it was stunning. When the coach had parked beside its stablemate Coach 98 the party walked up and up a paved road, and came to the very top of the mountain where there was, most unexpectedly, a white palatial edifice sparkling in the sun. Huge, ornate gates opened to let them pass through, and there they were standing in a courtyard of neat lawns, a huge marble statue at the centre. Fronting the four sides of the courtyard were windows: cells? They passed on from here between marble columns into an inner courtyard.

Breathtaking. To the left, framed by white marble pillars, the Italian countryside, far, far below. To the right, a huge, wide flight of snow-white steps, and at the top of these, more pillars. From the bottom, looking up, the steps seemed to go on forever, an endless flight of stairs reaching up to the blue skies of heaven. To the right and to the left they were flanked by huge, winged statues of saints and angels.

As Bodie began to ascend, Doyle at his side, it struck him fancifully that the place was exactly some Renaissance artist’s vision of heaven; the golden gates, the fluted marble columns, the endless, dazzlingly white steps reaching to the skies, the stone angels. Then of course there was Ray Doyle by his side, in his white jacket, severe in his Armani shades: certain aspects of an angel there.

He apprised Doyle of this notion of Heaven as they mounted swiftly and easily to the very top of the steps, leaving less fit aspirants to the summit well behind.

“Could we ’ave died without noticing, Doyle?”

At the top was another courtyard and more steps.

“Can’t be Heaven, even if we ’ave,” Doyle said grimly. “There’d be at least a coffee machine.”

“God,” Bodie groaned with feeling, “Doesn’t Architecture say anything to you, Doyle?”

“Yeah,” Doyle drawled. “It says—build a coffee shop. About there.”

No coffee shop, alas, but instead a chapel. Here the annoying child from three seats behind raised a smile when its perpetually cross mother, clearly desperate to keep it quiet in this most hallowed place, hissed at it:

“Be quiet!”

“Why?” it questioned, predictably, as it did one hundred times a day.

Mother said slowly and impressively— “This is God’s House.”

Pause. The child whispered at fifty decibels “Is he in?”

Even Doyle sniggered. But God, were he indeed in, would surely care little about the antics of mere Humans in the face of this, perhaps one of the more minor of his Houses, but glorious for all that. “Wait till you see the Sistine Chapel,” whispered Fred, gliding past, but this one here was good enough for the obviously lower cultural expectations of your average CI5 agent; Doyle was even silenced on the subject of coffee shops (lack of) as they prowled slowly around the magnificent interior of the chapel. Huge Renaissance-style Old Masters in rich oil colours stretched along every wall, and every candlestick, every scroll, gleamed dully with the opulence of gold. Every seat was furnished with the plushest, deepest crimson velvet. Far from striking one as an ideal setting for the purity of prayer, it was like wandering around the insides of a rich lady’s trinket box. And here it was, right out in the middle of nowhere, in acres of barren olive-growing land. Bodie doubted that many people even knew of its existence.

“This say anything to you about man’s relationship with God, Doyle?”

Doyle smiled, said deeply, “No, but it says quite a lot about this order’s relationship with church funds.” He stopped and craned his neck to stare upwards at the mightiest organ he had ever seen; it stretched from floor to the huge domed ceiling, and each of its massive pipes was richly golden in hue. “Imagine that belting out ‘Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus’ come Sunday morning.”

“Wanna watch out,” Bodie warned him. “Some people hear voices, y’know, calling them to be Saved.”

Doyle cocked his head. ““Ang on—is that what I heard?””

“Shall I,” Bodie asked primly, “propose you as a novice?” Having completed the circuit by now they were heading out through the huge carved wooden doors and briskly taking the steps down, Doyle’s head swivelling about from side to side as if checking for assassins. Or— “Don’t tell me,” Bodie said into Doyle’s ear, “Now you’re looking for the souvenir shop?”

But ironically enough, a souvenir shop there was, albeit souvenirs of the oddest kind: lumpy

beeswax candles— “Hand-hewn by the monks,” Bodie opined— rosaries by the dozen, and little plastic models of the Virgin Mary.

They signed the visitors’ book under the names Leyton and Bentley and left the splendour of religious glory behind, taking the trail downwards and finding something much more to their taste, an ice cream stand. They sat on a wall to eat, waiting for the rallying-call to rejoin Coach 99.

“Does have a certain appeal, though, doesn’t it?”

“What does?” Bodie shoved the last of his cornetto down his throat, licked his fingers and looked sideways at Doyle as the other man dangled his shades from one idle hand.

“Life of a monk,” Doyle replied, meditative, and lifted his eyes.

“You a monk?” scoffed Bodie, to escape the strange green blaze. “Not got the nature for it, Doyle.”

“How d’you mean?” Doyle asked him, and yawned: the heat rising off the gold stone walls was making him sleepy, hazy.

Bodie gazed in disbelief. “Come off it. You’d have to give up too many earthly pleasures, m’lad.”

“Ah. But you get unearthly ones in exchange,” Doyle remarked; and strangely enough, at that moment Bodie could imagine him as a monk, every day the will of steel battling to subdue his leanings to sin. And what a battle it would be: Doyle, with his tastes for wild sex, and mood-altering substances both legal and illegal, and the flair he had for seriously harming other people who got in his way: killing people, dealing out the retribution of death, was a part of Doyle’s life, and not often a part he seemed particularly to regret, either.

Challenging material, to say the least.

But then those who had the greatest struggle and the thorniest path attained, it was said, the greatest glory. Purity: to extreme. Bodie could just see Doyle there alone in his cell: the whips, the bleeding palms, those eyes burning green fire from that strange saint’s face.

Bodie tensed all over with shock as he realised that for some reason he was hard: cock straining at the fly of his cords. And all tied up with it was the sudden memory of last night: Doyle, masturbating for him, the tense sighs he had made, those thin strong fingers flexing on his own body as he came—

He came back to himself with a start. Doyle was leaping off the wall, brushing his hands down his jeans, grabbing his hand peremptorily: “Coach.”

Hot. Stuffy. Claustrophobic.

“What did you think of that then?” Suki was leaning across to address Bodie: Gianni was clearly in trouble again, head drooping, large frame bent over in utter chagrin.

Bodie shifted in his seat. “Yeah, pretty impressive. Ray liked it so much he’s thinkin’ of taking Holy Orders.”

“He’s not a monk already then?” and Doyle gave an earthy little chuckle, sleepy green eyes flashing over to her: acknowledging in that look that she was a very pretty woman, and alone with him she would be in serious trouble—

Bodie noted all this. No wonder Gianni took the aisle seat, fending off all-comers! And from the high radiation of the glance Suki was sending back to Doyle the attraction was mutual. Either that or Gianni was very out of favour today: bought the wrong Cornetto, probably.

“What does he do?” Suki asked of Bodie.

“Civil servant,” Doyle answered for himself. “Just like ’im. On the same pepsin scheme.” And the dark glasses were tipped back on his nose, robbing his face of any expression.

“I can’t make you two out at all,” she said, shaking her head, settling back into her seat with her travel pillow behind her head. Going to sleep again—! Bodie marvelled at these people who could doze on and off all day between stops.

He felt restless. If he shut his eyes disturbing images came to mind. It was a relief to accept a mini swiss roll from Fred and Edna in front; it took his mind off sex, pain, and Ray Doyle, which for some reason seemed for the moment to have become entangled in it.

Beside him Doyle passed him the guidebook without speaking. Bodie finished off his swiss roll, accepted another, and settled back in his seat as the coach crawled down the side of the mountain. After a few moments of gazing out at what he could see past Ray Doyle’s head of curls, his gaze dropped down to the book Doyle had placed so carefully on his lap.

It was open at a full-colour photograph of the oversized Pompeiian Priapus.

Most of the other Coach 99 inmates had apparently opted for the evening excursion of a Dinner-and-Dance at a restaurant in a local village. Bodie and Doyle decided instead on a meal out near their hotel, which decision, Bodie fancied, rather disappointed some of the other passengers who were hoping, perhaps, to see the two of them embark on a tango or a quickstep and put an end to speculation.

He said as much to Doyle over two wonderfully chilled pints of beer at an open-air cafe in the little spa town’s main square.

Doyle regarded him with those heavy-lidded eyes. “You reckon?”

“Yeah,” Bodie said grimly. “‘Twinkies’, and all that.”

His partner was looking so pronouncedly butch at that moment, short hair, leather jacket, sulky macho pout etc., that Doyle had to laugh. “Don’t worry, Bodie, you ’aven’t got the looks for it.”

Bodie said gloomily, “Yeah, but what about you? If you will keep wearin’ that bracelet. No wonder people talk.”

Doyle’s glance flicked down to the copper circle around his wrist and then up again to engage Bodie’s eyes for a curious little moment: Bodie’s heart missed its beat and he kept his gaze, steady as Doyle’s own while his thoughts raced ahead of him:.

Come on, Doyle. Flirt with me. I want you to.

But at that moment their meals arrived, borne aloft by a cheerful Italian waiter: omelettes, chips and salad. Putting it all away took quite some time, not to mention washing it down with another couple of beers, and normality reigned once more.

“Wanna look for a bar, disco or something?” Bodie offered; because that was the last chance. A woman: that was what he needed, and so did Doyle. Something dangerous was hovering round them right now, he knew it, he was just in the mood for it. And they should be trying to fight it off, they really should. But it was not relief but a stab of excitement he felt when Doyle shook his head, leaning back and draining the last mouthful of beer: “Knackered. Couldn’t be bothered to put me best bird-pullin’ act on.”

“I thought you just had to stand there, and they all got knocked over in the rush.”

Doyle shook his head. “That’s your luck, my son. Some of us ’ave to work a bit harder at it.”

When they had first met, Bodie had categorised Doyle as no threat in the looks department. His perceptions had since undergone a dizzying tilt. Doyle might not be good-looking in the conventional sense, but he was put together in an interesting way. A sexy ease of movement, a harmony of line: viewed in a soft light everything slipped into place. He never had any trouble getting birds, despite what he said. Mind you, Bodie had nothing to grumble about on his own account: women found him attractive, full stop. Dark hair, eyes, powerful male strength Never one to be modest, Bodie knew it. But Doyle, Bodie considered, had something of his own. A remote kind of—it could take you unawares, stop your heart, the way he looked sometimes.

Bodie jumped as a pair of lean fingers snapped briskly underneath his nose. “You there?” Doyle said caustically.

“Just thinking.”

“Something good, was it?”

“Why’d you say that?” Bodie said sourly. “You’re right, mind you—I was thinking about my

chances of getting you to pay the bill.”

“All right,” Doyle said amiably enough, and Bodie did a double take as Doyle raised a finger and an eyebrow to summon the waiter.

“Starting on that long hard path to salvation, Doyle?”

They were back at the hotel in five minutes. “Drink?” Bodie jerked an eye at the gloomy bartender, alone in the empty bar, polishing a glass very slowly.

“Nah, he’d only have to dirty another one. We’ve got something in the room, haven’t we?”

Only one toothmug (plastic) and they took turns with it. The little room looked clean and cosy as the day outside grew darker. For a while they had the balcony doors open so that they could see the stars and the lights of the villages dotted about the mountains and let the smell and the spirit of Italy enter: but by ten PM the air blowing in was too chilly, so they shut it. At one side of the room was a desk and one chair which looked uncomfortable, so they shoved a bolster along the head of the bed and lounged on it side by side.

Doyle had a paperback Harold Robbins which he read with one arm propped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles. When it was his turn for the toothglass of whisky he balanced that precariously on his belly and risked a spillage every time he had to let go to turn the page. Bodie was reading the guidebook from Pompeii: he found a page with illustrations from the brothel wall and held it up for Doyle to see.

“What d’you think, eh?”

Doyle passed over the empty glass and took the book, which he brought close to his eyes—then took it abruptly away. ““Ang on. Just trying to get me going, aren’t you?””

Bodie raised an eyebrow. “Would I?”

“Yeah, you like to watch me suffer.”

“Shouldn’t wear such tight jeans then, should you.

Go on, Doyle, at least you can tell yourself it’s Art.”

One of the scenes depicted fellatio, one a man taking a woman from behind. “Pretty forward for their age, weren’t they?” Doyle commented.

“How d’you mean?”

Doyle took his time: clearly the whisky was taking its toll on the transfer of electrons. “What I mean is, considering the human race ’ad only been on the evolutionary clock face about half a second, seems funny they got into fellatio that early on.”

Bodie was wincing. “It rhymes with ‘ratio’, Doyle.”

“How d’you know?” Doyle challenged swiftly. “Debriefing from Cowley, was it?” This he found amusing, convulsing with a fit of laughter. Bodie stayed dignified.

“Hasn’t anyone ever put you right before?”

Doyle stopped laughing to observe: “Well, I’ve never had to *ask* for it.”

No answer to that. Bodie tried to snatch back the book. Doyle put up a fight for it then surrendered, sweeping his paperback off the bed and onto the floor and closing his eyes. “Fellatio,” he tried out, a couple of times

Bodie yawned suddenly. Long, hard day. Another tomorrow. Rome.

“What time shall I set the alarm for?” Doyle was reaching out for the little clock.

“Breakfast at seven,” Bodie yawned again.

His partner said grimly, “We get breakfast tomorrow, do we?” He threw back the covers; the bed creaked.

The moment was upon him.

Bodie’s hand shot out and caught Doyle’s vanishing arm. Doyle turned, brow mildly creased in query.

“Don’t go away,” Bodie said, low, strung-out, and Doyle stared at him as if he were unreal.

“Wha—?”

Bodie swallowed over the sudden dryness in his throat, but his smile was devilish enough as he tilted his head at Doyle:

“Shouldn’t have started something if you didn’t want to finish it, Ray.”

“What are you on about?” Doyle said, but Bodie saw the very moment that sudden understanding struck in and Doyle’s eyes narrowed on him, still as a cat and tensed: Bodie grinned again.

“Ah, don’t be like that. Weren’t so innocent last night, were you? Why else’d you do it, if not to give me a thrill? Well, I gotta hand it to you. Thrill’s about right.” He lifted a finger, touched Doyle’s hand, trailing it down and around to his palm, making a caress of it; perhaps a sardonic one. “Must have felt pretty good for you, came off in about ten seconds flat, didn’t you? Got me wonderin’ what it looks like with a better view, that’s all.”

Doyle took a deep breath, his chest expanding hugely, and he breathed out fast. “What exactly are you suggestin’, Bodie?”

“You get yourself off. I watch.”

“Bodie. That’s wicked,” Doyle said, with the glimmerings of a smile, almost provocative in the way he glanced at Bodie. The other man shrugged.

“Who cares?”

Doyle took another deep breath; his eyes were wide pupilled with alcohol and alarm. But he made a quick decision: “Lock the door, then.”

Bodie had done that automatically when they came in; nevertheless he got up to check it. “Put the big light off,” Doyle said behind him.

“No.” Bodie denied him that. He came back to the bed and threw himself down next to his partner, turning so that he was propped on his elbow. Doyle was already unzipping his Levis, pushing them roughly and impatiently down his thighs, shoving his T-shirt up under his armpits, and then dragging down the waistband of a green slip of cotton to grasp his cock in his right hand, his left hand sliding automatically into his groin to press against his balls. And Bodie’s response was instantaneous, a leap of astonished desire whipping through him, his cock up-thrust and ironhard.

“All right then... Be quicker with a copy of Playboy,” Doyle said, shutting his eyes.

“Use your imagination. And I’ll just bet yours is something else.” They were both a little drunk, which helped. Doyle’s cock as he touched himself was already semi-hard; clearly the idea of doing this turned him on even if he wasn’t going to admit it. He sighed as he arched his back, hand sweeping up the strong shaft, caressing the head of it with his fingers, coaxing the slippery slit. “If Cowley ever gets one whiff of this we’re dead, you know that?” he said, without opening his eyes.

Bodie felt dizzy, almost sick with excitement. “Well, who’s gonna tell him.”

Doyle’s eyes came wide open at that: his left hand came away from the snugness of his groin though his thumb still slipped over and over the tip of his cock as if he could not bear to stop, “I’d never put it past you to gloat about this with one of your mates.”

“What mates?”

“Guess what Ray did in Italy’—”

“Of course I bloody well won’t.”

“Well, you’d better not, that’s all, or I’ll kill you.”

“Look Doyle, I swear it, it’s just between you and me. It’s no big deal, is it? Some blokes do this kind of thing all the time, ever been to a porn flick, have you?”

Doyle gave a grim smile, almost more like a snarl. “Not quite the same thing, is it?”

“Why isn’t it?”

“Fifty blokes all jerking off together at the movies is one thing, you wanting to watch me do it is something else. Something, I dunno, a bit perverted about it, I’d say. So you’d better make bloody sure you keep it to yourself.” Again that thumb slipping in a sweet, caressing pattern over the rosy, shining tip of his cock. Bodie had to swallow as he watched. “Now shut up,” Doyle said, losing his breath a little, and the fingertips of his left hand went in to press his balls again, his right beginning to fly.

Bodie watched it all, to the very end. Doyle didn’t go in for anything exotic, not this time anyway, didn’t even touch his nipples as Bodie had always imagined he would, didn’t spit into his hand for something wet to stroke himself with, didn’t do any of the interesting things he might have done, and yet it was still the most powerfully sexual charge Bodie had ever had, watching Doyle with his jeans and pants almost casually down his thighs, the T-shirt pushed up above his nipples. He watched with breath held the way Doyle listened to the inner voice of his body, touching himself delicately at first then working swiftly to the end when he tired of playing, the way his hips thrust off the bed and his hands stilled as his cock was shooting off, and then his fingers moving gently again, giving himself the very last gentle pleasure, right at the end of it all.

His stuff had flown everywhere: when it was all over he sat up, swearing, dragged his T-shirt over his head and mopped himself up with it.

Strong emotions were moving within Bodie; he wanted—

So many strange things.

When Doyle glanced over at him Bodie managed a shaky grin.

“Enjoy yourself, did you?” Doyle asked him almost sourly, still swabbing himself off, then chucking the soiled T-shirt into the far-off corner of the room. There were still little semen pearls in the dark hair on his lower belly, and one silvery trail of it along his ribcage which he had missed; and as Bodie watched he opened his hand, looked at his palm without expression, obviously about to go and wash it off.

Half-mad with wanting Bodie grabbed the hand and jerked it downwards and murmured into his ear, “Please, Ray. Please.”

Doyle’s whiplash rebuff was instant, every sinew in his wrist resisting. But Bodie, ruthless,

overpowered him and pressed Doyle's slick hand to his cock and closed the fingers around the aching, throbbing length of it. His voice sounded harsh, sadistic almost: "Just do it, Ray." He squeezed his eyes shut: erotic visions beguiled him. "Do it for me."

"Oh, Bodie," Doyle murmured; angry? disturbed? but he stroked Bodie's cock, oh the sweet feelings that evoked, kneaded it hard, harder, and Bodie convulsed as he got there, painful lust melting suddenly into a wonderful release, holding Doyle's hand hard onto himself until the very last.

Even in the fading glow he clutched Doyle hard and would not let him go.

"Jesus, Bodie," Doyle whispered to him again, breath warm and close against his face.

"It's all right," Bodie murmured. "Ssh, it's okay." Sleepy now, he muttered a little protest as Doyle extricated himself from his grip, and then fell back into sleep.

Doyle put the light off: went to the bathroom and washed, used the toilet, then came back to bed. Stretching over Bodie, careful not to touch him, he switched out the bedside lamp and the room went dark.

Bodie opened his eyes to the morning light coming in between the shutters, his brain engaging bit by bit, running the startup routine: who am I—? where am I—? Feeling okay—?

Everything checked out. But then higher brain function struck in and caused instant chaos.

Did I really—? Did he—?

Doyle was still peacefully asleep, breathing light and quick. Looking at him, at the hand curled around the bedclothes, Bodie experienced a detailed physical memory of Doyle touching him last night, making him come the way he had. His insides dissolved: they were not tender men, and yet it had been a peculiarly tender thing they had done.

He looked at Doyle's sleeping mouth, the shape of it, and knew what he was going to do. Careful to move gently he slipped an arm around Doyle and pulled himself closer, close enough to catch the warm, sleepy smell of his body and his breath. He kissed him on the mouth. At the same time his fingers brushed against Doyle's cheek.

"Wha' the hell—"

"Ssh," Bodie said. He closed his eyes in bliss and moved himself against Doyle's warm thigh.

"Bodie—"

"Just shut up, will you?" His hand rubbed down Doyle's chest to distract him and went lower, found his warm and willing cock waking up and ready to play. He gave it an encouraging squeeze and it seemed to like him, shy but sexy, nudging gently at his palm.

Bodie murmured again in pure pleasure, and then Doyle whipped himself and his sweet cock away. He glared.

“What the hell are you up to?”

“Oh.” Bodie murmured in reproach, “He was enjoying that.” He threw back the covers and nodded down at Doyle’s cock, now drooping disconsolately over his belly.

“Well, ’e shouldn’t have been, then,” Doyle snapped. “For godsake, Bodie... are you trying to turn me queer or something?”

“Why not, you haven’t got far to go, have you?” All this time Bodie was following him around the bed and Doyle was trying to evade him, not always successfully, slapping his hands away, eventually laughing:

“Bodie, stop it—! Stop it now!”

“Ah, come on, Ray,” Bodie said, serious now, sitting back on his heels. “We did it last night.”

“Yeah, but that didn’t mean we ’ad to do it again this morning.”

“Ah, just once more. Please.”

“Get off me, Bodie! Look, for the fifth and final time, I’m not queer, okay? An’ I’m beginning to wonder about you.”

Bodie groaned in exasperation, hands resting empty on his thighs. “Lots of blokes do it, Ray, doesn’t make them queer.”

“Yeah?” Doyle challenged. “Mates of yours, are they?”

“Look, we’re both in the mood for it, and there’s no women around unless you fancy trying your luck with Edna. They even have a name for it in the States—”

“Yeah, I just bet they do.”

“Fuck buddies,” Bodie pronounced.

Doyle looked as if he were going to be sick. Seizing his chance Bodie was on him again, seizing him by the upper arms and pushing him down to the pillow and throwing everything he could into the look he gave him—

“Just a kiss then, Doyle. One kiss.”

Utter stillness and silence. Doyle looked up at him, and Bodie smiled down, as tender and

intoxicated as he had ever been in his life.

Meaning to let fly with something sharp Doyle looked up into his partner's eyes; soft, dark blue, a sort of gentleness about him as he waited: "All right," he heard himself say, astonishing himself, and Bodie came in for it: he knew, somehow, just how to kiss Doyle to make him want it, and as his tongue, gentle, dipped into and caressed the inside of his mouth he ran his hand down Doyle's chest again, touched his nipples, found his cock again and held it, sliding it up and down against his palm.

The kiss, passionate and ardent and from the heart, was not what he would have expected from Bodie at all. Knowing himself too well, Doyle thought: If he keeps touching me like that I could be in trouble... Doyle's eyes opened to see Bodie's tightly shut, a trusting gesture from a dangerous man like Bodie. Those lashes: long and black, like silken threads. And over his shoulder, the clock—

"Bodie!!" he dragged his mouth away and hit out. "Have you seen the fuckin' time—bloody alarm didn't go off—"

Fifteen minutes till the coach was due to leave. Well, they could forget breakfast—Bodie caught Doyle's arm to prevent his mad leap out of bed.

"Tonight then?"

Clearly Bodie's mind was not on fallible timepieces, the hard bread he wasn't now going to get, and the splendour of the Eternal City. In fact, it seemed more than likely that Bodie at this moment would sacrifice the glories of Rome for the briefer glory of sex—and think he'd had the best of the deal.

His eyes besought Doyle's, urgent. "Tonight?"

"God, I dunno, Bodie," Doyle said inelegantly, disappearing into the bathroom. "See how I feel—okay?" Now water could be heard pelting down onto the tiled floor.

Bodie dropped his head back on the pillow and sighed deeply and dramatically. "This how you keep your women so hot for it, Ray?"

"What?" came the faint voice from the bathroom, wrapped around a toothbrush.

"Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen, eh?"

Doyle reappeared, naked, wet in places, and began to rummage through his bag for a suitable clean T-shirt. "Bodie. Behave." But the look which he flicked, flirtatious, over to the other man seemed full of promise.

And thus it was that 3.7 and 4.5 took the long road down to Rome, nearly in love like many before them. In the hot hell of Coach 99, Bodie could not help running through the night again

and again, what he had said, what Doyle had countered with, how Doyle had looked as he lay down, how he had made himself come and wiped himself off with the T-shirt: how these things might never come to pass again. He scarcely noticed the journey and did not even open the map. Gradually, though, he began to tune into the conversation around him, which was concerned mainly with the dinner-dance of the night before, evidently a roaring success: every different type of pasta, free wine, and an Italian tenor crooning throughout. Suki and Gianni had danced cheek to cheek by the light of the moon—and, presumably, spent the night thereafter in carnal acts from the way their hands were so intimately entwined this morning, the long, dewy-eyed looks they felt moved every few minutes to exchange.

Whatever the acts, he could not imagine it had been any sweeter than what he and his partner had done.

Me and Ray—we've got that same secret, today.

The objectionable child from three seats back was bouncing up and down and shrieking, its mother unsuccessfully trying to control it— “get down!” “stop it!” “This is the last time I'm going to tell you!” (A licence to continue—? It did.)

“Pity I didn't bring me gun, innit?” Doyle said gently, at Bodie's side.

“Browning, yeh? Good for stopping small wildlife at close range.”

“Or the Uzi? Couldn't miss.”

“Take a few of the others out as well, mind.”

“I could live with that.”

Fred's ears in front looked unnaturally cocked and alert to Bodie. Not a line of conversation to pursue: Fred had surprised him once or twice already by turning round to join enthusiastically in a conversation Bodie had not been aware was public domain. Bodie leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Enjoy yourself last night, did you?”

“Lovely. Lovely. You?” Fred half twisted round in his seat to nod and grin at them.

Doyle stirred himself and said in a quiet sort of way: “Yeh, we 'ad a very good night, thank you,” and at the mischief of it Bodie jolted beside him, but Doyle's face did not so much as flicker; too quickly Bodie began to explain about the meal out, the walk, the visit to the supermarket.

“Didn't see you at breakfast?” Edna cranked her huge bulk around to ask.

Nosy cow. “Overslept,” Bodie growled.

“Can’t say we did,” Fred yawned. “Not a wink.”

“Bed’s very comfy,” was Doyle’s offering.

“Not ours,” Fred said with deep gloom.

“No breakfast, eh?” Edna said. ““The boys must be starving—here, Fred, pass them these.”

And a sandwich or three later, when Fred seemed to have dozed off and Edna had her head deep in an oversized ham roll, Bodie said sotto voce to his partner:

“Shouldn’t you have said *are* very comfy?”

“What?” Doyle stared at him as if he were mad.

“The beds *are* very comfy,” Bodie hissed, looking around. “Don’t want people getting the wrong idea, do we?”

“Too late now,” Doyle shrugged. “Gonna look even worse, innit, if I tap ’im on the shoulder now going ‘you know just now, when you thought I said ‘the bed’s comfy’? What I really said was, the beds *are*—”

“Ah, stoppit and shuddup.” Bodie stretched out as far as possible—about three inches—and pressed his thigh to Doyle’s. The answering pressure he perhaps imagined, for when he opened his eyes Doyle was looking away from him, out of the window.

Bodie dozed, jerking in and out of sleep with the swaying of the coach and the piercing chatter of the child. The journey seemed, as ever, very long. As they turned onto the Rome ringroad he foolishly imagined that they must be nearly there, and sat up to look around with interest. However, one and a half hours later he began to understand that Rome consisted of 31 huge Zonas, through every one of which they had to pass before they arrived at the tiny bit in the middle containing anything of interest. And by the time they did he was hot, tired, bored, and fit to strangle the singing child behind.

“Shame, innit,” Doyle muttered beside him, “Just think, they could have bought a cat instead.”

And then the coach swung around a corner in heavy traffic to enter a long, impressive avenue. Huge white marble columns every few yards along the wide pavements signalled grandeur, the sense that the road led to somewhere highly important. The roadsides were lined with coaches, and at the end of the avenue could be seen a domed edifice.

“What’s that then?” Bodie said blankly.

“Church or something,” Doyle shrugged.

Fred turned around, unable to overlook such ignorance. “That’s the Vatican.”

“The Vatican!” Bodie breathed, and when Fred’s eyes had swivelled frontwards, wiggled his eyebrows irreverently at Doyle. Their driver gave them their instructions, two and a half hours of freedom before they were collected up again. The next thing was to stand up, wincing with cramp and stiffness, shuffle down the aisles hopping over people’s legs, bags and rubbish, waiting politely every so often for exceptionally large, slow people to amass their bags and waddle, puffing, out of their seats—Bodie grimly remarked they’d need a week of training to recover.

“You absolutely must go to the Sistine Chapel,” Edna instructed them with great firmness.

They never got there. Perhaps the glories of an imagined Paradise meant less to a CI5 agent than to the average man in the street: they had seen death, they knew it. And as they could testify, death was not about some dazzling golden vision of angels, trumpets, and the Lord. Far more pressing than such fancies were the calls of freedom—fresh air—! so that, perfectly happy in their own way, they wandered along the streets between the columns, bought warm pizza from a street vendor and chilled cans of drink. They investigated dozens of dark little shops selling jewellery, clothes, postcards, with old Italian women dressed in black sitting beady-eyed behind the tills. Bodie bought a Liverpool football shirt—

“What the ’ell’s that for?”

“Always wanted one,” Bodie said shamefaced, “and it was cheap.”

Doyle spent a long time browsing through the racks of T-shirts which, they discovered, cost no more than £1 each: but being particularly fussy, despite there being a choice of thousands he found neither the exact shade nor style to please him.

“Come on, Doyle. There must be one you fancy... how about this one?”

“I don’t want a picture of the Coliseum stretched across me chest.”

“Don’t blame you, mate. Why’d anyone want a flickhouse on his chest?”

Doyle looked at him askance. “D’you think we’d better buy a guidebook—?”

But there was so much to do and see in that one street that it took them over an hour to walk the 200 yards to St Peter’s Square. And they found it wonderful: a huge circle laid out like the rays of the sun, and after so much time in their half a cubic metre of Coach 99 it was bliss, just to stand out in the sun in so much open space. There was even a fountain and squabbling pigeons in case they felt homesick for Trafalgar. Before they could enter they had to pass the inspection of the Swiss Guard, who took a distrust to both of them and frisked them officiously. Bodie rolled his eyes as he raised his hands; so strange, these young uniformed men so arrogant, so important of themselves, versus himself and Doyle, so apparently tame, Doyle standing so patient and still for the search: and yet Bodie had the feeling that for all the guns and the Hitler boots and the

macho posturings of strength they were cream puffs: that he and Doyle could take them all if they tried.

The thought of violence and Doyle on to kill set off a chain reaction; he looked down at his partner kneeling casually on the stone paving adjusting the focus of his camera, and Doyle, acute, looked up. Time stopped: it froze the moment like a snapshot, sealing them into a private world.

“Remember tonight,” Bodie said, low, warm.

Doyle cocked a quizzical eyebrow at him, rising slowly on well-toned muscles to stand. He applied his eye to the viewfinder, reached his hand around the front to fiddle with the zoom as he said: “How can I remember tonight? It ’asn’t ’appened yet.”

And that seemed to Bodie full of promise for the night to come: a hint, nothing certain, still the challenge of seduction before him. “Stand there,” Doyle ushered him into place, pointed the camera at him. “Say cheese—”

His finger pressed the shutter release, the lens blinked once. Click.

In the photograph, which exists today, Bodie, in cords, a black T-shirt, dangling his jacket from one finger, looks not at the camera but through it to some unimaginable yonder: a man with something on his mind. Behind him there are rows and rows of chairs, and beyond those, the steps of the Vatican, upon which there is a tiny red dot—

Slinging his camera over his shoulder, “Look, Bodie—” Doyle nodded towards the dot— “I reckon that’s the Pope.”

Bodie crossed his eyes like a gibbon. “Who?”

“That’s who lives in the Vatican, innit?”

Bodie squinted. Certainly the crowds in the thousands of seats arranged before the steps seemed to be getting excited: a swelling roar had gone up, and then subsided to a simmering murmur. The little red dot had placed itself centrally at the top of the steps. It raised its arms, held out its hands. The crowd roared again.

“I dunno. Looks like George Cowley to me.”

“He’s come all this way just to check up on us.”

“Can’t get away with anything, can we?”

A voice began to intone something sonorous through loudspeakers over the whole of St Peter’s Square. Bodie winced. “Not old George, after all... because, if I’m not mistaken Ray m’lad, that is a prayer.”

Doyle was grimacing, holding up a hand to fend it off. “Time to go?”

On the way out they passed Fred and Edna at the back of a queue as long as the Serpentine, winding its way all around the sides of St Peter’s and round to the back: “Sistine Chapel!” Fred mouthed at them.

Of one mind about the Sistine Chapel and the queue thereof the two CI5 men turned back to walk along the street again: this time they took the other side and browsed there, buying a guidebook, two cans of beer, and a postcard for the office. They sat on a marble seat to consume the beer and compose the postcard, pleased with their final effort, which encompassed Rome, Pompeii, and the monastery in a few well-chosen words:

“HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME—SEEN THE POPE, VISITED A BROTHEL, BEEN TO HEAVEN.

3.7, 4.5.”

In search of a postbox Doyle turned off the main street into a side one, popped the card into a box, and spotted a bridge arching over the horizon in the distance. They walked to it, crossing en route a major road between streams of mad Italian Grand Prix traffic, and found their bridge. It was an immensely imposing and ancient structure of grey stone, crossing a wide river which was a strange pale green gooseberry shade. “Just like your eyes,” Bodie said inconsequentially to Doyle, who was gazing down into the waters with some vestigial long-ago classics lesson tweaking at his brain—

“Isn’t that the Tiber?”

“The what?”

“The actual Tiber.”

“Could be, I suppose.”

“Amazin’, innit?”

“Yeah, amazing,” Bodie humoured him.

“It was there all those years flowing through ancient Rome, and here it is—”

“—still flowing. And still in Rome! As you say, Doyle, amazing.”

Doyle hit him on the arm. “No soul, Bodie. No feeling for the past.” But in fact as they leaned on the stone parapets, for a moment it was there for both of them: literature browsed once long ago had left its legacy of words, the Senate, the Forum, Caesar and the legions, Et Tu, Brute. Doyle leaned against Bodie, and for a moment history came alive, here on this ancient bridge

crossing a river of green water.

And then it was time for their rendezvous upon the Via del ???, the Street of Many Coaches, to pile back into the warm, fuggy atmosphere of Coach 99, its inhabitants all agog with the beauty of the Sistine Chapel, or the horrors of the queues in the money-changing banks.

Bodie didn't mind about the Sistine Chapel. They had had the Tiber instead.

The sightseeing tour was next. First port of call was a high viewpoint where huge antiquities and monuments could be glimpsed all over the city, popping up like incongruous mushrooms amid the office blocks and flats. Doyle leaned on the wall overlooking the panorama and gazed out, the wind blowing back his hair: Bodie materialised at his side bearing two cornettos. "Don't say I never buy you nuffink." Taking one, Doyle blew him an impromptu kiss. Sharp-eyed Suki spotted it and telegraphed a speaking glance to her husband. Bodie saw Doyle track the exchange but not react to it. Good on you, Doyle. What do we care what they think, anyway?

But in a way he did care.

The next stop was the Coliseum, a giant antiquity, far huger than one would ever imagine from its regular appearances on mugs, jugs and ladies' headscarves. Doyle and Bodie peered through solid iron bars at the vast circus ring inside, the tiers of seats rising to the skyline, and tried to visualise screaming Christians scattered by leaping, pouncing lions as crowds of ancient Romans roared and cheered. The violence of the past seemed so much nobler and more magnificent than the violence of today: it was only moments before they faced their first brush with the roguery they had been warned was rife in modern Rome when a crowd of narrowfaced blank-eyed gipsy children milled about them, young girls who looked no more than twelve carrying dirty, pretty babies on their skinny hips—

"Oi!" Bodie jumped and slapped a hand away from his pocket: Doyle caught the offending wrist as it withdrew bearing Bodie's wallet. "Prego, prego, signori," muttered the girl and melted away into the crowd, but others were not so lucky, several inhabitants of Coach 99 returning to it without their purses.

Back onto the coach. On and off again. After a while it all became a bit of a blur. People began to argue about which famous antiquity they had just been whisked past because after a while everything began to look the same, all huge, all fabulous, all ancient.

But there was one place they never forgot. Hustled off the coach, whisked down narrow alleyways, all 64 inhabitants of Coach 99 arrived in a tiny square at the back of which loomed a huge snowy marble sculpture of pillars and men and horses ejecting plumes of water into a bluish pool. Tourists thronged around this pool in their hundreds. Bodie and Doyle pushed their way right to the front in seconds: they were young, they were arrogant, they had no manners. Doyle knelt and dipped a hand into the cool water.

"Wait a minute," Bodie said, looking down at Doyle meditatively, "This is something famous, this is. 'Ang on. It'll come to me."

“Well, don’t force it.”

“No, it’s coming. ’S a fountain, innit? Three coins— something about three coins in a fountain—”

“It’s the heat, Bodie, it’s getting to you. Here—sit down. I’ll duck your head in.”

Dodging— “It’s the Trevi Fountain,” Bodie arrived at it triumphantly. “You ’ave to throw a coin in, it’s traditional.”

Doyle snorted where he knelt, one wrist draped artistically across his knee. “Yeah, sounds like a tradition worth encouragin’.”

“Cynic. You throw in a coin, see, and that means you’re sure to come back to Rome one day.”

Obviously thinking deeply Doyle tossed up the alternatives and came to a decision. “Nope: think I’ll keep the money.” He began to rise and Bodie thumped him. Laughing, Doyle half-fell against the low fountain wall, might have tipped backwards over it if Bodie hadn’t rescued him with a lazy hand.

“Tighter than Cowley’s arse, aren’t you, mate?”

“—only you would know that, Bodie—”

“Okay, okay. I’ll pay for you, that’s what you want, isn’t it.” Bodie fished in his pocket for a coin but Doyle slapped his hand away.

“No thanks, I’ll pay for meself. Won’t work otherwise.”

They stood there on the steps of the Trevi fountain, each with a lire coin in their hand, looking at the blue water, the dazzling white marble, the thronging holiday crowds. Then Doyle drew back his arm, let gently fly with his coin: it twisted through the air, glistening in the strong sunlight and fell with a gentle splash into the water. Bodie did the same, the coin describing an arc through the air before it fell. Bodie had a good eye for such things; he reckoned that if he could dive beneath the surface his own coin would be as near to Doyle’s as it could be, perhaps even atop it. And Doyle turned and grinned at him, acknowledging without words the little feat of skill, and Bodie watched his hair change colour as the sun drifted in and out of clouds, and the patterns of moving water rippling across the green of his eyes; and into his mind came the thought, curiously exact and complete:

I’m going to fall in love with you. And you won’t fight.

A shout recalled them to rejoin ranks: rounded up and counted they left the Trevi fountain and their coins, slumbering together on the ancient fountain floor.

They were going back up through the maze of alleyways, Bodie and Doyle dropping back to the rear of the party, loping along at a steady pace, soaking up the unexpectedly atmospheric aura of this back-street vista, not intended for tourists—narrow cobbled paths, scraggy washing hanging everywhere from windows, rubbish in the gutters and urchins running barefoot. Squalour: but somehow rather splendid squalour, the smell of Italian cooking herbs in the air. Then they became aware of a little drama taking place ahead: the cross Coach 99 mother had lost, it seemed, the Coach 99 child.

“So there is a God,” murmured Bodie, reverently bowed head, and “I’d just cut me losses and run, meself,” was Doyle’s offering, which made them both inclined to laugh: that was until they saw the woman’s utter panic and distress and joined in the search without further ado. Mother love! inexplicable.

Going down one street so narrow it was more like a cart-track, Bodie turned a corner and ran into trouble. There was Fred, three youths with him, and they had hold of the elderly gent’s camera strap. The expressions on their faces made the encounter instantly recognisable: “Hey!” Bodie shouted, and powered up into a run, and wrenched the strap away, interposing himself, solid and brutish, between the little gang and Fred. He even allowed himself a grin as he put up his hands: nice odds, just the way he liked it. He was definitely going to enjoy this, missing infants were really not much in his line at all.

Until three more thugs arrived as if from nowhere—and two of them carrying knives, sharp wicked-looking things, the sort of knives which could do a lot of damage in an unethical hand. The hands holding these looked very unethical indeed. Bodie judged right and left distances quickly, dived, grabbed a wrist, jerked its owner towards him and kned it in the groin extremely hard. It fell to the ground writhing in a most satisfactory way. The remaining thugs seemed to take this up as a challenge: five swarthy, grinning Italians, the scent of garlic and sweat hanging heavy in the air. “Fred?” Bodie said over his shoulder, “Get back to the others—and if you see Ray anywhere—”

Alert, he leaped to one side as the knife went for him, got in under the man’s armpit and threw him off, chopping his hand down hard on his wrist so that the hand flew open and released the knife: misguidedly brave, Fred had not left after all, was muddling about behind getting in Bodie’s way: one more softskinned target for Bodie to protect. By now his reflexes were zinging into gear, sending messages like lightning along his nerves: he didn’t even feel the knife that caught his wrist, but it was all getting nasty and it made him angry. Bodie thumped and chopped and ducked with violent intent: and then, there behind him, was Ray Doyle.

“About bloody time.” Relief, and yes: excitement: this was more like it, this was the life they knew and the game they always won. Doyle was taking off his jacket, looping it swiftly around his arm.

“Big strong lad like you—and you need me?”

“Good experience for you, m’boy. Watch and you might learn something.” He saw the thugs weighing up the new arrival: not rating it overhigh on first impressions. They moved in closer.

Watching them, Doyle gave a quick, ferocious smile. “You wanna watch ’im,” Bodie warned, “’e kicks—” And in a blur of action Doyle’s boot was jabbing a vulnerable Italian crotch with a vicious-sounding crunch.

“—told you.” Bodie said with a smug smile.

The balance of power having tipped, the Italians were soon on the run. Exchanging a look, just one little glance of acknowledgment of a job well done, the CI5 men turned their attention to Fred, who far from being exhilarated was obviously very shaken up.

“You’d never have thought it,” he kept repeating as Doyle’s hand eased beneath one armpit to guide him gently on his way, “You’d never think it would you? Not when you’re on your holidays.”

As they rounded a corner and recognised the way back Doyle nodded at Bodie’s wrist— “That need a stitch, does it?” It was bleeding quite profusely. Bodie was pinching it between the finger and thumb of his other hand.

“Nah, the power of my will’s enough,” Bodie said impressively, but he accepted the offer of the clean white hanky Doyle flourished at him and stood still while Doyle neatly and tightly tied it around the wound. They had reached the rest of the party now, standing around in the square where Coach 99 awaited them; there was an excited babble of speech all around as Fred tried to tell the story of his adventure, himself and Bodie and Doyle fending off a crazed gang of robbers, while others regurgitated the tale of the found child, and from one side came the sounds—

“Don’t you ever—” slap, slap, scream— “ever—” slap— “ever do that again, do you understand me?”

So much excitement, the glories of Rome, the lost-and-found child, the Muggers and the Heroes, united Coach 99 in a tight band of gang-spirit: the return journey had the feel of a travelling party, quite rowdy at times, duty free booze passed around in plastic cups and eagerly downed. And when they spotted from the coach window a line of men peeing into a stream and the child asked loudly what they were doing and its mother replied quickly ‘fishing’, Doyle’s audible snort of “Short rods!” brought the house down. It had been, everyone agreed, a good day, a really Good Day, the stuff of lifetime memory.

Later on people were quietening down, and the child was evidently asleep—either that or, as Bodie cruelly suggested, had been garotted by the man behind with the strap of his sunglasses; Doyle too was dozing, swaying with the rhythm of the journey, heavy and limp against Bodie as the coach took corners. Bodie, as always the only one left awake, took the opportunity to unwind the bloody hanky and examine his hand—the cut, extending from his wrist to his forearm, was long but not deep and the bleeding had slowed to a reddish ooze.

He looked up from the wound to find Doyle’s eyes unexpectedly watching him, drowsy green.” That bothering you?” Doyle asked, yawning; he took Bodie’s hand into his and drew it onto his lap, turning it gently this way and that. The touch sent little shocks racing along Bodie’s nerves

and raised all the hairs on his skin. Doyle's fingers were so tender on him, the small pain he was causing quite exquisite— "I'll look at it later for you," Doyle promised, green gaze dwelling intently on his face; Bodie wondered, winded, if Doyle knew what the look, the touch, was doing to him. His hand lay on Doyle's lap; gently, almost imperceptibly, he pressed his knuckles against him. Doyle stayed very still, head down, as if just looking at Bodie's arm; beneath his touch Bodie sensed a tension, a springing to life. Heart pounding, head spinning, he lifted his arm away and stared for some time out of the window across the aisle without seeing a thing.

What a risk to take, all but touching Doyle up in public. Yet it had been—thrilling. He felt—brilliant, boundless with life and energy and excitement. He was just, so, glad that they had taken this path. Whatever came of it, something, nothing, it was a strange and wonderful new dimension to his life.

He must have dozed off himself, for the next he knew was the world filtering back into his ears and Doyle shifting about next to him as the coach drew up outside Pensione Alberto. The time was 6.30PM. They went to their room for a pee and a wash. Doyle came out of the bathroom yawning widely: "Hard work this, innit?"

"Need a holiday when you get back to recover from the holiday," Bodie agreed, flopping back full length on the bed.

"I tell you what, though. We'd better jog off to the shop—no chance tomorrow, full day out."

"Where is it tomorrow. Just remind me."

"Capri. Where the cars come from."

"Ah yeah," Bodie sighed romantically, "Napoleon's Isle."

Doyle canted a disbelieving glance his way. "Nah, don't think so. This is the one with the volcano."

"No way. You're thinking of Sicily."

"What makes you think Capri's an island anyway?" Doyle was opening the bedroom door. Wishing he could stay where he was Bodie swung his weary legs off the

bed and followed him.

"Why else would we be going by boat, Mastermind?"

"Because we're on an island now, of course."

"Italy isn't an island, Doyle. What's the matter with you?"

"Well, it's part of one, innit? Came across by ferry, didn't we? Can't *walk* off Italy, can you?"

“Yeh, you can. But only if you’re going to Switzerland.” They were clattering down the narrow stairway by now, jostling and laughing as Bodie tried to get past Doyle and take the lead, Doyle neatly retaining pole position by dint of some fancy footwork. “Going out to eat?” kindly Fred asked of them as they arrived in the foyer.

“Haven’t decided yet,” Doyle was answering, flying off the bottom step with the help of a hefty thump to the small of his back. “Of!—But I can’t say I fancy Bodie’s cold sausages and bottled water.”

“We’ve found a little place down the road. Fancy joining us? Suki and Gianni are coming, and Don and Eileen, and—”

Bodie met Doyle’s eyes, read no violent dissent there, so that was settled. First of all though they went to the little supermarket because it might be their last shopping opportunity, and stocked up on beer and bottled water and a few duty-frees to take back home—some Italian Scotch for Cowley, which should annoy him nicely, and a fancy bottle of olive oil for Doyle, who had chef-like pretensions. Then they joined the others on a party-spirited expedition to the local pizza restaurant.

Throughout this evening Bodie was peripherally aware of a feeling of alienation: it didn’t unsettle him, he was too used to it: he could watch these ordinary human beings at play, even join in for a while, but he was essentially apart. Doyle too. Was it that life in CI5 was so desensitising, so that everywhere they looked they saw life’s blackest side, always ready to draw a gun and fire, that they had lost the knack of being normal?

Or, Bodie mused, was it the other way round entirely. That they had always been different, and that was how and why George Cowley had spotted them, and recruited them for CI5?

Of all the people here, he could be close only to one: another outsider, like himself, one who would also be a devil if he had not been cast by George Cowley in the role of saint. They did not fit in here among this party of chattering tourists; six days away playing in this dreamtime was long enough, it was time he and Doyle were back in their world.

Doyle nudged him. “Oi. What’s on your mind?”

“Dunno really. Just feel—”

“Homesick?”

“Nah, not really.”

Doyle studied him for a moment longer. “That wrist okay?”

Bodie had forgotten it, looked down at it in surprise. Oozing redly through the clean hanky he had applied in the room.

“Let’s get back,” Doyle said, rising.

Bodie looked around. The party was in full swing, Suki was in a violent mood with Gianni who had apparently ordered her the wrong sort of pasta, spitting fire at him; everyone was a little bit drunk, but dessert had not yet arrived. “Bit difficult to get away, don’t you think?” Social nicety was not high on Doyle’s agenda; Bodie sat back and watched, detachedly admiring, as Doyle sorted out payment with Fred and made their understated farewells. Someone, however, noticed their premature departure:

“Off so soon?” bright-eyed Suki asked, head on side. “Anyone’d think you two were a pair of honeymooners.”

Doyle had his claws sheathed among the general public, but all the same there were not many people who ever walked away smiling from a joust with Ray Doyle. He leaned over the table and smiled a blazing smile and spoke through his teeth: “Well, sweetheart, no-one’d make that mistake about you.”

The streets were dark, and they walked side by side in silence. Lacking a gun to fondle, Bodie had his hands thrust into his pockets, but Doyle, that most harmonious of movers, had his thumbs tucked through the belt-holds of his jeans. Neither of them went in for idle chat, and it wasn’t until Doyle noticed something— “Starting to rain, innit?” that the first word was spoken. Doyle was wearing a white jacket, Bodie a cream one— “Better run—” and they darted through the streets beneath a sudden drenching rush of rain, finally tumbling, wet and panting, in through the doors of the pensione Alberto.

In their room Doyle flung open the balcony doors and the shutters and let the fresh, rain-chilled air roll into the room while Bodie pushed past him and went in to use the toilet. Doyle followed him in and began to wash his hands at the basin, looking in the mirror at himself as he did it. Lifting his eyes from the lavatory bowl as he tucked himself in, Bodie met his eyes in the mirror: Doyle looked solemn, eyes wide, rosebud mouth set in a grave repose, but Bodie looked pale, skin almost translucent, a ghost behind. Impatient, Bodie shoved him out of the way and began to wash his own hands, turning the soap over and over to get a good lather; it got in his cut which began fiercely to sting and he snatched it out of the water, wincing. Doyle noticed: “Lemme look at that again.”

They looked at it together in silence. Finally Doyle shook his head. “I dunno, Bodie. Even on holiday you can’t leave it alone, can you? Got a first aid kit on you?”

Not as such: but he had a little tin army box of aspirin, stomach pills and plasters. “Come on then, Dr Doyle.” He sat on the edge of the bed and extended his arm. Doyle took Bodie’s hand in his and flexed his other arm so that it rested on Bodie’s thigh, and looked again at the sliced wrist. It was a clean cut, no ragged edges. Used to years of small injuries, the two of them no longer believed in Savlon or the like: they had learned from experience that wounds healed faster the less they were mucked about with. But—

“I dunno, Bodie, nasty innit? I reckon it could do with a stitch.”

“Don’t be daft. Just stick it back together, will you?” Bodie was always loftily heroic about his injuries. Shrugging, Doyle cut some little strips of plaster and began to work in silence. Not moving, Bodie looked down as Doyle knelt before him; his curls were soft with the heat and brightened by the Italian sun. Bodie breathed in deliberately; Doyle was very close to him, leaning against Bodie’s thighs; he smelt warm, a little aftershave, a little sweat, the tang of alcohol. An erotic sensation began to crawl across his skin, a moth’s wing brushing on his nerves. It might go either way: might be killed off before it gained a life, if Doyle did or said the wrong thing, or seemed cold, or ugly, when he looked up—

And when he did, the shadows in the room played across his face; half in shade Bodie saw there again the face of the monk, the ascete, a purity astride whatever inner demons he might have. Seemingly lost for words Doyle looked into his eyes, and held Bodie’s hand lightly in his own, his other wrist draped negligently across his own denim-clad thigh. Bodie cleared his throat and tried out his voice: “Thanks.”

That seemed to remind Doyle that he had finished: he let go of Bodie’s hand. “Feel any better?”

“Yeah, much. Thanks.”

“Better get ready for tomorrow?” Doyle said, almost with the lilt of a question, bouncing on his haunches, ready to rise.

Bodie roused himself. “Yeah. Yeh, good idea.” They assembled stuff in silence, clothes for the morning, money, passports, a jacket each for the boat, camera. Finished, Bodie went back to the bathroom, washed, brushed his teeth, looked at his pale face and his darkened eyes in the mirror. Still that sensation in the pit of his stomach: dread? excitement? When he got back into the bedroom Doyle was closing up the shutters and locking the windows. The air in the room was fresh and chilly. Bodie threw off his clothes quickly and got in between the covers, lying on his back with his hands behind his head.

For the first time in his life it felt odd to be lying here with Ray Doyle in the room, and to be naked. Yet to abandon normal practice and wear some token garment would be equally odd: what sort of message would that give out? I am unafraid to be naked with you = you are no threat to me: I must garb myself in your presence = there is some doubt about your intentions.

Oh yeah, it was even almost funny, put like that. Maybe one day they could share the joke. He lay quite still, open-eyed, as Doyle pulled back the covers and got in beside him. Bodie said nothing, and had nothing in mind to say. For Doyle must know how he felt. Bodie knew quite well his response must have been obvious as Doyle knelt there before him: if not quite trembling, he had certainly been hard enough to show.

“Light out?” Doyle queried.

“Yeh.”

The sudden blackness and silence was disorienting. Bodie's senses fought for and gained some meaning out of it: gradually dark shapes appeared here and there around the room. Still Doyle did not touch him.

Oh, get real, Bodie. Doyle wasn't going to, was he?

The realisation came to him in a rush, and almost as a relief. His fingers began to unclench on the sheet. It had all been a fantasy. He had been mad to even dream that Doyle might be going to make some sexual overture towards him: no such thing was ever going to happen, and that was just how it should be.

"Bodie?"

The whisper made him jump. "What?"

And in disbelief he heard Doyle do it, take that astonishing leap into the dark: "Still fancy it, do you?"

Bodie had to force the answer out through dry lips. "How d'you mean?"

"Ah, come on. You haven't forgotten this morning, have you? I've been thinking about it all day."

Christ almighty. His heart jolting and his blood singing in his ears Bodie said, lips hardly moving, "Have you?"

"Course I have. Haven't you?"

Bodie swallowed, and made the no-way-back admission: "Yeah."

"Well, come on then."

As Doyle moved closer to him Bodie felt the brush of his skin across the lifted hairs on his body, Doyle's breath light and warm on his face. "We've gotta keep this closer than MI5, Bodie," the soft voice warned, "We'd lose our jobs just like that if anyone even knew about last night, let alone anything else."

"You think I don't know that? I read the bloody small-print too, y'know."

"Just wanna get it straight. Whatever we do out here—it's not going back with us, okay?"

Bodie always had lived for the moment in hand and the promise came from him easily: "Yeah—now stop carryin' on like an old woman."

"And if anyone did twig it—let's get the story right— we're on holiday and these things

happen,” Doyle improvised rapidly, “—we ’ad too much to drink one night, we tried it for a laugh, can’t remember exactly what we did but nothing much happened, that sound okay?”

“Look, Doyle,” Bodie was surprised at the acid thinness of his own voice, “it’s not gonna make the Nine O’clock News when we get back, y’know.”

“Just in case. What if Cowley put a tail on us?”

“Why the hell would he do that?” Bodie gazed at him in disbelief. “And use your bloody common sense— where would it all end? If he’s that suspicious he’d have to put a tail on the tail, and another tail on that and he’s short of manpower as it is with us away. We’ve never been asked to tail anyone, have we—3.7, 4.5, would ye mind tailing Murph and Jones tae Amsterdam, just tae make sure they’re no’ bonking each other on the quiet, ye understand—!” and he felt Doyle laughing a little beside him, paranoia edged out by absurdity. He went on, groping for and finding Doyle’s hand, placing it on himself, “And in any case, even if we did have a bloody tail it’s not here in the room with us now, is it, so shut up or I’ll lose interest.”

Doyle moved closer, seemed to be hesitating. “I’m nearly asleep as it is,” Bodie yawned, “reckon you can wake me up?” He shut his eyes as he felt Doyle’s hand pass across his chest in a brief, heartstopping caress; then, implausibly, deliciously, thin cool fingers travelling lower, running lightly over his sensitive skin. Bodie winced and shivered as Doyle touched him on his nipples, rougher than a woman but surer; after a moment he seized Doyle’s wandering hand and pushed it down to where he wanted it. Doyle seemed to understand that, murmuring sexily to Bodie: “Yeah, you liked this last night didn’t you, you made me do it,” and squeezed him long and hard. Bodie made a low, helpless sound, turning his head away from Doyle and then towards him again, searching for his face, but he could see nothing more than shadows, the gleam of an eye, a tooth.

“Put the light on.” And Doyle reached out over him and switched on the small bedside light. Bodie lay on his back, arms behind his head, and Doyle came back to him, laid his hands along the sides of Bodie’s face and found Bodie’s mouth with his own, parting his lips with a gentle tongue, dipping inside and tasting him slowly. The kiss was long and fluid. “You’re so sexy, Ray,” Bodie murmured against his mouth when they paused to draw breath, “Watching you doin’ it last night—got me so hot—”

Doyle gave a little sigh, remembering. “Yeah, wasn’t that something else?” He moved in again to kiss Bodie’s mouth, his cheek, his ear, dipping his tongue inside to make Bodie shiver again.

“How often d’you do it, Ray?”

“Do what?”

“You know.”

Doyle nuzzled his sensitive earlobe and broke off to whisper into it: “When I feel like it.”

“Once a week—? Once a day—?”

“Bodie.” Lightly, Doyle straddled the other man’s body and looked down at him, palms massaging Bodie’s nipples slowly, eyes closing as he found Bodie’s cock with his own and pressed into it, moving in a slow, sexy way.

“How often, Doyle?” Bodie persisted, voice a little hoarse, thrills of pleasure shooting through him as Doyle sighed again and kept up the slow and gentle rhythm of massage, answering him:

“Oh Bodie, I dunno. I don’t write it in my diary, y’know.”

“Don’t you?” Bodie whispered, hands rising to take hold of Doyle’s hips, guide him more firmly.

“Why d’you want me to tell you, anyway?”

“Why d’you think?”

“Turns you on, does it?” Doyle had it now, that certain tidal rhythm, rubbing their cocks sweetly together, the bliss of it closing his eyes for a moment then opening them to stare down in a hazy sort of way: “This doesn’t turn you on enough, then?”

“Yeah. Oh, yeah... Doyle. Keep it going, will you?”

He fought to hold it there, keep that sense of lazy pleasure building, knowing all the while that in the way of things it could not last. Doyle moved on top of him and he made himself be still, not to spoil Doyle’s perfect timing; Doyle raised himself on his elbows and looked down into Bodie’s face, his gaze drifting, his lashes lifting and falling as he breathed, quite hurried now, almost panting. Bodie could no longer be still, thrusting hard upwards again and again and the rhythm broke; it became a struggle, Doyle wild, nipping and plunging, desperate only to please himself, and Bodie left to fight alone. At one point there was a scuffling outside the door of their room, and voices shouting: Doyle raised his head, tensing, and appeared for a moment to be listening, but then, shuddering, he dropped his head again to Bodie’s shoulder and thrust himself violently at Bodie, freezing perfectly still: Bodie, sweating and trembling, felt the tremors of the other man’s ejaculation pulsing sharply, wetly onto Bodie’s skin.

Doyle slumped on top of him, limp, heart pounding right on top of Bodie’s own. Bodie grabbed him and threw him off and rolled on top of him, thrusting urgently between thighs which tumbled apart for him, coming in seconds, Doyle’s hand over his mouth keeping in the long, imploring moan he could not help but make as the orgasm ripped through him.

Bodie slept for a moment afterwards and then awoke, and watched over Doyle, fiercely, in the silence of the Italian night.

When at last his eyes unclosed to bright morning light, he was alone in the bed. He lay on his back for a moment, and tracked Doyle’s whereabouts at last: he was on the little balcony, fully

dressed, leaning out.

“All right?” Bodie said, and had to try his voice out again before it worked.

“Nice mornin’,” Doyle said, coming in. He was wearing a green v-necked jumper today, and the lighter denim jeans. He had washed his hair.

“What time is it?” Bodie asked, yawning.

“No hurry. Got time for breakfast this morning.”

Right. He knew where he was, then. Bodie had a thorough shower and washed his hair. The slash on his wrist was healing nicely so he gritted his teeth and yanked the plasters off. Then he had a complete change of clothes, clean white cords, cream shirt. Good job they were going home tomorrow; his dirty garments now outnumbered the clean by about two to one.

And if Doyle was going to play it cool today, well, fine. He needed a breathing space himself; he didn’t know where he was any longer, life seemed to have changed.

Suki just happened to look their way and happened to wave just as they entered the dining room, so they sat with the London couple for breakfast. The bread and jam routine was unchanged, as was the battle for the coffee. However, here Gianni’s Italian birth came in handy as the waitresses rushed to fill his cup even before he lifted it into the air, and then he would graciously indicate to them Bodie’s, obviously enjoying the little condescension: Bodie then had to fight with himself to get the expected syllable of gratitude out. Suki seemed to spend most of the time leaning across the table and staring deeply and meaningfully into Doyle’s eyes, at least when he deigned to lift them from his plate.

“Ever go to any of the London clubs, Ray?”

“Yeh, sometimes.”

“He go with you?” she nodded at Bodie.

“Nope,” Doyle said, “Not a clubbing type.”

“Oh, you never asked me,” Bodie camped. Doyle ignored him: Bodie’s expression did not change, though his senses registered the direct hit. Reaction’s certainly set in there, then.

Doyle left the table soon afterwards to go back to the room with five minutes to spare. “You two fallen out?” Suki asked Bodie, big brown eyes peering over the rim of her very expensive glasses.

“Not as far as I know... still, Ray’s the moody type. You won’t believe this. He’s booking again for October, got the idea to bring his bird back with him: good luck to her, I say.” Bodie dropped this in with a cool smile and did not look their way as they tried hard not to exchange glances.

Doyle was weaving his way back through the tables at that point: “Isn’t that right, Ray,” Bodie said as Doyle came within earshot

“What?” Doyle picked up his last piece of dry bread and looked at it without appetite.

“Bringing Sylvie with you next time, weren’t you saying?”

“Not if she hears about breakfast,” was Doyle’s only comment, dropping the bread back onto the table.

By 6.30 AM they were on their way. In his seat Bodie shut his eyes and tipped his head back and made no attempt at conversation. He was, he realised, very tired: travelling nonstop, so many impressions coming and going, lack of a regular routine or even the chance to stop and breathe and take stock between things of large historical or cultural importance. Every minute of their time seemed to be accounted for by the tour itinerary, except of course for the hours between dusk and dawn, and those too had their story.

He was awoken by a nudge in his side and there was Doyle, holding two steaming cups of the liquid which the driver’s grumpy assistant passed off as coffee.

“Thanks,” Bodie grunted, still half asleep, and took it.

Doyle pushed back the bracelet on his arm and grinned at him as he yawned and stretched in his seat. “Worn you out, have I?” His voice was quiet, but not unduly so.

“You’re not kidding.” He took a sip of the coffee, grimaced. “Talking to me now, are you?”

“Shouldn’t I be?” His hand was lying alongside Bodie’s between them, and for one moment Bodie felt the hair-raising sensation of a fingertip touching his, though Doyle’s head was turned away, looking out of the window.

“Thought I’d upset you,” Bodie said, and took another cautious sip.

Doyle turned his way, and his expression was cool, appraising: “Oh, you have.”

Bodie’s heart flipped over in his chest. He gulped the coffee down and crumpled the plastic cup in his hand, staring ahead.

“Might never be the same again,” Doyle added, unsmiling; and then he seemed to look away from troubling inner thoughts to see Bodie himself, his lips curving up, his eyes suddenly friendly, warm. As if he would touch him, if he could. Kiss him, perhaps.

Bodie’s heart quickened in a way it did not under gunfire. Things had changed; it scared him a little bit, excited him more. And there was still the night to come.

Meanwhile there were the motions of tourism to be gone through. Coach 99 was left forlornly at

the Naples harbour alongside Coach 101 to watch all of its 64 inhabitants board a ferry and sail away across the Mediterranean. Today had a truly holiday feel to it, away from the dusty roads of cities ancient and modern and out onto the deep blue ocean. On deck it was breezy, and they soon got chilled standing there by the railings watching the ferry's white and foaming wake streaming out behind them, the hot reek of engine oil in the air; it was time to go below decks, where to their delight they found a bar. Also many of their fellow Coach 99-ers, but as Bodie said, nothing in life was perfect. He bought two beers—

“Bit early, innit?”

“We're on holiday—” they chorused together and rounded the corner in search of a private spot to drink it. And there behind a capstan coiled about with thick rope lurked the Coach 99 child, with something sticky in its hand. Bodie smiled at it pleasantly then goggled his eyes— “Boo!” he said quietly. The child fled, wide-eyed.

Acknowledging the success of this Doyle raised an eyebrow at Bodie, then took up a pose leaning on the capstan and had a swig from his can. “Like kids, do you?”

“All right in their place, I suppose.”

“Want some of your own?” Doyle tipped up his can again, one hand raking through his hair; he looked out to sea, at the factories and the smoke of Naples all along the coastline.

“I dunno. Maybe one day.” Odd question. “Don't just get 'em out of the blue, y'know. But I suppose I'd like to leave something behind.”

Doyle nodded, eyes fixed on the view to sea. “Yeah, I reckon most people feel like that.”

Bodie didn't like the mood of this conversation. If Doyle was trying to send him some subliminal message by it he sensed it was a message he did not want to hear. “Look, Doyle, I'm not looking to the future at the moment. Can't see further than tomorrow right now. Leave it at that, yeah?”

Doyle just looked at him, eyes grey and reflective, the wind blowing back his hair. “Tomorrow may never come, remember?” Bodie continued determinedly. He stamped disparagingly on the somewhat scruffy deck. “They say ‘see Naples and die’ don't they? This boat's on its last legs, for a start.”

That did the trick. Doyle's lip lifted cheerily. “Yeah, noticed it was listing to the left just now. You were stood over that side at the time, but I don't know if—”

He was gone, and Bodie after him, armed with a dripping can.

Capri rose up like a jewel set in the sea: it sparkled. Emerald greenery crawled up the sides of its cliffs; white houses, pink houses, blue houses were set higgledypiggledy around the harbour they were fast approaching. “This is the life,” Doyle yawned as he leaped with lazy energy off the

ferry onto the gangway.

“Yeah, isn’t it?” The place was bustling with life and vigour, pleasure boats and fishing smacks side by side at the quay, souvenir shops and cafe-bars clustering along the narrow street. But any thoughts they might have had of freedom were quelled by the appearance of a guide bearing down upon the Coach 99 crowd; he carried a rainbow-coloured golf umbrella for easy recognition, but this did seem superfluous given his huge and shining bald cranium, and the fringe of hair to his earlobes beneath just like a cake-frill.

Cake-Frill rounded them up, coralled them into sections, loaded them onto several minibuses which then took to the narrow streets and up hills to the smart and stylish little square named AnaCapri, where expensive shops for leather, marquetry, lace and jewellery predominated. Most of Coach 99 seemed keen to browse here but Bodie had thoughts of insurrection on his mind. He pushed through the crowds to find his partner.

“Fancy going off with me?”

“Oh, Bodie, you know how to tempt a bloke,” Doyle automatically fluttered his lashes and Bodie swatted him on the rear.

“—I mean, shall we make our excuses and go?”

Doyle merely raised an eyebrow at him this time, his glance significant, and Bodie felt a shockwave strike right through him: Doyle had lain on top of him and come all over him last night. It didn’t bear thinking about, not now, and soon not ever. “Yeah,” was all Doyle said, and took things immediately in hand, strolling over with that easy swagger to the coach driver, who was soon shaking his head, obviously not keen on splitting up the party. Bodie saw the insolent tilt of his partner’s head; Ray Doyle could be rude for England if called upon.

“Okay?” Bodie asked as Doyle shouldered his way back through the throng to him.

“Yes—” Doyle stopped to consider, lips pursed: “But we mustn’t get lost, we must be back by 3.30, we must remember we are ambassadors for our country and—” he paused again, primly—“we must wash our hands if we go to the toilet.”

“No problem,” Bodie said, “Brought up proper, we was,” and heads together, laughing, they made their escape.

Once they had got through the crowds and run the gauntlet of lace stalls they found a beautiful walk along a high coastal path, passing by the cool and shady gardens of a lovely classical villa: they came to a viewing point and paused there to look out at the sparkling sapphire sea and the white sands beneath.

Doyle mused: “Bet the likes of George Cowley retire somewhere like this.”

“Yeah,” Bodie agreed with him, “and bloody Clacton for the likes of you and me.”

Doyle propped his elbows on the railings and gazed out. His skin had turned an easy brown and his teeth looked very white; he looked fit and strong and healthy. His shirt, shortsleeved white aertex, was damp here and there; the hairs on his honey-coloured forearms were stiffly raised, trying in vain to bring his body heat down. There was nobody about; on impulse Bodie ducked his head and laid his cheek there for a moment on Doyle's arm, breathing in the warm scent of the other man's body, always a familiar background to a life where he was often confined in small spaces with Ray Doyle: sweat and soap and sometimes, but not today, gunsmoke. Here in Italy he and Doyle were just men, just tourists: but they had something very special about them today: they had kissed in the night and made each other come, and nobody in the world knew it, a secret they would never share with another living soul.

Withdrawing his gaze from the view, Doyle looked down at the dark head, felt the graze of Bodie's mouth gentle on his skin, and said: "If Fred and Edna come around that corner right now you can do the talking," but he didn't sound bothered.

Against his lips the other man's skin was salty, warm. Bodie said, quiet, intense, "I want—"

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Let's do it again. Ray. Let's."

"Right here?" Doyle scoffed, but there was tension in his own body now, the veins in his forearms standing out stark and blue. Desire spread through Bodie's blood like a sickness: he slipped an arm around Doyle, found and fingered the tiny bud of his nipple through damp cotton. And Doyle stood there registering the shock of it, eyes closing for a second, blanking out the blue dazzle of the sea and Bodie's eyes beguiling him, the better to focus on the feel of Bodie's warm, strong fingers pinching him, sending thrilling messages all across his nerves and down to his cock.

Bodie came closer still, grazed his sensitive ear with the lightest of whispers, a thought which had come to him last night at a crucial moment—

"I'll go down on you, Ray, just say you want me to."

The offer was mad, extravagant, dangerous: anyone could come round here at any moment, but Doyle's eyes, wild, tempted, met his, and for a moment time stood still for them—

"Oh yes, I want you to," Doyle whispered back to him at last. "Gonna swallow it for me, are you?"

A huge jolt hit Bodie just like that, his cock swelling, throbbing. He stared at Doyle without saying anything. Electricity alive between them: the heat in the air beating down. And then a sudden babble of voices nearby, coming nearer. Doyle actually jumped, fingers whipping into his armpit for his gun, and then his arm dropped empty down by his side as he moved to look out at the view again, and Bodie's own hand trembled as he raised it to smooth down his hair and aim a

friendly grin at the tourists coming their way.

Without a word Doyle swung away from the sea view and began to move off fast down the narrow path. Bodie followed him, heart like a hammer in his chest; sweat prickled all over him, his loins as heavy as lead, the pulse of his blood banging in his veins.

That was the end of Bodie's sightseeing: to this day he could tell you nothing about the elegant little town of AnaCapri and the beautiful white villa of Axel Munthe, save that the heat of the sun beat down on him and his head swam with the wine they had with an untasted lunch, and desire for Doyle intoxicated him still more than that; so that every sense in him urged him on to hunt him, kiss him, force him if he had to.

They were lunching on the terrace of the first hotel they had come to, overlooking the magnificent panorama of the cliff and the ocean: the food was going to cost a packet but Bodie was not thinking about that. In the shade of a potted cypress tree, beneath the white iron fretwork table his knee pressed against Doyle's, hard. His partner was leaning forward, chin almost on his forearms, peering out over the terrace to the cliffs below. His curls shone copper in the sun; the nape of his neck was damp.

"Come in the heads with me," Bodie said, low and fast, and Doyle turned a fierce little smile on him, the chipped tooth flashing.

"No thanks, Bodie, be just my luck to get done for indecent behaviour."

Just the way he said it, low and sexy, indecent made Bodie's heart thrill and flutter, nor less the knowledge that Doyle had said it to arouse him. He sought out Doyle's eyes and stared at him very hard. "You look good enough to eat today."

Doyle lowered his lashes. "Yeah, so you said." He looked up quickly, to catch the hard and hungry gaze. "What is it with you today, Bodie? Oysters or something?"

"It's you, something about you's just getting to me."

Doyle met his eyes amused; but Bodie's intensity, the moody passion of the man, seemed to be altering the very air around them; he was finding it very hard to breathe. Bodie looked very trim today; wearing the white trousers which suited him, almost a James Bond figure, cool and dark—and sexy. If Bodie just touched him again—

And Bodie did touch him; his hand gripped Doyle's knee under cover of the table then slipped upwards over the hardness of his thigh and traced over the line of his cock with a finger.

"You're half way there already," he said softly, oddly touched by that, and it made him all but beg in uncharacteristic submission, voice low: "Come to the heads with me Ray, just get ourselves off so I can think straight again."

Doyle shook his head, his cock throbbing under the careless touch of Bodie's hand. Oh, brilliant.

Now he was as desperate as Bodie. But not quite to the point of insanity.

“In a hotel? Come on, Bodie, this isn’t a Hampstead cottage, y’know. Be waiters and tourists an’ all in and out the whole time. Forget it. Look down there.”

Leaning right over him to look, fingers still caressing his thigh, inhaling the sunwarm scent of his hair Bodie saw what Doyle wanted him to: a narrow path winding down the cliffs.

Doyle stared at him with cool green eyes. “Could go for a walk.” And Bodie’s hand clenched tight at that.

Having paid the astronomical bill by credit card (Bodie’s) they left the pretty terrace with its panoramic view and the white latticed tables and dark green cypress trees in pots and took the coastal path downwards. It was just wide enough for them to walk abreast: to the right of them there was a dizzying drop down to the dark blue Mediterranean. Shielded by rusty railings the path was steep, and rough in places, which was presumably why it was deserted. “Look,” Doyle said, pointing further along, and soon they came to a little structure beside the path, an arch of ancient-looking stone, mossy in parts.

“A rest for weary travellers?” Doyle guessed, and poked his head in, then laughed. “Nah, mate, reckon you got yourself your cottage after all.”

A comfort stop for weary travellers. Just some holes in the ground, and not much used these days from the look of it. Doyle put his nose in the air and sniffed: only a vague redolence of the shelter’s purpose. He went to the back wall, slowly turned, and waited for Bodie to come to him, sliding his hands immediately beneath Bodie’s shirt to touch his warm and naked skin.

“Oh Ray,” Bodie said, the words dragged out of him as the dark head dropped onto Doyle’s shoulder, and Bodie’s hands stroked up and down his sides, slowly, languidly, “It’s good, this, isn’t it?”

Doyle smiled at that, and then with both hands he lifted Bodie’s head and looked deep into his eyes while his fingertips stroked back the feathery dark hair at his temples:

“We can’t go on with it though, Bodie, you do know that, don’t you?”

Bodie looked back at him, took stock of Doyle’s rare mood, and the fact that he meant it exactly and precisely: they could not go on with this once the holiday magic was revoked. The decision had been made, and it wasn’t going to go to appeal.

In any case, Doyle was right. They could not go on with it. They could not.

“Yeah, so you keep sayin’. Better make the most of it now then,” Bodie said harshly, “hadn’t I?”

Hands twining in his shirt Doyle dragged him close and kissed him then, a long, deep, searching kiss, drinking down thirstily all he could discover in the winesweet darkness of Bodie’s mouth.

Falling in love with each other was not an option: at best they would lose their jobs, at worst it would kill them. But for all that Doyle could not hold back the moan which left him as Bodie's hand slipped between them to undo his belt and touch him secretly, thrillingly; he rested his head against Bodie's broad shoulder and looked down and watched the movement of Bodie's strong hand between their bodies and saw himself come before Bodie did, astonishingly sweet, swift; and then, panting, watching while Bodie finished the job on himself, head thrown back, cock in his hand, beautiful.

Doyle leaned on the railing and looked out to the sea again. A tiny yacht with a red sail was passing. An arm went around his shoulders and Bodie briefly kissed his cheek.

He leaned towards Bodie. "Feel better now, do you?"

Bodie closed his eyes briefly. Doyle marvelled for a moment at the sooty length of his lashes. Then the eyes opened and all the ripples of the sea flickered across them. "Dunno what came over me."

"Me," said Doyle, lashes fluttering modestly, sardonic

little smile. Bodie dug an elbow into his ribs. "Not cross with me, then?" "Nah, I love it," Doyle returned ironically. "None of

my girlfriends ever get that hot for me." Bodie grinned at that, quirky eyebrows raised. "Well,

just remember, Doyle, you started it." "You keep sayin' that. Not quite how I remember it." "Doyle, you got up and went to the loo and tossed

yourself off cool as you like." "What was wrong with that? Like you said, I was in the loo."

"I think most people might have shut the door."

"Didn't have time."

Bodie's lips curved delightedly. "Randy old toad, aren't you?" Doyle laughed, and shoved him in the side. Bodie shoved him back. "How did that compare?" he nodded to the shelter behind them. "Ah, I know you, Doyle. I suppose you're going to tell me no-one can do it so well as you can yourself, go on, is that what you're going to say?"

The crease in Doyle's cheek deepened. "Well. 's true enough up to a point, innit?" He gazed at Bodie contemplatively. "But what you did seemed to do the trick, I'm not complainin'."

"Sounds like a complaint to me."

"No, I didn't mean it to be." Too difficult to explain if Bodie didn't know what he meant. In any case he suspected Bodie knew exactly what he meant: Bodie just seemed to like him to talk about it. Well, talk was free. They stayed there in silence for a few minutes more.

Loners by nature, the claustrophobic togetherness of Coach 99 did not suit them, and it was so beautiful here, the sky azure blue and the sea sparkling and glittering beneath, the little yacht, the fresh warm air. Then they began to lope up the path, enjoying the sheer physicality of it, making a little unspoken war of it, keeping in front, taking the shallowest breaths etc., until they came out onto the streets again, back in mainstream life.

They took a minibus down from the elusive heights of AnaCapri down to a halfway point, where there was a pleasant park to wander around—more of those glorious views out to sea—Bodie snapped Doyle sitting on a wall with a palm tree behind, brown skin, white shirt, cheeky grin. Then they meandered through the narrow cobbled streets window-shopping and found themselves eventually back at the harbour.

“Ever ’eard of the Blue Grotto?” Bodie asked of Doyle, reading one of the many signs chalked on blackboards.

“Nope,” said Doyle thoughtfully, “Blue as in movie, d’you think?”

“Go and find out, shall we?”

Another magical experience, though Bodie had not been expecting anything. They went in a motorboat with about twenty other tourists, captained by an Italian youth with a deep and swarthy tan and the habit of crooning throaty Italian love songs to the lady passengers as he pulled the tiller this way and that and the boat sailed around the spectacular coastline. Bodie leaned over the edge of the boat and thrust his hands into the cool water rushing past the prow. Doyle raised an eyebrow at him, commenting deeply, “Sticky fingers?” and Bodie grinned back at him, knowing, cocky as the wind blew briskly and coolly through his hair, and Doyle’s hands joined his in the water, feeling the pull and the force of it as the boat ploughed on through. They must be in deep water, and perhaps over rocks: the sea was a dark blue, the darkest, with a silvery sparkle in it put there by the rays of the sun.

“Colour of your eyes,” Doyle said. He looked from one to the other, assessingly.

“Exactly.”

It struck through him like a power surge: Ray Doyle, looking at him in that way. Made him shiver— “Careful, Ray,” Bodie warned, low, sardonic. “As you keep sayin’, no point starting off the romance of the century.”

“Just makin’ conversation,” was Doyle’s comment, and stayed quiet thereafter, eyes drifting over the horizon.

Loud shouts heralded arrival at their destination— which was an uncompromisingly small hole at the foot of a huge, black cliff towering to the skyline. Little rowing boats lay at anchor nearby, each crewed by another sunblackened Italian, now upping anchors and rowing as fast as they could towards the pleasure boats in the race for customers. When their turn came Bodie followed

Doyle over the edge into the narrow, rocking boat indicated to them and the boatman began to row fast and furious for the hole.

“No preety ladies,” he observed, looking back over his shoulder.

“Not this time,” Doyle said.

“You like preety ladies?”

Doyle met Bodie’s eye, gave him a little smirky grin. “You bet, mate,” Bodie said, amiably enough, just in case the chap had some sort of a threesome in mind, though surely nothing much could be accomplished in a narrow rocking rowboat. The boat, propelled by those muscular Italian arms, was now approaching the impossibly tiny hole in the side of the cliff.

“Tell me we’re not going in there,” Bodie said, claustrophobia or whatever phobia it would be regarding tiny holes in the sides of mountainous cliffs striking in, but yes, going in they were, ordered imperiously by the boatman to lie almost flat on the floor of the boat as the low arch of rock passed overhead and sudden darkness made them blink.

They emerged into a vast black rocky cavern, highroofed. In here where no sunshine ever reached the air was dank and chill. But, astonishingly, the seawater had changed into the lightest, brightest turquoise, sparkling like liquid aquamarine all around the boat.

“That’s amazing,” Bodie said.

“You being sarcastic?”

“No, it’s really amazing.”

“Yeah, I was thinkin’ that.”

“Underwater floodlights?”

“No, I think it’s a natural phenomenon. Didn’t that American guy back on the boat say so?”

“Engleesh?” The boatman, moodily lounging on his oar, interrupted this exchange.

“Yup.”

“I donta like Engleesh.”

“Oh, right,” Doyle said faintly, exchanging a look with Bodie.

“Know where we stand then mate, don’t we?” Bodie said with a humorous curve to his lips.

“Smoll teeps,” said the boatman with meaning.

Bodie met Doyle's eyes. "I suppose we could swim out if it came to it."

"Just give 'im a beeg teep, Bodie, and let's stay dry."

Bodie handed over a 5000 lire note. The boatman folded it and stuffed it into his pouch and began to row fast for the tiny crack the other side of which lay the world and daylight. "Duck!" Doyle said urgently as they approached at speed.

Bodie twisted his head around, searching for one.

Doyle hit him. "Idiot." And as their laughter echoed eerily in the vast spaces of the dark cavern, all around them the sparkling turquoise water flowed, incandescent with supernatural light: fantastic, magical, the stuff of dreams.

They were quiet on the way back in the coach. Bodie sat half-listening to the conversations around, unaware

that two or three times his reply to some conversation-opener made to him by Suki or Fred or someone bordered on the curt; after a while their efforts died out and he didn't notice that, either. At one point he turned his head to the window to find Doyle watching him, quizzical: "Wanna sit by the window for a bit?"

"What's brought this on?" Bodie asked in disbelief. "Oh wait, I get it, sun's in your eyes, right?"

Doyle only shrugged. "Just thought you might like a turn at it, thassall." His eyelashes, long, tipped gold by the sun, fluttered up and down as he stared steadily at his partner. "Get a better view."

"I like this one. You're going brown," Bodie said, not smiling.

Doyle studied him in return. "Pink for you, mate. Just an English rose, aren't you?"

"Bring any suntan oil?"

"Nope, never thought of it."

"Pity," Bodie said, hard and dark, a million miles away, and he watched Doyle's eyes fly wide as he made the same connection Bodie had, and at about the same time. Without knowing he was doing it Bodie's hand clenched tightly, nails biting into his palm. "Could get some," Doyle said, tense, on edge. Bodie threw a glance his way..

"It was just a thought, Doyle." He nearly jumped out of his skin when Edna's face appeared through the divided back of the seats in front of them, followed by her hand bearing two Kit-Kats still in their scarlet wrappers:

“They’ve been in the coolbox.”

“Thanks,” said Bodie, taking them.

“Have a good time, did you?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

After a further moment the face and the hand disappeared. Bodie unwrapped his Kit-Kat and ate it in several crunches. Beside him Doyle broke his in half, ate one finger and passed the other across. Taking it, Bodie said: “That’s what I love about you, Doyle. Your sharing nature.”

“Anything else?” Doyle asked, glancing sideways, definitely provocative.

Bodie’s short reply was accompanied by a long, darkly blue stare: “You really want to know?”

The Pensione Alberto was humming tonight as the overexcited holiday makers got their packing done with their doors left open, called to one another and joked, and suitcases went in convoys down the stairs. Little clusters of people who had formed lifelong bonds in the claustrophobic confines of Coach 99 got into their groups and made plans for a last, wildly celebratory night out.

Up in Room 25 the two CI5 agents packed alone and nearly in silence. Used to a lifestyle of quick changes they were both efficient packers and the room was soon cleared and neat again, their kit bags standing ready by the door, left open for last minute things to be put in in the morning.

Finished first, Doyle threw himself flat on the bed. “We eating out tonight?” he asked with a yawning lack of enthusiasm.

Bodie watched with fascination as Doyle’s hand began a lazy quest around his belt, found the buckle and began slowly to unfasten it one-handed. “Room Service?” he suggested.

Doyle smiled to himself, eyes closed. The belt flipped loose, the zip began to come down. “I shouldn’t try askin’, if I were you. The last person who asked—”

“I know. Ended up in the lasagne.”

“But—” The hand had stilled now, just lying there.

“But what?”

“—we’ve gotta eat at some point. One of us better go to the shop and get some stuff to eat here.”

“Which one of us were you thinking of?” Bodie said grimly.

Doyle thumped the pillow and shoved it under his head. “Take your time,” he yawned, and firmly shut his eyes.

Bodie did not mind the early evening walk, especially in the light of what was to come tomorrow—at 6 AM they would be in that bloody coach again, for 33 hours on the trot!

And then, the day after, London. CI5.

The Italians in this non-touristy spa town did not seem to know about pre-packaged sandwiches a la Marks and Spencer, or even Littlewoods. He had to settle for bread rolls, which the dour old grocer sliced for him and stuffed in a generous quantity of thin cured ham and cheese. They still had whisky in the room, just about the right amount to see off tonight, and he bought some beers as well and set off back to the Pensione with his shopping bags, meeting Fred and Edna on the way and managing to be a touch more gracious than he felt he had probably been of late. When he got back to the room he shut the door and locked it behind him and turned to look at the bed.

The shutters were closed and the curtains drawn. It took his eyes a moment to adjust. Doyle was lying on his back, asleep, long legs sprawling. His jeans were in a heap on the floor; he wore only the white aertex and dark underpants, one leg drawn up with bent knee, one hanging off the bed.

Bodie remembered to breathe after a moment, his lungs sucking in a vast amount of air; slowly, quietly, he set the shopping down on the floor, eyes never leaving the bed.

Christ, but he was turned on to Doyle at the moment and no mistake. Every hair on his skin was erect; he was so fiercely aroused, cock throbbing with an urgency he seldom felt these days, nerves screaming at him to whip it out and jerk himself off just standing there and who cared if Doyle woke up and saw him? That need not stop him, not any more.

And it would be wiser, too: get it over with, get rid of it before it had a chance to settle and take root, because he was getting into trouble here. He knew all the signs: deep, deep water. For he knew what he wanted now. What he wanted was not to mess around with Doyle on the fringes: he wanted to take him all the way, as far as they could go, take them both out to the limit and stay there.

His hand clenched. Sorry, Ray. Doyle, who had only wanted to play around a bit, have his fancy tickled for him; caught instead in the web of Bodie’s obsession. Unless Bodie could stop it in its tracks before he ever knew.

And he did not want to. He knew he should be shocked at himself, but what he wanted now was the clearest, most direct and most primitive of urges, expressed at its most crude: to give it to Doyle long and hard up the arse, spit him like a pig on the prong of his cock and never mind if he squealed, thrust and thrust until he emptied out this huge and terrifying desire into Doyle’s body. Here it is: pass it on.

Perhaps alarmed on some psychic level by the resonances in the room, Doyle stirred; his

breathing faltered, then changed its rhythm. He opened his eyes to see his partner standing at the foot of the bed staring at him. He smiled, but Bodie did not smile back, just kept up that powerful smouldering stare.

“Whassamatter?” Doyle said, coming fully awake, propping himself up on an elbow, and at the sound of his voice the demons fled back into the shadows, the fixed blaze of Bodie’s eyes shattering as he blinked. After a moment the tense set of his mouth broke and reformed into a smile, a smile of great charm, tenderness almost, and it dragged an answering smile from Doyle.

“Did you get it?” he yawned, remembering Bodie’s mission, and the bed dipped under Bodie’s weight as Bodie rapidly knelt and took Doyle’s bare foot in his hand, bringing it to his mouth and kissing the sole.

“Christ, Bodie, you’re shaking.” Doyle’s head was falling back onto the pillow as Bodie kissed warmly and swiftly from his ankle bone right up his leg to the sensitive inner thigh.

“Wha’ happened? Suki chase you back or something?”

“Ssh.” Bodie was deftly pulling the tight underpants down a little more. Doyle lifted his rump obligingly off the bed but Bodie did not take the offered chance to rip them off, simply settled them beneath his cock so that the tight cotton band rubbed against his balls, a welcome pressure which made his eyes fly wide: clever of Bodie, intuitive, or perhaps more intimate even than that, perhaps an echo of Bodie’s own secrets “Nice,” he said aloud, his body springing to life. He reached behind him to thump the pillow back into plumpness, propped it behind his head so that he could watch Bodie touch him, stroking his balls very carefully, stretching the skin tight over the precious sacs inside, tracing the line between them with a fingertip. Something women didn’t seem to know about, yet it could bring him off quicker than almost anything. Then Bodie’s lips touched him there, gently, almost reverently. “Oh, Bodie,” he said, and shut his eyes for an instant.

“Bodie,” he said again after a moment, just for the hell of it, just to hear his name. The touch of Bodie’s mouth was so sweet it was making stars dance before his eyes—I didn’t know anything could be so bloody wonderful, I want him to go on doing this forever—and that was when he remembered Bodie’s promise.

“Want me to have a shower?” but Bodie shook his head briefly, nuzzled at his groin in the dark curls of hair there, and Doyle remembered that Bodie had a thing for words—

His voice was soft, seductive as he reached down and ran his fingertips through Bodie’s dark hair: “Gonna make me happy, then? Suck it for me.” His cock leapt off his belly as he spoke: obviously wasn’t only Bodie liked to hear it.

And he watched all the while, stiffly aroused by the sight of Bodie opening his mouth wide and taking in his cock, sucking it immediately and deliciously deep, lips closing tightly over the root, then drawing sweetly down the length of the shaft in one gliding motion, making Doyle shudder and gasp.

This could be the quickest blowjob on record. Again, that sliding pleasure, and then Bodie's tongue flickered across the slit at the tip and fluttered around the frenulum in the most exquisite way. "Oh yeah Bodie, that's it—" and in willing response that delicious tongue fluttered around again and his balls lifted up, pressed and soothed by the constricting band beneath them. Christ, he was going to come—

Had Bodie remembered to lock the door? He could hear noises outside, people talking, passing by just a few feet away from them. God, he was so nearly there. He looked down at his own body in a sensuous sprawl, seeing what someone would see if they opened the door and looked into the room: his legs wide apart, Bodie's dark head moving at his groin in unmistakable activity, unchanged since the days of Pompeii. As Bodie's mouth glided again from root to tip Doyle reached down to touch Bodie's lips with a finger, touching too his own cock in Bodie's mouth, and the thought flashed into his head that a photograph of this would be a high security risk, blackmailable material, a matter of national security: 3.7., in an Italian bedroom, sucking off 4.5.

His hips lifted off the bed: he cried out.

Bodie finished it off. Doyle's last, yearning thrust hit the back of his throat: the liquid pulsings slid sweetly down. He swallowed it all before he had to cough. There. Easy. What a way to make someone happy. He rested his head on Doyle's belly near the damp curl of his cock, pleased with himself: that had been good for Doyle, a damn sight better than being fucked up the arse by a big hard cock. He had the urge well in hand now, Doyle was safe. Just as well too: how nearly had he blown it? Rape was probably not on Doyle's list of fantasies: not that way round, anyway.

He had even enjoyed it in an odd sort of way: it had been a thrill to see his cool partner so wild for it. If Cowley had marched into the room and stood by the bed uttering shocked Scottish oaths—och, ye bad, bad laddies—Doyle would have begged Bodie to carry on regardless, he'd lay money on it. Doyle was stroking his hair gently as Bodie's head lay on his belly; and that made him feel—

"Bodie." The throaty whisper above him made him lift his head.

"What?"

"Come up here."

"Hang on a bit." He rolled over and got off the bed, went to take off his clothes, folding them automatically and leaving them on the chair. Then he lay back down on the bed in the circle of Doyle's arms; Doyle was kicking off his underpants then lying still, half under him. Bodie laid his head on the aertex shirt Doyle still wore and listened to the kick of his heart.

"Well," he said deeply, "can't tell me you can do that better by yourself."

Doyle chuckled near to his ear. "Wasn't going to."

“Ever tried?”

“Have you?”

Bodie stroked a fingertip very carefully around the contours of the other man’s lips. “You’ve got a beautiful mouth.”

“Is that a hint, yeah?”

If not exactly enthusiastic, Doyle sounded perfectly cool about it. As if he would. God, the thought of it: Doyle’s gorgeous mouth closing willingly around his cock.

“There are other ways, you know,” came the low voice in his ear.

Yeah, right. But getting sucked off by Ray Doyle was not something he was going to pass up in favour of a handjob. Come on, Doyle. You can do it. It’s better than doing it to a bird, I promise you.

Impatient with his silence, “Oh, come on, Bodie, don’t tell me you haven’t thought about us fucking.”

Well, that was—Bodie’s head shot up off the pillow: he stared. In the semi-darkness of the shuttered room it was not easy to read the subtler shadings of expression.

Doyle remarked, “Must be your lucky day, mustn’t it? You get to fuck me, and no, I haven’t ever done it before.” He gazed at Bodie consideringly. “Will that make it— special for you? Yeah, I reckon that’ll push your buttons, Bodie. I just bet deflowering virgins is right up your street.” Silence. Bodie said nothing. Doyle prodded him with a lean hard finger. “Ey. This is the only chance you’re gonna get, mate, so I’d say yes quick if I were you.”

Bodie closed his mouth, his heart thudding in shock, and then opened it again. “You don’t really want to, do you?”

“I don’t want to go back and always wonder what it might have been like.”

Finish it off with one final act, the ultimate. No daydreams necessary to disturb their lives back home, never to have to wonder what it might have been like: they would have done it all, played it through to the last card and they could shut the door on it for all time. Still Bodie said nothing.

Doyle was lying flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling. “And while we’re on the subject—this is another thing, mate, that you aren’t going to tell Murphy—‘Oh, by the way Murph, good old Doyle let me screw him when we were in Italy’—”

Bodie was shaking his head in disbelief. “Ray, you know I wouldn’t.”

Still lying there, cool and relaxed, Doyle gave him a smile, surprisingly sweet. “Just checkin’.

Wouldn't do much for my macho image if they knew I let you up my arse, now would it?"

He meant it. Bodie felt a sense of disbelief: he was going to get what he wanted. For all the wrong reasons, probably, but anyway he was going to get it. He leaned up on one elbow over Doyle, touched his hair, stroked a curl around one finger, hardly aware. "You won't like it," he said, bluntly, abruptly.

Doyle looked up at him for a moment, and then a quirky little smile twisted his mouth; the flawed tooth flashed rakishly. "Well, that's okay, Bodie. I don't plan to get the taste for it, y'know."

Something about the way he said it, a sort of sadness, courage, moved Bodie: go out in a blaze of glory, is that what you're thinking? Well, how wrong can you be.

Helpless nonetheless, Bodie leaned down to kiss him, and found the taste of his mouth intoxicating enough to stay for a while. But all while thoughts raced around his mind: temptation warred with intuition. And temptation won. At last he withdrew to whisper ironically, "I've got a feeling we shouldn't do this, Ray. So don't blame me afterwards."

Doyle said, almost bitterly, "I won't."

Bodie kissed him again, and let his hands range over him freely and possessively, and whispered to him, "Suntan oil?"

Doyle only took a moment to answer, though Bodie heard him catch his breath; perhaps that made it all too real for him, brought it right down out of the hearts and flowers, blaze of glory league, but Doyle was always practical: "Olive—in my gripbag."

Trancelike, Bodie got out of bed and groped around in the bag and the heavy bottle came straight away to his hand. Back on the bed he unscrewed the cap and the peculiar aromatic scent of it was in the air: very Italian. His erection seemed to have subsided, awed perhaps by the sense that something more profound than sheer lust was abroad, but Doyle took care of that for him, sitting up, stripping off his own shirt, and Bodie looked at him, the neat, well-defined muscles overlying bone, and touched his nipples then kissed each in turn, lips suckling, yearning, while Doyle caressed his cock, stroking it back into stiffness, finger and thumb ringing him as carefully and exactly as he might oil the barrel of his Browning.

Doyle poured the stuff into the palm of his hand and smoothed it onto Bodie's cock and Bodie tipped his head back to watch: the tall rod rising, redly tipped, from the dark hair at his groin and Doyle's fingers on him, stroking, then slipping beneath to cradle his testes in a firm, comforting grip and Doyle's curly head tilted up to look into Bodie's face, a slow grin beginning: "That nice, was it?" He tossed Bodie the bottle. "Do me—just for fun." And as Bodie began to unscrew it— "Ang on. This is going to be messy, Bodie, better chuck some towels on the bed."

Good job one of them was thinking straight. Bodie eyed the white counterpane with horror, stripped it off and left it over the chair, then got their own bath towels from the bathroom, where

they still hung over the rail ready for last-minute packing in the morning. While Doyle shunted over Bodie laid the towels side by side on top of the sheets. “Just make sure you don’t slip through the crack.”

Doyle leaned back on both elbows and grinned lopsidedly up at him. “As the actress said to the bishop.”

“Drycleaning bill arriving in London could be embarrassing.” Bodie poured out the last of the whisky, took two small sips, and gave the rest to Doyle, whose eyes regarded him thoughtfully over the rim of the glass as he downed it in three rapid swallows.

“Think I need to be anaesthetised, do you?”

“Might help.” He poured some of the oil into his hands, rolled it about to warm it. Doyle’s cock grew bolder as he rubbed it sweetly and seductively, but it was time to move on, his body was arrogant, demanding my turn. He’s had his.

“Turn over,” Bodie said. If Doyle was nervous he wasn’t showing it, rolling in one neat quick movement onto his stomach, then drawing himself up onto his knees and burying his forehead in the hard white pillow. The muffled voice floated back to Bodie, “Leave enough for a stir-fry, will you? That was expensive, you know, extra-virgin.”

“Like you then.” Bodie bit him lightly on the buttocks: lean, muscular, very different from a woman’s. He laid his face there for a moment. The smell of the oil and Doyle’s body was making him feel strange, heated. “Ray...”

“What—?”

“Nothing.” He was thinking—that for all their bravado, this was a tragedy in the making. The end of it all, before they were truly ready for the beginning. And like the song—there’s no-one left can help us now/we’re in too deep/there’s no way out.

Bodie stroked him between the cheeks of his arse, finding the little depression there with his oily fingers, circling it then pressing inside. More oil—and Bodie looked down at his own cock, darkly swollen, rearing up towards his chest. “What’s that thing—about passing a camel through the eye of a needle?”

“Yeh, but take heart, kingdom of heaven’s supposed to be just the other side.” Doyle, flip as ever, wringing from Bodie a tortured grin..

“Well, I’ll let you know.” He shook out more oil and stroked it inwards. In other circumstances he would have enjoyed something like this for the sheer crude thrill of it. Doyle’s body was relaxing for him now, opening outwards. Doyle shivered and thrust back at him, which looked like encouragement. “Ah, that’s—” Bodie heard him swallow— “Yeah, I like that.”

“Think this is all a dream, Doyle?” Bodie asked him shortly; he was having difficulty breathing,

looking, privileged, at the shining entrance to Doyle's body.

"Could be, I suppose. Had one like it once. That must be enough..."

"Look, if it means that much to you, I'll buy you another bottle."

"Oh yeah, and where will you get it?"

"Harrods do it. And it's cheaper there."

"You say the sweetest things."

Doyle was so cool, so together, just lying there waiting to get screwed; Bodie didn't trust himself one half so much as Doyle seemed to. The vulnerability and the courage of the man was doing peculiar things to him, really getting to him: in another minute he was going to lose it, his body on a countdown now, all too ready to run away with him. There was something he had to say—

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me if it hurts, will you?"

"Oh yeah, you know me."

He did know him. Doyle would draw blood on his tongue first. "I'll try to go slow, okay?" He straddled Doyle's back, knees outside his thighs, hands on his shoulders, and let him feel the tip of Bodie's cock at his anus. Just that much made Bodie swallow, hard. "—But don't count on it."

"Just do what you have to do, all right? Want me to lie down?"

"No, stay like this—" He settled one hand on the small of Doyle's back.

"Can you—" and with that same intuition that kept them alive on the streets Doyle used his hands to open himself up. The sight of that made him less careful than he had meant to be and Doyle sighed slowly, a moan perhaps held back by gritted teeth as Bodie's cock passed through the tight muscle and sank into the other man's body, where it was hot, and tight, and desperately exciting.

"Okay?" he whispered, holding himself back with a terrible effort; drops of sweat slid down his temples and fell onto the sharp planes of Doyle's shoulder blades.

Doyle's 'yeah' was only a sigh but it was too late now to change his mind, Bodie knew it and Doyle must know it too. His cock was committed now to see it through whether Doyle liked it or not. And he probably didn't: this whole thing was an abomination, a sin against nature, a crime

still in several parts of the world, including this one for all he knew. But the funny thing was that Bodie's body had gone off the scale on it, electric with delight, reacting as if this was the best and only way to do it and for Doyle's sake he was having to fight it every step of the way.

But trying it slow and gentle only seemed to stimulate him more. When, soon, one quick hard thrust was irresistible only Doyle's answering gulp of breath gave him the strength to stop. Then he stayed just exactly where he was, trembling with the effort of it, one hand reaching around Doyle to toy roughly with his nipples—

“Sorry—”

“S okay.”

“S just, it feels so—”

“—so, what?”

Bodie half laughed, half fought for breath— “wonderful—”

“Does it?” Doyle sighed, curious, exhilarated. In the moment of stillness Bodie reached down to touch his own body where it joined Doyle's, immediate heat flashing over his body at the sight of the tiny glistening opening stretched so wide around the base of his cock. It nearly did for him: he felt his balls draw up, get ready for it—

With a superhuman effort Bodie pulled himself out, very, very gently, wincing

“Now what's the matter?” Doyle's head poked up from the pillow.

“Nothing.” He took one sharp breath, and then another. “Just—too good, that's all. You're so— Turn over, will you?”

After a moment Doyle rolled onto his back. “Well, make your mind up.” He looked very pale, shadows and pain and the marked cheekbone giving his face a sort of delicacy. Kingdom of heaven was about right: and here I am, fucking an angel.

“Gotta slow myself down, my angel,” Bodie said aloud, looking down into his partner's face, taking another deep, calming breath, “Or it's all going to be a bit too fast and furious for you... You've got the sexiest mouth on the squad,” tracing it with a slow finger. “Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Nope, you're the first,” Doyle said, considering, breathing. Probably relieved at the break he was getting. Die before he'd admit it, though, and Bodie loved him for that.

“Mm. Lovely mouth. I'd love to see it round my cock...”

But now I never will.

As a calming thought this was not well-qualified. Maybe kissing him, with its diffuse pleasures, would slow the dizzying pace of things. Still it was only moments later that Bodie raised his head, a last lingering parting of their lips, and breathed in again, gathering strength. “This isn’t going to take long, Ray. Can you stand it this way?” Rearing up he slid his hands beneath Doyle’s thighs, urged them onto his own shoulders, and his cock, quick on the uptake, found the angle for him. Doyle the yoga expert adapted to it with ease, knotting his legs behind Bodie’s neck and arching his hips:

“Come on then Bodie, go for it, I can take it.”

“I know you can,” whispered Bodie, eyes closing as he entered Doyle for the second time, the last time, easier now, as if Doyle’s body knew him now. As if he belonged.

And he did belong.

Oh, we shouldn’t have done this.

We shouldn’t...

Once and once only. A sweet, sharp pain stabbed Bodie’s heart, like the pain he was all the time aware of causing Doyle, and Doyle taking it for his sake without a murmur, with a sort of tender understanding that Bodie could not help it, did not want to hurt him, it was just implicit in the act. He tried to hold onto the feelings, every one of them, so that he would have something to remember; Doyle’s wide-open eyes the only glimmer of light in the darkness of the room, the sweetness of the mouth beneath his own, the abrasion of stubble as their chins grazed together, the willing lips that parted for his tongue. Doyle’s hands gripping his hips, not to hold him off but to pull him closer; the sights and sounds and smells, oh, the sweet intoxicating scents of the two of them, his sweat rubbing on Doyle’s, his cock deep, deep inside him, lovely, the feeling of it...

He rested his head against Doyle’s on the pillow, and felt their hearts beating together, and the pulses of his own body inside the other man’s, way outside his control now, he had lost it for sure, lost it all.

“You see? I knew it. Now look what you’ve done—” and Doyle’s eyes were wide, wider as he began to understand: “I’m going to come, Ray,” Bodie whispered, feeling it start to happen; a last moment of stillness, of peace for them, and then it began; the last and most powerful thrust, the moment of glory suddenly there inside him, spreading, and then a shattering shockwave of pleasure breaking inside him, his body lifting and coming and falling apart all in one go.

And then afterwards an astonished, exhausted wonder at the beauty of it all, and the fierce, possessive gratitude for Doyle, who had let him do this, not knowing what he would unleash upon them: well, but how could he have known? How could either of them: Bodie had earlier dreamed of rape and feared it; by what means could he have known it was not violence but tenderness which would defeat them?

He was gripping onto Doyle's hand like a lifeline. At one point he lifted his head, but Doyle drew him back down again against his own wet body, sweat drying, cooling off now. They lay there together, quiet, hit by all the same things. All the universe off-centre, and only themselves to blame.

"Sorry, Doyle," Bodie said at last, his cheek pressed, hard, to the thinly fleshed bones of Doyle's shoulder, "Just happened..."

"Can't blame you. My idea, wasn't it? And it was special for you all right, wasn't it?"

That bloke had got it wrong, about the universe. Not with a whimper, but a bang... "Bit too special, mate... I'll get over it," Bodie added, harshly. In about ten years.

"Will you?" was Doyle's response to that.

Bodie lifted his head again and looked at the clock, and deciphered the numbers. It was still early evening, they could go out, get a meal, try to rediscover some normality.

But at the moment he could not stand that there were other people in the world: all he wanted to do was stay here, and lie close against the other man's side, and look at him, and feel him breathe.

He felt so possessive that it hurt him, fiercely jealous, another side-effect he had not counted on. What price the lovely Sylvie now—? He would take a gun and make her eat it if she so much as looked at Ray as if she owned him.

Owned him! She wasn't fit to touch him.

"This must be how women feel," Doyle said, a little later. "Virgins. You know." Outside the window someone shrieked down in the square below and someone else replied. Fun and games. "The first time. No wonder they fall in love."

"Don't, Doyle." He squeezed his eyes shut.

"No. I'm just sayin'. I always wondered what it must feel like."

"Well, now you know."

"Yeah. Now I know."

"Did you really dream about it?"

"Eh?" Doyle lifted his head off the pillow to look at his face, then he remembered. "Yeah—once or twice."

“Was it like that?”

“Yeah. Sometimes it was me fucking you. Anyway, it was the two of us.”

“Sure it wasn’t Cowley?” A certain grim teasing seemed in order. They had to fight their way back to the surface somehow; couldn’t stay down here forever drowning...

“Then once I was with this bird—not that long ago— she came around but I wasn’t in the mood, you know? Too tired or something, but you know how they expect you to get it up any time they feel like it, take it very personal if you can’t. We’d been shooting that day, you and me, you had the Uzi on the targets, you couldn’t miss, even Macklin couldn’t get it past you. It kept coming back to me, picture of you, standing there with the gun in your hand. Sort of ugly sneer on your face— Don’t mess with me, mate, that sort of look.”

How little we know of other people. “And?” Bodie prompted, since the story seemed to have run itself out. Doyle roused himself from reverie.

“Only thing did the trick for me. So I just let her have it. Must have been the quickest fuck in history but she didn’t complain.”

Even Bodie was grinning by now. “Didn’t tell her, did you?”

“What do you think?” Doyle’s thigh brushed against his; and suddenly it was all there again, that fierce, hurting need to touch him, hold him, and he gathered him up in his arms, speechless, and buried his mouth in Doyle’s ridiculous curls..

“It’s funny, innit?” Doyle said softly, deeply against him, “I never knew it would be like this.”

That wrung a smile out of Bodie, and even that hurt him. “And if you had—?”

“I’d still have wanted to. Even more.”

“Can’t exactly have been the best sex of your life, though, eh, Doyle?” Unlike mine...

Doyle was looking at him incredulously. “You think that sort of thing happens to me all the time?”

“Didn’t make you come though, did it?” Bodie said, and for all the world he could not stop the bitter twist to his mouth.

Doyle was silent for a moment, thinking that one over. Then: “It was still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever had done to me.”

The delight that bounded through Bodie was ill-informed: it was just one more thing that would hurt him later. “Was it?”

“I’ve had women say that to me, haven’t you? Doesn’t matter whether they come or not. I never quite believed them. Know better now, don’t I?”

Danger, looming fast and sharp from nowhere, like rocks at night in black water. “Don’t, Doyle. Please don’t.”

But Doyle kept on, relentless. “You know, I’ll always—Doing that with you—changed something. Best thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

“And the most stupid,” Bodie added harshly; he hadn’t cried in years.

“Well, I thought you’d want me to tell you.”

Silence, or nearly. Doyle found Bodie’s face with his hands, stroked around his eyes with the pads of his thumbs. “Hey, Bodie. We really screwed this one up, didn’t we?”

“You’re telling me.” He had already considered every possible way out, and ditched them all. Jacking in their jobs, running away together, was the stuff of childish fantasy, nothing more. He knew what they would be doing tomorrow: not making more strange and beautiful discoveries in each other, not getting on with the greatest love affair the world was never going to see. No, tomorrow they would be tossing that in the bin and taking the first step of the journey back to the real world. A one-way ride: from here, to there.

There was nothing he could do. He had never felt more helpless. Facing up for the first time to the fact that he could not change the world, at least not in any way that counted. He could help George Cowley balance right and wrong until the day he died for him; but here was something he could never have.

He looked down into his partner’s face, and Doyle looked back up at him. For a very long while no-one spoke in the room.

Bodie stroked Doyle’s hair with his fingers, very gently. “I’ll never forget this, Doyle. Never. Just because I never mention it—I don’t want you to think it didn’t mean anything to me.”

“I know what it meant. Hey, look. Maybe once a year we’ll get a bottle of Chianti and remember. Like an anniversary—no, okay, stupid idea. Ssh. Bodie. It’s okay.”

All night they stayed there in the darkened room of the Pensione Alberto in the still Italian night, close, touching, jealous of each second lost to sleep. And in the cool fresh dawn, they packed up everything and left the room as clean and as empty as if they had never inhabited it and took the coach back home, the longest journey they had ever made and with nothing for them at the end of it.

Thanks for everything, mate. Was nice, while it lasted.

“The best part of our lives was over much too soon”

END

My journey through Italy inspired this story... Some of the things happened—except that I did not (quite) fall in love, and I did not lose the dreadful Coach 99 child in Rome—though by that time I would quite have liked to.

Some names have been changed.

Coach 99, however, appears as itself.

Sebastian, June 1996

Zeropanic

For Elaine's 30th Birthday

Cowley's hand shook with excitement as he lifted the whiskey to his lips. 7.55. He lifted his elbow, surreptitiously sniffed his armpit. Fine. He'd splashed on enough Brut there and down his crotch to kill any odour his ancient body could possibly come up with. This was going to be his Big Moment.

He rubbed his hands together gleefully together - then noticed the big, ugly brown liver-spots on them which people over 30 always start to get - but a look in the mirror reassured him that he was looking his best, spruce and dapper, his sparse sandy hair smoothed down with a generous lashing of Vaseline, remembering to pull up his sagging bottom lip, the one that always hung loose, giving him that vacant expression. He practised kissing motions, admiring his technique, though it was rusty now. The doorbell rang. Heart pounding, he rushed to answer it.

There she was, built like a battleship, in a tweed suit, her broad face arranged in a meant-to-be-sexy grin that showed off her teeth, yellowed and spaced like tombstones in a neglected graveyard. He felt his heart miss a beat.

"Miss Walsh."

"Mr. Cowley," she acknowledge with a little flirtatious wink, and stepped

He followed her with an eager step, panting rapidly with excitement, though he maintained his air of the perfect host.

"Get a whisky down ye, lass," he hinted suggestively, winking lewdly, "lubricate the tissues, if ye ken what I mean."

She grinned coyly at him. "You randy old goat," she said tenderly. "Why don't we get straight down to - er - business, George."

And then they were in each other's arms, and it was all too wonderful to bear: their lips drew apart with a moist sucking sound, and Cowley finally wrenched off his glasses in a gesture of uncontrollable lust.

"Miss Walsh - "

"George - "

They undressed in a flurry of excitement, combinations, longjohns, thermal vests, trusses flying everywhere. Miss Walsh lay on the camp bed and admired her new lover's body; particularly impressed with the blue-veined legs, the knobby knees, the scrawny thighs, the wrinkled belly; but entranced more than anything by the leathery yellowed scrotum that bounced fetchingly around before her eyes, a perfect background to set off the 2 inches of maleness that dangled on top of it.

Which rubbery semi-hardness was soon buried in saggy-damp folds, bringing them both to intolerable heights of ecstasy, as pantingly they achieved a sweaty fumbling climax.

"Ahhh, Miss Walsh..."

"George..."

He gazed adoringly at the wrinkled, sweaty face of his paramour.

"You're a remarkable woman, Miss Walsh."

She twinkled roguishly at him. "I - *was*."

George Cowley took out his teeth and dunked them in the waiting jar of Steradent. They each took a Sleepeze, and settled down for the night.

He slept first, exhausted by the effort, so Miss Walsh had the tender joy of holding her lover while he snored, looking into his slackjawed face, achingly vulnerable in sleep; until she too toppled into the arms of Morpheus, who staggered under her weight and dropped her unheeded onto the ground.

END

Zeroplanic

First Night, Last Night

Sebastian

Having forgotten about this story entirely, I was surprised how much I liked it when I came to it afresh. Not least because it gives a passing nod to the heart of what I loved about the series - the urban landscapes, docklands, grim and grimy streets. I seldom saw the need to transpose B and D away from their cultural heartland to scenes of pastoral bliss. They seem perfectly at home in gritty and unbeautiful inner-city landscapes and that's where they shine most brightly, perfect little diamonds in the rough.

=====///=====

"I dunno what the hell I'm doing here."

"Come for the free beer, Doyle, like always." Bodie's smile glittered, and the look he bent upon Doyle was one of great charm. But Bodie was not, Doyle noticed, in the sweetest of tempers; the lashing flippancy had an edge. Why, he didn't know, but in any case he didn't care. Didn't care about anything. He was cushioned from the here and now by a champagne cloud; and the world was a rose.

He dropped his head back against the settee and regarded his difficult partner through half-open eyes.

"Why did I come?" he continued to lament. "I could be layin' my head on a softer chest than yours by now."

"Don't be too keen. Play hard to get," Bodie suggested. "Best way to keep 'em on the simmer, y'know." His eyelid dropped in a leery wink.

"You are talking," Doyle said, eyes closed, "about the woman I love."

Bodie groaned. "We know, we know." He feigned a yawn, struck an attitude. "Raymond Doyle-- in love. Again."

Doyle's eyes snapped open. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Bodie said. "How long have you known her? Two months? And already she's got you dancing around with a ring. Oh, she must be laughing all the way. All the way to the alimony courts, most like."

He was halfway to his feet, saying, "If you're going to be like this, I'm going," when Bodie pushed him back down again, making an exasperated face.

"Don't be like that, Ray," he said, wounded. "Just joking."

Doyle eyed him, hard. "Yeah? Nasty sense of humour you got, matey. You wanna get that seen to."

"Beer? Scotch?" Bodie interposed elegantly, one eyebrow quirked.

Narrow-eyed, Doyle asked for a cup of tea. In a speaking silence Bodie traipsed into the kitchen and began clattering. Doyle sighed and shut his eyes. Instantly the party whirled around him again, faces, lights, the thump of music, Murph's hard fingers pinching him to the bone--

He opened them in a hurry. "Where's me bloody tea?" rescuing his body from its slumping position, his head swimming. Must have had more than he'd meant to drink. That was the trouble with booze, slipped down so easily at the time then whacked you in the nerves and brain all at once.

"Just coming, my flower," Bodie sang out, entering with two mugs. He handed Snoopy to Doyle and kept Woodstock, taking a noisy sip as he sat down. Impossibly long, black lashes flickered over a blaze of darkest blue as he remarked:

"Wonderful party tonight, Ray. Really good. Thanks."

"It was okay, wasn't it?" Doyle said, nettled by Bodie's tone. "I mean, that's how these things go, isn't it?" Certainly it had cost him an arm and a leg. The drinks bill would be coming in at the end of the month.

"Oh yeah," Bodie remarked gloomily. Another sip of tea. "Been to one CI5 party, you been to 'em all. Everyone drinks too much. Talks too much. Thinks too much."

It sounded like poetry. 'A Party'--*drinks too much / talks too much / thinks too much*--Doyle was trying to think of a witty last line to toss at Bodie when Bodie made his next comment:

"And how do you feel, Ray? No last minute doubts? Feet still ever so warm and raring to go?"

"Of course," Doyle said, amazed that Bodie should doubt. "She's beautiful, isn't she? Beautiful, intelligent, attractive." He addressed his fingertips with flying kisses.

"So?" Bodie shrugged, looking morosely down at his mug.

Doyle stared at him. "That's a start, isn't it?" he said, heavy with irony.

Bodie swallowed down a mouthful of tea. "All your birds are like that, Doyle. No need to marry 'em all though, is there?" He stared at Doyle unreadably. "There's something unnaturally desperate about you, Raymondo. Like you've got to pin one down. It's some kind of musical bumps or something, and you're scared you're going to be the last one to sit down."

"So you're saying," Doyle said slowly, "that I'm making a mistake."

Bodie muttered, frowning, "I'm saying I think you rush into these things without giving 'em a bit of time."

Doyle stared at him. He set his mug down with a delicate thump. He was so angry his hand was trembling. "But what would you know about it, after all?"

He stood up. Bodie watched him out of one eye. "Well, no need to get all in a fuss about it, Ray. Sit down. What the hell's it matter what *I* think? You know yourself best."

"Even you'll have to give in sometime, you know," Doyle let fly at him. "Can't be the eternal playboy forever. Even you."

"Why not?" Bodie shrugged this one off.

Doyle grimaced at him in disbelief. "Because one day you'll realise you've left it too bloody late, that's why."

"Nah," Bodie demurred softly. "I'll still be beatin' 'em off. Be plenty of widows around-- divorcees coming up for their second crack at it." He drained his tea to the dregs, set the mug down on the table beside Doyle's, propped his arms behind his head and stared at his partner without expression. "You staying? Or going?"

After a moment Doyle sat down with a sigh. Bodie was just speaking his mind. Had a right to his opinion. "Just be a bit sweeter about it, will you? Night before I get meself engaged, my best mate and all. You could be passin' out the odd congratulation or two, nothin' too heavy, just 'all the best, Ray,' might be nice."

"Sorry. "

"For chrissake, Bodie, you're acting like you're jealous or something."

Bodie said nothing at all. Doyle eyed him, bold and a bit provocative. "Gone a bit quiet now, have you?"

"I was just wondering," Bodie said, with a long-lashed stare, "if you meant that seriously." His voice was remarkably untainted, of anger or surprise or anything at all.

Doyle turned a querying palm outward. "Wouldn't be so surprising, would it? Lovely girl like her. Naturally you'd be a shade on the green side."

He noticed, halfway through speaking, a smile cross Bodie's lips and then fade out again: and then Bodie said, easily, "Is that what you meant? Ah no, mate, you got it all wrong. I don't envy you your luscious leggy lovely. Got plenty of those in my own stable, thank you. You fancyin' a proper drink now?"

Doyle had a think about it. "Yeah...okay." Bodie pushed himself to his feet and sauntered off to the bar, whistling. Cheering up, Doyle thought, pray god. "Better stay the night," he decided. Shouldn't have driven back here, really, not with all that party sparkle under his belt.

"You do that, mate," Bodie agreed amiably, sitting down beside him and handing Doyle a chunky glass a quarter full of amber liquid. As he sipped from it he nodded towards the TV. "Want the box on?"

Doyle took a squint at his watch. "Nah--just in time for the closedown blessin'." It was, unbelievably, just after midnight. He clinked his glass against Bodie's extended one. "Cheers. Better turn in after this."

"Yep." Bodie smacked his lips reflectively, savouring the whisky taste after the tea. "Else Cowley'll know we've been bad boys. Dunno how he does it."

"It's his crystal ball," Doyle said.

"A crystal ball *and* a wooden leg? Christ, the man's been unlucky."

Doyle chuckled evilly, raking one hand through his curls, crossing his booted feet in front of him on Bodie's glass-topped coffee table. Beside him the black leather of Bodie's jacket creaked as he leaned forward to set his glass on the table. It was late and they were tired; they sat together in silence, each one lost in his own sphere of thought.

"Your last night on earth as a bachelor," Bodie broke the reverie at last. "How's it feel?"

Doyle jerked out of his semi-doze. "Not quite." He frowned at Bodie through half an eye. "I'm getting engaged tomorrow, not married you know."

"Small difference," Bodie shrugged, his eyes dwelling curiously on Doyle. "'S only a matter of time and degree, old son."

Doyle pulled irritably on his tie to loosen it. "Bodie, you keep on makin' it sound like I'm about to start servin' a sentence." His partner smelt of sweat and aftershave, luring a powerful tactile memory to the fore: Murph's idea of a joke, no doubt, pushing him into Bodie's arms not two hours ago, his fingers locked around Doyle's wrist and on Bodie's like steel: and as he yowled, his party hat slipping over one eye, Bodie's mouth had come to rest on his for a scant second, kissing him coolly and briefly before letting him go. Weird.

"Funny sense of humour, Murph's got," he said obscurely; but Bodie seemed to know what he meant because he chuckled.

"It's his Masonic upbringing, y'know."

Bodie seemed now as he had seemed at the time: unperturbed, and yet Doyle had found the incident curiously disturbing. Not because of anything Bodie had done: the kiss had been swift enough, pure enough, and yet somehow his own body had let him down, lighting up like a Roman candle. Ridiculous. Men kissed each other all the time in France. Not to mention on the football field. Didn't mean a thing.

So: Big Deal.

Indeed.

He tossed down the rest of his whisky, felt it start up some little inner glowings. Thumping his hand down on Bodie's knee he said, "You've been a good partner."

"Sound as if you're divorcing me in her favour," Bodie said, amused. "Is that how you see it?"

"Don't be daft," Doyle said, keen to reassure. Fool: he hadn't realised. Of course Bodie would be feeling a touch insecure, as if his partner's coming marriage would mean an end to things. "She won't come between us...I promise you."

That sounded a mite more intense than he wanted it to; Bodie's mood was odd enough as it was, and he had meant to play things down, not charge them up.

"Sounds intriguing," Bodie drawled on cue. "No chance of a threesome, you mean?"

Doyle grasped for the allusion of this, caught it, chuckled anxiously.

"You ever done that, Ray?" Bodie added, one flying eyebrow arched, dark in the shadows and unsmiling.

Doyle shook his head over a swallow of whisky. "Never seen the point. Less for everyone, I'd have thought."

"It can be better than that."

Doyle eyed him coldly. "No way. No way at all. She's not that sort of girl."

Bodie chuckled, banged him on the shoulder. "That's okay, sunshine. I wasn't hinting. I'm not that sort of boy, either."

There was a little silence. Every time Doyle's eyelids fell the party started up in his head again. "Anson was drunk," he accused blearily.

"Yeah. Good job Cowley decided on an early night."

"Absolutely."

"Especially when Murph got out his Swedish cards."

"Not to mention that funny weed we found growin' among his mustard and cress and brought in to show us."

"Dried out a bit though, hadn't it?"

Doyle took another sip of his whisky, savouring the last warm drops of it now, the glass cradled on his chest. Okay. He was mellow. He was going to ask. "Bodie."

"Yeah." Bodie was slumped beside him, the same pose.

"What's it like then--how d'you go about it?"

"Go about what?"

"A threesome." Doyle nudged him in the ribs. "C'mon, you brought it up. You might as well tell me. Do you both--"

"Both what?" Bodie seemed vaguely amused, twirling his glass around in his hand.

"Do both of you go in at the same time? Or what?"

Bodie appeared to take this seriously, looking around into Doyle's eyes. "Depends on the lady. How--accommodating she is." Doyle blew out a long breath, feeling suddenly hot. And his condition was not helped when Bodie leaned over and whispered in his ear for a moment, words which made his skin prickle all over, "...and one up the back." He drew back, grinned at Doyle's face. "That can be the best, Doyle. A real buzz."

That Doyle could imagine. "I'll bet." He shifted in his seat, and shut his eyes.

"Too late for all that," Bodie said, looming in on him again. The expression on his face was quizzical, almost tender, his voice soft as he said: "Look at you, sunshine. A little bit of sexy talk

and you're all up for it. Doesn't she give you enough?"

He didn't know why it had hit him so hard, the way unexpected things did sometimes: the tarty flash of a girl's white thigh, the crease in some young mother's jeans as she knelt to tend an infant; Bodie's casual words had had that same instant effect on him. He was even trembling a little, painful with desire; but it would pass.

Bodie had noticed, of course; Bodie's sharp blue gaze seemed to miss nothing about him. Sometimes the current of telepathy between them was an annoyance to him. While at others--

He closed his eyes. Like this morning. Dockland. The peculiar barren space of the area moved him, stirred him to a pitch of excitement as they ran down their quarry, adrenalin surging in with every thundering heartbeat: huge stilled cranes reared to the skyline over bleak warehouses; great masts of ships clustered untidily along the concrete edge; wide open spaces to be crossed between buildings, dangerous both for a hunter and for a killer. Good sightlines for a rifle, a machine-gun, whatever.

He had hurtled around a corner, skidding to a stop, his hand jerking at the big gun in a hurry, pulling out the spent cartridges and chucking them away, pressing in others, fast and sure. And as he had done so he had heard a noise behind him that had raised all the hairs on his neck with horror.

Such a little sound. Just something stiffing the air, close behind him.

He had turned as if in slow strobe-lit motion to see their prey standing there, a big man in biking leathers, the black eye of his gun wide open and looking into his. Ready. To blink--

And at that very moment *Bodie*, scudding around the corner, throwing the man against the wall with the whole weight of his body and yelling "Down!" with all the wild force of his lungs.

Doyle dropped like a stone as the man's gun went off, kickfiring viciously into the wall, Bodie and he thrown backwards by the force of it so close.

With his eyes closed, Doyle lay still and listened to the sound of Bodie thudding the man's head onto the concrete floor.

When he opened his eyes again to the blessed air and light there was Bodie sitting up, and picking bits of brickwork fastidiously off his clothes, his mouth a moue of distaste, and the man slumped bloodily by his side.

He had shut his eyes again and laughed.

He opened them now and said, "Saved my life this morning."

It seemed a very long time ago.

Bodie had been resting with his head back, face blank, eyes closed. "Did I? Oh yeah." As if Doyle owed him sixpence.

"Thanks."

"That's three times now, mate. Think I own your soul yet?"

"How did you know I was in trouble?"

"I always know when you're in trouble, Raymond."

"I mean it."

"So do I." Bodie opened his eyes and looked at him, the blue of his eyes very deep.

Something very peculiar began to happen then.

Doyle felt his heart begin to thump oddly and heavily in his chest: he was quite unable to drag his eyes away from Bodie's face. The world seemed to be spinning around him, a vortex of some different dimension; and he saw in a flash something so clear and so true he wondered how he could ever have missed it before. And just as it came into his mind Bodie spoke it aloud, his voice breaking in softly:

"Well now, that's what I mean, Ray," he said, watching Doyle all the while. "Your lady. She's pretty. You like her. She's okay to spend a night with, a weekend even. She's not part of you."

The way I am.

It hit Doyle right in the heart, swept away all his certainties. Desperate now, he cast about for thoughts of her, tried to summon the feelings he had when he was with her: but the truth was, and he knew it, that it was pale stuff, just a shadow, held up beside this; and that whatever he felt for her fell so far short of the electric bond he had with this man here that it made a mockery of what he had called, to her face, love.

He sat quietly, tensely, thinking about it.

It was not so much that what he had with her was slight, a more trivial thing than his relationship with Bodie, though even if that had been all there was to it he would have had no business marrying her. No, the truth was worse than that and by far: the truth was that what he had with Bodie was so far at the other end of the scale as to make any comparison unfair.

In which case, he certainly had no business marrying her.

And his first thought was *Now what do I do?* and on its heels fast and fleet came a worse one, *What have I already done...?*

"Well, I can't marry you," he said, with a sudden spurt of deep and violent anger. "Whaddayou suggest, Bodie, I should set up home with you instead?"

Bodie grinned at his partner's belligerent face, tapped his cheek with a finger. "Might not be such a bad idea."

"Oh, don't be so bloody stupid, Bodie!"

He was not a coward. He faced up to this new and damning knowledge with the courage to see it for what it was: the reason why. The reason *why* a lot of things: oh, it was all adding up now, fast as binary maths. He remembered, tense with hindsight, Bodie's mouth pressed to his, his instinct to a wild response, the way he had had to hold himself back.

"Don't worry about it, Ray," Bodie said beside him, quiet and still, not joking now, not at all. "We're not the only ones it gets to this way. Life and death and sex--it's all tied up together somewhere."

The world had blown up in his face, and here was Bodie quoting generalities.

"Oh, that's a great comfort," Doyle said bitterly, kicking out at the floor, the table. "Thanks for thinking of it." Kick. Kick. "I know, you're going to quote Alexander the fucking Great at me now. Well don't just fucking bother, okay?"

"It's all right, Ray," Bodie said, watching him from beneath a carbon tangle of lashes. "Forget it, if you want. Nothing's happened."

"That's not quite the sweet, fucking point though, is it?" Doyle said, violent with control. "The point is, how the *fuck* am I supposed to get engaged tomorrow, knowing--"

"Knowing *what*?" the voice of reason clashed with his, and Bodie's calm, faintly humorous eye slid up to his face. "Nothing done, nothing doing; no need to get in such a state about it. We had feelings we maybe shouldn't have had. But we never did anything about it."

Still not the point.

"Did you want to?" Doyle muttered fiercely, eyes wide open, fixed on Bodie's face. "Did you, Bodie?"

It took Bodie a long time to answer, circling one finger endlessly around the rim of his glass, eyes hazy as he looked out and back into the past. "Remember the Adams thing?"

"Yeah," Doyle said, though he could not think for a moment what Bodie meant; and then it came to him. For ten days and seven hundred miles they had poured their best, grittiest efforts into nosing out and hounding down the man Cowley had sent them to find.

MI5 had wanted him too.

No-one could prove it was their men who had ambushed Cowley's two best agents on their way back to HQ, but anyway the man got lost and remained lost, despite intensive trying. It was one of their worst failures. Still the memory stung.

Oh, they had resisted. Given a good account of themselves. But in the end, caught on an open road so many miles from home and help, two men can't hold off seven. Doyle had come off worst: bruised ribs and a streaming nosebleed. Blood, sweat and tears. He had indeed had tears in his eyes: not pain, but the wildest of angers.

Lounging here now with Bodie, moody and unhappy, he remembered all this; but could not think why Bodie should have called this particular memory into play.

"You stood there afterwards," Bodie said softly, "Like to kill something just in the way you hurled a look at it. You were bleeding, rivers of it everywhere, and you were cursing like a devil out of hell. You were in such a temper I hardly dared look at you in case it was me you decided to stamp on." He took a deep breath, sighed it out again, not looking at Doyle. "And I wanted you so badly--" He stopped: then said into the resounding silence, "I'd have died for you that minute, Ray, I swear I would."

Doyle was still, remembering. Bodie had seemed strange, distracted. Not that he had thought anything of it at the time. They had both just taken a brutal assault by MI5's kidnap posse, seen their own brilliant work ripped out from under their feet, had Cowley still to face with the news: a small wonder he had not noticed anything about Bodie which could not be easily explained away by circumstances.

"I thought you'd taken a hit," he said, after a pause. "You were so dead white, looked fit to be ill."

Bodie managed a twisted laugh. "Oh yeah, I felt sick all right. Sick wanting you. Thought I was going to throw up." He added, into the still and weighted pause, "Felt if I touched you--we'd probably both die..." and then he tried to laugh it off, shrugging, "Stupid, isn't it."

Doyle looked at him curiously. "What did you want to do?"

Bodie ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Oh Christ, Ray, I dunno. Just touch you. Cry on you. Wash all that blood away. Get inside you, I suppose. As far as I could get..."

Doyle was shaky too; he drew in a ragged breath. Sheer, naked curiosity ran high in him: he said, "So what did you do?"

Bodie looked at him then, dark and dazed and blurred, dragging himself back to now. "What do you mean, what did I do?" You know what I damn well did. Nothing. Sat beside you and kept quiet while you wrenched the gears and shot your mouth off all the way back to Whitehall."

"Such self-control," Doyle said with nasty irony.

But Bodie answered him quite seriously, "See, that's the point, Doyle. We all have these choices come up from time to time. Feelings you know you shouldn't have. Who hasn't eyed up some nubile bint sometime and not given a toss if she's over the age of consent? We're only human, we can't help the way we feel. Most of the time we don't act on it. However much we want to."

True perhaps, but it didn't seem to help. Doyle still felt restless, utterly disoriented. Stirred up, left to drift in the air with no place yet to settle. It was far from over.

Suddenly Bodie said: "On the other hand."

"On the other hand, what?"

"On the other hand--maybe one night would cure us both."

Doyle stared at Bodie in disbelief. "What?"

Bodie smiled at him, reckless and tender, the smile of a man with nothing to lose. "Why not?"

"Oh, that's brilliant, Bodie. Truly brilliant. That'd solve everything, that would."

"Solve--?" Bodie stood up and stretched. Strong, warm leather creaked over the knotting swell of muscles. "Solve nothing at all, probably. But think of the fun, Ray. Think of the fun."

"Fun?" Doyle didn't think it would be fun. At the very least it could be brutish and nasty: at the worst, it might swallow him up and eat him alive.

Bodie shrugged off his jacket. Beneath it he wore a white poloneck which suited his dark good looks. His holster banded his broad chest; the gun hugged his armpit, cradling in the warm recess of his body. He began to undo the buckles, slip it over his head. "Going to have a shower," he said, and Doyle nodded. He watched Bodie leave the room, one hand coming up again and tugging irritably at his tie, working it looser still.

It would not be wise to go to Bodie's bedroom tonight.

He knew that much: profane, clandestine things waited for him there, better by far untold: a man might be put to death for knowing them. He stared ahead of him, his mind in a dizzy whirl.

He should have gone to her flat tonight. He had known that even when Bodie had invited him back here, with that half-jerk of his head: "Coming back to my place, Ray?" and a look in his eye, that hard, disturbing embrace so close behind them.

And yet, it was second nature to him to go along with Bodie, even to flirt a little with Bodie. He wasn't an innocent. He knew quite well what he wanted. He wanted Bodie's attention, and he wanted Bodie's eye to chase him, always, wherever he was.

And what did that make him?

It wasn't too late. He should turn around and go, now. They could put it down to the drink.

He jumped to his feet, inactivity suddenly unbearable to him. Even his blood felt irritable, coursing around inside. He dragged on restless feet through to Bodie's bedroom, large bed in the centre, black sheets, black and silver duvet.

He could hear Bodie, noisy in the ensuite shower. Cheerful snatches of song interplayed with the rush and splatter of water, the busy scrubbing noises. Doyle could picture Bodie standing there, the translucent spread of water coursing down his clear skin.

The shower slowed and stopped. Bodie stepped out of it, into the room. A dark blue towel was whisked like a vigorous piston around his neck, back, buttocks. He laughed out loud at Doyle, standing so silently there.

"Come on mate, cheer up. Cowley's aunt! Hope your lady appreciates the mean and moody style."

The hairs at the nape of Doyle's neck stood on end, he positively felt them do it as Bodie came closer to him, his frowning eye drawn to various points of his body: nipples, thighs, cock. Bodie seemed unselfconscious; he hustled himself nearer to Doyle and grabbed him. Just as he might on any ordinary day, fooling around.

The smell of clean wet skin rose to Doyle's nostrils, and the heat of Bodie's nakedness pressed through Doyle's clothes right to his skin. Bodie's arm slipped around him and held him in a grip of iron; his other hand entwined itself in Doyle's applegreen tie and used it as a hook to draw him closer.

And Doyle could only stand there, rock steady, and stare into his eyes; every nerve in him seemed hypersensitive to the feeling of Bodie's cock, pressing up against his thigh. It was just there by accident, but still it was there. He shifted automatically. Bodie muttered something under his breath, then gave a half laugh, shaking his head. He looked down at Doyle, deeply and intensely, and murmured: "Christ, Ray. You're such a little tart, aren't you?" in admiration more than anything. He gathered the tie more firmly. Off-balance, Doyle flung his arm around Bodie's neck, his fingertips curving around his shoulder, his eyes traveling over Bodie's face in wonder.

Bodie smiled at him. "Well?" he invited, and for a second they were perfectly, completely still. "Tempted?"

"It's not my thing, Bodie," Doyle said.

Bodie grinned at him again. "Not even a little?" and in his mind's eye Doyle viewed a host of fleeting memories, every little thing from their past which gave Bodie the right to hold him this way, the lease of familiarity, the confidence that Doyle would entertain this, the fanciest of notions. He had flirted about at the end of the line, laughing, meaning to stay out of reach: now

Bodie had hooked him out of the blue. One cruel jab and he would be threshing in Bodie's palm. And it was nobody's fault but his own.

He broke the hold, broke the mood, slipped back and away and out of Bodie's reach.

"I think it takes more than a little."

He walked away, out of the bedroom, a blue-jeaned swagger which had lost none of its flair. Bodie's eyes watched him all the way. Thoughtful. Not displeased.

The sudden sound of smooth music in the air warned him, so that he scarcely tensed when he felt the settee dip beside him, Bodie settling there. His head was lifted onto Bodie's lap, resting on silk; Bodie's midnight-blue dressing gown, at a guess, and nothing beneath. He didn't open his eyes.

Bodie's musing voice drifted above his head, "I never met anyone quite like you before, Ray."

"I could say the same about you," he answered, with distant irony.

Bodie's fingers sifted through his curls, lifting them away from his scalp, a touch quite detached for all the intimacy of it. Just as if Bodie took it for granted that to touch him would not annoy him, or excite him.

"And I never quite believed in esprit de corps."

"No. You wouldn't."

"I do now," Bodie said against his ear, and kissed him.

He had been expecting it for some time, was tensed up for it, and so it even came as something of a relief. He opened his mouth to the arrogance of Bodie's moist tongue, tasted dark secrets with a pleasure that arrowed straight down to his cock.

There: everything was all right.

This would straighten them out. He could give Bodie what he wanted and still have his girlfriend waiting. And along the way, not the least of it: solve his curious, desperate longing in himself.

Bodie gave a little low murmur and stayed still, breathing against his lips. Doyle slid both arms around his neck and settled himself into Bodie's embrace. Bodie's caressing hand swept down his chest, over his belly, and came to rest over his cock, which Doyle pressed up helplessly, wanting, needing Bodie to take it in his hand, closing his eyes as something sweet began inside; at that moment he felt responsibility flee from him, like a shadow in the path of the moon. Possessed himself of sophisticated sexual needs, he guessed that Bodie shared them, was also an initiate, he need worry about nothing at all. With a little sound of pleasure he raised himself up a little so

that Bodie could undo his shirt, begin a long slow caressing of his chest, and the delicate area of his nipples. As Bodie's square fingertip stiffed them, dreams and longings chased around in his mind, and his cock throbbed sweetly with life and lust and power.

"Well?" Bodie murmured, his voice a little rough with passion, "How far are you going to let me go before you scream?" And his hand slipped inside Doyle's jeans; lying back as he was, flat in utter abandon, there was room to manoeuvre. He felt with utter delight one finger circling the rigid head of his cock, coaxing the slippery moisture it discovered there. He shivered in Bodie's arms.

"Takes a lot to get me screamin', mate--ah!" He shuddered again at the exquisite feeling of it. "But my money's on you," he finished in a whisper. After a moment he propped himself up on one elbow so that he could watch Bodie touch him; christ, the sight of his hard, colourful cock in Bodie's pale strong hand, enough to make him come then and there.

He took Bodie's hand and held it still in his own. "Careful." And Bodie wrapped him up in his arms and kissed him again, strongly and deeply and hard; he could no longer taste the difference between them.

A long while later, gasping for breath, he pulled himself away again, felt his lips sore and swollen and abused.

"Okay, you win. Let's go to bed."

Bodie looked a little disheveled, his robe unfastened, his hair mussed up, but his eyes were dark with passion and his gaze burned into Doyle, branding him with the fire of Bodie's possessive desire. He shivered a little; Bodie took his hand, drew it upwards to his lips, pressed a kiss onto his palm in a gesture almost sweet, almost to break his heart--

"Ah, don't look like that, Ray."

"Like what?" he whispered; he had little breath to speak.

"Like you're scared of me."

"I'm not."

Bodie held his gaze, a long, dark look. "I would never hurt you, Ray. Don't you know that?"

He said it with a kind of wonder, as if there was so much more to know. Doyle lost his breath again, his heart beating heavily, with dread as much as anything. He was frightened all right, though not of Bodie; more at the depth of what he sensed in himself. But it was too late to stop now.

"Come on." He bent to strip off the tangle of jeans around his knees. Bodie took hold of him and pressed him urgently to the floor, wrenching at his clothes as if he could wait no longer.

So: Bodie wanted him that much. How much?

After a while, his cock like iron, he bent his head to Bodie's ear and whispered a question as his heart thudded and the blood rushed and sang into his ears.

"I dunno, Ray," Bodie answered him, his voice low, husky.

"Come on," he persisted, and his hand squeezed Bodie's buttock, hard, and squeezed it again. "Just muckin' about if we don't, innit? Might as well go the whole bloody way." And when that failed he brought all his will to bear on Bodie, crowding him into a corner, pressing in hard with all his strength of mind and the precious allure of his body: "Come on," he whispered, eyes shining in the dark, and writhed against Bodie, "Let me. Bodie, please."

Look at me, I'm desperate. And Bodie gave in, as Doyle never doubted that he would, found him some stuff, took him to the bedroom and kneeled on the bed, propped on his elbows. The laughter had stopped, and the kisses, and the sweet murmured things, and he saw that the joy had gone out of this for Bodie; and yet it didn't seem to matter, nothing mattered but the iron spike between his legs and the nature of his own needs. And so, trembling, he gazed at Bodie's white arse with a hunger that overwhelmed him; there seemed no perverse act in the whole of the world to Ray Doyle right now, he would have done anything, anything at all, and thought it the sweetest and most natural thing there could be.

Imagination, a false friend; the frenzy in his mind lost him the control of his body, and Bodie, tensed for entry, felt only the muffled clotted thump of Doyle's seed stealing forth like a traitor over Bodie's back, his advance over before it had begun.

Anything would have been better than this.

Doyle kept his head buried in the pillow, pressed into his arm, and ignored Bodie's persistent voice.

"Ray. Ray."

Bitter iron pride alone made him roll over and face Bodie's eyes.

"Flattered," Bodie said ironically, and then he swept Doyle up into broad arms again and lay down with him.

"Doesn't matter, Ray."

"Not to you, no doubt," Doyle muttered, dropping his head back, shutting his eyes. He felt tired, and cold, and vaguely dirty. As if they had done something nasty. And yet that was a joke; they hadn't even come close. Just two lads mucking about in the woodshed, that was all it had amounted to. Didn't mean a thing. Pointless.

Bodie was leaning over him, pulling up the duvet over them both. Wrenching himself away from Bodie's hands Doyle turned angrily onto his side, away from him. Sweat was drying coolly on his skin, the sheets were cold. It crossed his mind to leave. Go, as he should have done three hours before.

"This was a stupid thing to do," he snarled, shuddering with cold, vicious with the need to lash out.

In silence Bodie finished sorting out the covers, practical and efficient. "Did you hear me?" he let loose between chattering teeth. "We must've been mad..."

"Yes," Bodie said. "Yeah, very likely." His voice, bleak and sober, rescued Doyle from the lonely country he had banished himself to: he gave some thought to Bodie, wondered bitterly how far reality had failed to match up to Bodie's dreams.

"Sorry," he muttered grudgingly, "Not your fault. I knew it wasn't a good idea, but still I--"

"Too late now."

"I know. See, Bodie, I thought maybe...I thought it would be okay. I thought it would be an end to it."

"Well then," Bodie said thinly, ironically, from very far away in the bed, "you were half right, weren't you?"

In the morning we can pretend it never happened, Doyle thought, and at last, at long last, his troubled mind tumbled off a precipice into sleep.

But they never made it through the morning: the next time Doyle awoke and blinked at the clock it read 2:59 a.m.

He was warm now, Bodie was lying close to him.

The memory flickered instantly in his mind. He winced away from it, but it persisted, and in the end he faced up to it full-on.

And found it, after all, unthreatening. Instead, comforted by sleep and warmth and haze, it seemed not to matter at all. He looked back amazed at his own defensive fury; for a woman might have mocked him, or pitied him, but he was not with a woman, and any man should know just how it was, how you had to fight against the tide, how easy it was to throw yourself in. He had been so--

He had wanted Bodie, so much.

Bodie should be flattered, as he said.

Bodie was awake now, his eyes glinting in the dark, some electricity alive between them and drawing them together. With an inarticulate murmur he moved closer to Doyle, kissed his shoulder, his cheek, parted Doyle's lips with his mouth. Doyle let his eyes fall closed as his tongue played with Bodie's, a terrible excitement beginning once again to churn inside him, a ticking clock set off and counting down now to some inevitable explosion. Bodie's mouth broke away to kiss his nipples, his chest, his belly, and he began to moan softly. And when he felt Bodie's tongue lapping delicately at his cock he experienced a sweet, peculiar thrilling unlike any he had known. It was really going to happen. The end of the world, inside Bodie's mouth.

Bodie was speaking to him, low and intense. "Don't come, Ray. Tell me first." But when it came to it he could not speak, Bodie's swirling tongue, sweet suckling made too brilliant a magic for him and he tensed, waiting without breathing for the catastrophe of orgasm.

Immediately Bodie pulled away, left him cold and lost and frightened by his own temper; he wanted to hit Bodie, force him back to it. He calmed himself with an effort, willing himself to, taking great, deep breaths.

Bodie grinned at him cheekily, amused by his state. "Don't worry, Ray: think I'd leave you in the lurch? I'll finish you that way if that's what you want. Thought you might want to try the other again, that's all."

And Bodie was right: that was what he wanted, more than anything, to fuck Bodie through the floor. Because in a way he wanted to punish Bodie, who had proposed this he had said, for fun: he wanted to teach Bodie that you couldn't play these sort of games for *fun*, for a laugh, that you played them for real. This time Bodie lay upwards and faced him; propped on his palms Doyle looked down, very deliberately, into the dark of his eyes as he bore down, closing them only at the slick tight shock of entry, opening them again when he was in all the way.

The pleasure of it was devastating, a magnificent beast in the dark.

For a while he wrestled with it alone, and then he sensed Bodie there with him, getting the feel of it, beginning to move. Touched by what Bodie had taken on to give him pleasure, Doyle looked down into his face all the while, seeing his strong partner shaded, for once, by a certain vulnerability: it moved him intensely. Bodie had withheld nothing from him: this was as much sex, the true thing, as it could ever be with any woman, he was as close to the man now as he would ever get, moving deep inside him with slow sweet rhythm. He cradled Bodie's face gently in his hands, stroked back the feathery blueblack hair from his temples, moaning as he sank deep, deeper inside him, and pulled out, and pressed home again. The whisper and slide of skin on silken skin continued, picked up speed; and this seemed like the last step, the ultimate in a lifetime of trust. The sweet simple truth of it hurt him even as it thrilled him; he gripped Bodie closely to him, fiercely, tenderly. Beneath his belly Bodie's iron cock grew rigid, and Bodie whispered something, some lost endearment, his eyes filmed with ecstasy, his fingers digging tight, tighter into Doyle's shoulders, spilling forth the milky dreams he had been hiding deep inside.

That was the last thing--

Doyle thrust home swift as an arrow and exploded in the violent glory of orgasm, his mouth lying open against Bodie's trailing moisture, and a picture flashed into his mind at the last moment of another face.

He could not even remember her name.

They said nothing afterwards; though Bodie held his hand very hard, gripped it, beneath the covers.

Doyle shut his eyes.

Oh christ.

What have we done.

Tomorrow, he was due to pledge himself forever and for all time to a girl whose name he had lost when he lost himself in Bodie.

And yet, she had seemed real to him. Until this.

He had been living in two dimensions. And if he had taught Bodie nothing at all then he himself had learned: and there was no way back.

Beside him, sensing trouble, Bodie murmured some fierce comfort, but it could not help.

He was alone on this one.

He thrust back the covers, sliding his hand away from Bodie's with one last quick pressure. He got out of bed and went to stand near the window, looking out, seeing nothing.

"Ray?" Bodie said from the bed, a soft, dark question.

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

He didn't answer that.

"Wish we hadn't done it?"

"No," he said, not to reward the sad bleak courage of Bodie's question, but because it was true: you might as well wish for the sun and the moon to be unmade.

"What do you want to do?"

Well, indeed. There was the question. What now?

The stars in his eyes were sharp as glass: they hurt him.

First night.

Last night.

Either way it was the end of something.

-- END --

Zeroplanic

Flu

Sebastian

The second story I ever wrote, unsophisticated, uncomplex, hurt/comfort times-two. It was meant to have a sequel, but perhaps, after all, it's all there.

"I won't forget..."

=====|||=====

It had been a straight forward, run-'em-down case, and the two CI5 agents had laid their quarry to ground in a complex of pre-fab buildings used for the purpose of chemical research, pharmaceutical experimentation and the like. It had been shut up for the weekend, guarded by one man with an Alsatian, who was presently lying out cold, quite unaware that he was shortly to awaken to a thundering headache, a grilling from his boss, and a long tramp through the surrounding countryside looking for Rover, whom the unscrupulous villains had let off the leash.

The said villains had even worse prospects to keep in mind as they high-tailed it around the laboratories, in a crazy game of hide-and-seek, pursued by two grim-faced agents who were making it clear, very clear indeed, that they were not in this for fun and games. They finally burst into a locked laboratory, guns drawn on the two men cowering behind neat lines of Bunsen burners, test-tubes and acid flasks; they made a lot of mess. Glass flew everywhere, but not a drop of blood was spilt as they wore down the opposition, rounded them up and marched them out to handcuffs and the waiting car.

Behind them, a fallen test-tube lay on its side, its precious nurtured virus compound leaking out onto the floor. The air was richly full of invisible molecules, and had been for several minutes, quite long enough to ensure that anyone in the vicinity had a very nasty surprise coming up for the weekend...

Doyle had a bath, and shaved. It was Friday night, and he should be feeling full of the joys of life and the prospect of a wild, abandoned evening coming up; but it wasn't working out that way. He felt vaguely restless; there were tinglings in his nerve-ends like itches, and odd pains that came and went in his joints. He must be getting a cold... There was a deep, nauseous sensation in his stomach, too, slight but noticeable. Although he was all ready, spruce and clean, he began to realise that he didn't feel like an evening's drinking, that was for sure, let alone anything more strenuous later on; he was tired and wanted to go to bed. Bed? He noted with surprise that it was only 8, an hour yet before he was due to join up with Bodie and do the town together. A shudder went through him at the thought of it.

He'd have to call his partner, say he wasn't up to it and needed a good night's sleep. Bodie'd understand. Get on just as well on his own; in any case, the old smoothie. You couldn't imagine Bodie being turned down.

The phone rang, just as he was wearily considering how much time he could rest where he was before making the effort to call Bodie. He felt distinctly lightheaded as he automatically jumped to his feet to answer it.

"That you, mate?" Bodie, sounding strange.

"No, the Aga Khan, who you expecting? You dialled my number, didn't you?" He *felt* like being mean and sarky.

"Look, I don't feel too bright. You'll be on your own tonight, sorry, sunshine. Give 'em enough for both of us, okay?"

Doyle was momentarily diverted from his own aches and pains. "S'funny, *I* don't feel too hot, either. Was going to ring you to say the same."

A pause. Then Bodie's grim voice - "Stands to reason. Whatever you get, I get it too, right? After all, we suffer everything else together, why not the flu?"

"Flu? Is that what it is?"

"Guess so. S'not just a cold, I eat cold germs for breakfast. Looks like a weekend in bed."

"We got flu?" Doyle took it in. Oh god. Yes. that was why he felt shivery and yet hot at the same time. They had a great weekend coming up, that was for sure. "You got someone to look after you?" he found himself asking.

Bodie sounded gloomy. "Not bloody likely. Do *you* know anyone keen to catch a raging dose of flu? No, nor do I."

"Not even from you?"

"Nah, looks like I'll be getting my own aspirin. Look, call it a day. I'm not up to any more of

your fast patter right now. See you on Monday. If I'm up to it. Might put my aim off; Cowley wouldn't like that."

"Ang on a minute. Why don't we see it out together?" A spur of the moment idea.

"What?" Bodie, tetchy.

"Spend the weekend together." Neither was Doyle inclined to be joyous. "Got flu, right? So we have it together."

"What the hell for?" his partner demanded, suspicious.

"Two of us," explained Doyle, succinct. "Take it in turns to get up and make the tea. Halves the number of trips up."

Bodie said, after a pause, "S'pose it makes sense. Come on round, then,"

"You must be jokin', mate," snorted Doyle down the phone. "I'm a sick man. I'm not going anywhere. See you when you get here."

And he put down the phone.

Bodie looked like death, pale, dull-eyed and sweating as he handed in a small kitbag. He retained, however, the old sparky spirit as he glowered at his mate. "I must be mad. Bloody hell, Doyle. I should be in bed, not following up one of your crazy ideas and driving half over London in a daze. I nearly killed someone."

"Pedestrian?"

"No. traffic warden, Stopped me and said I was speeding."

Doyle grinned. "So you said you were on official business?"

Bodie's brows drew together in a mean scowl. "No, that's when I nearly killed him."

It felt good, to have Bodie here. Already Doyle felt a notch or two brighter. "Well, s'over now, isn't it?" he answered, locking and double locking the door. "That's that, till Monday morning. All R&R from now on, mate. Look at this."

He held open the door to the bedroom, waiting for Bodie's approval. A sickroom deluxe. In the half-hour before his partner's arrival, and before the incapacitating effects of influenza could take a strong grip, he'd moved the TV in, to the foot of the bed, shifted the hi-fi onto the dressing unit in case they should feel like some soft music to soothe their troubled breasts, there was a jug of fruit juice on each bedside cabinet. The bed itself, a luxurious kingsize object he recently bought in a fit of extravagance, he had carefully divided down the middle by the simple expedient of placing a pillow there.

"You wouldn't do better if you were covered by BUPA," he stated with satisfaction.

[text missing] Bodie was not in the swing of things. "This is a mad idea," he reiterated, looking around. "I'm not feeling in the mood for company, and especially not in bed."

"Ah, c'mon, mate. You'll see the logic of this in the morning, when I bring you in a nice cup of tea."

"Mmm," sniffed Bodie, disgruntled. He genuinely felt lousy, all aches and pains and fatigue. "Mind if I have a bath?" Without waiting for his host's permission he disappeared into the bathroom, and Doyle presently heard the sound of running water. His head was beginning to ache. He took two aspirin, left two out on Bodie's side of the bed. This weekend looked like being a long way from a barrel of laughs, with one thing and another.... He undressed, pulled on a pair of stretch cotton pyjamas and got into bed.

Bodie appeared in a borrowed bathrobe; he looked hot, his usually pale skin flushed and damp. He dropped the robe on the floor and prepared to climb into bed, naked.

"Ey. Pick it up." Doyle pointed to the heap of towelling. "Nothing worse than an untidy sickroom. And won't you be cold like that?" he added as Bodie bent muttering to do as he was bid.

"Cold," Bodie said ironically as he slid gratefully between the cool cotton sheets. "You must be jokin', you could fry an egg on me."

He did look hot and uncomfortable. Doyle reached out and felt his mate's forehead, half in jest, half serious. "Jesus, Bodie!" he exclaimed.

Bodie turned his head away from the hand. "I know, I know."

"You sure it's just flu you got?" Doyle was really worried: Bodie's skin was burning.

"Yeah, had it before. Two days of hell, then you're okay. Virus; no point in calling out the quack. You seem pretty perky. Sure *you* got it?" He touched Doyle's temples with the back of his hand, pushing the heavy curls aside with the other.

"Yeah," he said, letting go and leaning back wearily. "You got it."

Doyle half got into a thriller on TV, trying to ignore the pounding in his head. Bodie had said nothing for a long time, just lying back against his pillow, but the silence was not uncomfortable. They were too close for that; the time when they had needed to fill every silence with words lest it become awkward was years past. S'funny, reflected Doyle, it seems right to have him here when I'm ill, or when he is. Him, not anyone else. As if he was a child again, and Bodie - no, that was wrong, nothing maternal about Bodie, and he cancelled it instantly. What, then? As if Bodie were like - like a brother, maybe? But that was even further from what he was feeling, and he

considered it for a while, baffled. Bodie was a friend, the best friend he had. Yeah, true but it was more than that: he only knew that if he were feeling ill, even mildly so like now, or if he knew that Bodie was, it was right for them to be together. After all, who else did they have?

A couple, his mind finally supplied, contented to have solved the problem; that's what they were.

Like a bolt from the blue he realised what he'd been thinking, and he choked happily on his orange juice.

Bodie flicked a dark eye his way. "Something funny?"

"Yeah," spluttered Doyle. He wanted to share the joke. "I was thinkin' - you an' me, we're like Darby and Joan. We share the hot water bottles and the aspirin and the flu... You better watch out, mate, " he warned. We'll get a name for ourselves." He flashed Bodie a wicked green-eyed look.

Bodies answer was one of his best sarkily disdainful stares, from below eyelids fluttering with exasperated hauteur. It was fun to have Bodie here; the two of them close and secure in a tidy, comfortable room with everything to hand, and sleep not far away.

Bodie was also half-watching the thriller, a frown of irritation on his face. "Why," he demanded, "are these people speaking with French accents?"

"They're French," Doyle explained gently.

Bodie gave it a pause. Then, "Okay. They're French. In France. So why aren't they talking in French?"

"Because," said Doyle, patient, "we couldn't understand them if they were.

Bodie thought it over. "So why the French accents? If we're supposed to believe they're really speaking French, why accents, for godsake?" The actors exchanged another impassioned bit of dialogue, heavily laced with 'verrees' and 'e sinks zat eet ees'.

"So we don't forget they're French."

"I see." A pause.

Bodie, querulous: "If they sell this series to France - "

"Yeah?"

Giving up, Bodie waved a hand in dismissal. "Nah, it's too complicated." He lay down. "I'm for an early night."

"Don't drop off. I'll make us a nightcap." Doyle pushed himself out of bed, surprised to find that his legs were definitely staggery. Remembering long-ago childhood cures, he warmed up milk, added brown sugar and a dash of brandy, dropped in some soluble aspirin and a vitamin pill for good measure, and took the two mugs back to bed. Bodie was lying just as Doyle had left him, eyes closed. "Sit up and drink this."

Bodie opened an eye. "What is it?" He sounded distinctly unenthusiastic.

"Nourishment, panacea and relaxant all in one go," said Doyle, with a flourish.

Mildly interested, Bodie heaved himself up, and took a cautious sip. "Christ, Ray!" he spluttered, through a grimace. "If I drink this I'll be sick."

"If you are, you know the way," replied Doyle, unimpressed, and drank his own.

Wincing horribly, Bodie managed most of it and lay down again. "Night."

"Light out?"

"Yeah."

Bodie appeared to drop off almost at once. Doyle lay awake longer, wishing the nagging pain in his head would subside. He pressed his hot forehead into the pillow and eventually he too fell into a restless sleep.

He awoke to blackness, and a sense of something wrong. His head felt thick and dull and his throat was sore; but it wasn't just that. The bed was shaking; a low, violent tremor that halted abruptly and then began again. He lifted his head. "Bodie?" he whispered.

The tremors stopped. "Cold," muttered Bodie through chattering teeth.

Doyle reached a hand out over the coolness of the intervening pillow; met hot skin. Bodie was shivering violently again, as another helpless fit of chills went through him. "Put a sweater on," instructed Doyle. He felt cool himself, now he came to think about it; deep-down cold inside.

"Too cold to move."

Doyle didn't feel like getting out either. There was only one thing for it. "Told you you should have worn pyjamas," he murmured resignedly, leaning over and throwing the pillow out onto the floor. Then he shunted over in the bed and pulled Bodie roughly into his arms.

Bodie didn't resist; in fact he attached himself to his partner with a sigh of relief, wriggling until he was satisfied that the warmth of Doyle was soaking into him in as many places as possible. Then he relaxed, and stopped shivering.

Doyle looked down at the dark hair beneath his chin, felt Bodie's arms wrapped around him, an

ironic thread of laughter running through his mind. Bodie and Doyle, 3.7 and 4.5, Cowley's rough-tough ace team who put the wind up the heaviest of heavies - lying in bed, cuddling. No point in deluding himself, they were cuddling. Even though his head was painful and his inflamed throat hurt him, he allowed himself a little chuckle, into Bodie's apple-scented hair.

It disturbed Bodie, who, warm and comforted, had been drifting in to sleep. He dozily felt an immense, grateful relief for the warm presence holding him, keeping the chills at bay. He reached up one drowsy hand, stroked the smooth skin just beside Doyle's mouth with his thumb. "Love you," he mumbled.

"*What* did you say?" asked Doyle, incredulous, and more awake.

The other man sighed, warm breath on Doyle's throat. "I love you."

Doyle grinned to himself. Bodie was just going to love hearing about this in the morning, wasn't he? Bless him, though. A twinge of rueful tenderness went through Doyle. He hugged Bodie even tighter.

"Yeah, mate; love you too."

He fell asleep smiling.

He awoke to trouble. Everything was wrong. His head ached, his mouth was dry and sticky, his throat and chest hurt. He moved, restless, and his arms and legs grumbled more discomfort at him. He felt sick. For a second, he panicked: he had to get up, it was time for work, had to get up...and then the mound beside him in the bed stirred and said something incoherent, and Doyle woke up properly.

"Bodie..." he said, and his voice came out as a croak.

"Mmm."

"I don't feel - "

"That's flu for you, sunshine." Bodie sounded odd too, hoarse and strange.

"Oh god," croaked Doyle with feeling, and he turned and thumped his pillow with a weirdly feeble fist.

Bodie gave a wheezy chuckle, then coughed. "Did you think it was gonna be all fun and games?"

"Yeah," panted Doyle over the rising nausea. "Day or two in bed - nice and' warm - watch Match of the Day, that's what I - "

The wave of sickness caught him by surprise, his mouth filling urgently with salty saliva - oh

christ, too late - He sat up, swallowing hard, but it didn't do any good.

Bodie, watching his mate's expression, had moved fast despite his inclined-to-be-sluggish limbs. He was there with a towel, which had been the first and only thing to hand, and he supported Doyle over it with a hand beneath his armpit as his whitefaced partner gasped and vomited.

Then he took the towel into the bathroom, left it under a cold running tap in the bath, and returned to mop Doyle's still-trembling mouth and chin with another damp towel. "Wanna drink?" he asked, calm and practical. Doyle nodded. He was shivering, his eyes closed. Bodie punched the rumpled pillow behind him back into shape, pushed him back against it, not ungently, and pulled the covers up to keep him warm. Then he went off to get some fresh water and a bucket, just in case.

Doyle took the glass from his hand, drank thirstily. "Thanks," was all he said.

Bodie, feeling like hell, decided it would be better to do what he had to do now he was already up, rather than face it all over again. So he went to shower and shave, pulling on a clean shirt and one of Doyle's numerous dressing gowns. He checked the locks on the door, rinsed the mugs of the night before and got a jug of fresh water before he finally got to bed, sinking into it with a sigh of relief. Christ, he'd only been awake half an hour and already he felt shot-out. He cast a glance over at Doyle. His partner was still pale-faced, but his eyes were open, staring bleakly ahead.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

Doyle's silence after that spoke volumes. He looked decidedly fragile, both in health and mood. Bodie felt a sudden ache for him as he sniffed miserably and gave a little husky cough. "Told you it wasn't all fun," Bodie commented, and reached to brush the sweat-damp curls aside with a brusque hand, peering concernedly into the cloudy green eyes. "You get out now and shower. You'll feel better after that."

"Yeah? Did you?" But he complied and it was true; he felt, if not more human, at least more refreshed, in clean pyjamas, even managing to stay upright long enough to make a pot of coffee. He carried it into the bedroom and surveyed the tangled bedding. "I think we ought to make the bed."

Bodie groaned, his head turning to one side. "Look, mate," said Doyle, trying to be reasonable though he felt tired and grumpy. "You've been sweating in there all night. What's the point of us gettin' all clean and then going back in *that* pit?"

"Feels all right," muttered Bodie. "Come in for now, you look terrible. We'll change it this afternoon before we get settled down for the night; that suit you?"

Doyle agreed, too weary to press the point. He straightened out the sheets and toppled into bed.

He poured some coffee and passed it over, noting that Bodie looked terrible too; his eyes were heavy lidded and red-rimmed, his skin paler, and he looked more listless and apathetic than Doyle had ever seen him.

"Aspirins." He nudged him.

"Don't help." But he took them just the same, swallowed down the coffee and then lay down, pulling the covers over his shoulders.

"Not going to sleep again, are you?" said Doyle, watching him. "Got the newspaper here, you can have a look at the sport." He began to detach the pages but Bodie didn't move.

"Nah, s'okay."

"What's the matter?" Doyle leant over him, concerned. He put his hand on Bodie's forehead but Bodie pushed it off irritably.

"Don't keep mauling me around."

"Oh, *sorry*," sniffed Doyle, moving away, annoyed at the reception of his genuine desire to help.

Bodie rolled over to face him in one quick movement. "Sorry," he countered. He put out a hand and mock-punched Doyle's cheek.

"Well, 'mauling me around'," mocked Doyle. "That's rich, after you in the night."

"I said I was sorry." Bodie lowered his eyes, sucked in a breath, his mouth set into a pose Doyle knew well.

"Okay, okay." He lay back against the pillows, opened the paper once more and lost himself in the leader.

Beside him, Bodie closed heavy eyes and slept: but it was a fitful, restless sleep. He twitched and muttered, his fingers moving spasmodically in the sheet, his head tossing from side to side, feet kicking. After a while Doyle couldn't concentrate on the newspaper any more; he switched on the bedside radio, low, and lay back. His head was beginning to ache again and he still felt vaguely queasy. He felt very sorry for himself and wallowed in it for a while. His mouth was permanently dry, so he drank some more orange juice but it was raw on his inflamed throat and it hurt when he swallowed. He reached for a book, couldn't concentrate, threw it aside and looked down at his sleeping partner. Christ, Bodie looked ill. His dark hair was damply curling; Doyle touched it idly and realised with a shock that it was wet with sweat; beads of it running over his temples and into his screwed up eyes. Urgently, Doyle pulled away the covers. Bodie's shirt was darkly clinging to him in patches. He reached out and touched it - soaked. The bed beneath him was wet too, shiny puddles on the crisp mercerised material.

It couldn't be normal, to sweat that much. A moment of tenuous panic hit Doyle; what if Bodie

had something worse, much worse? *He* felt ill, but not ill enough to sleep all morning *and* all night, and he wasn't sweating like this. He reached out to grip the hot, damp cotton of Bodie's shoulder, suddenly desperate to have Bodie awake.

"Bodie."

Slowly, long, dark lashes wavered, lifted to reveal sleepy, dark-blue eyes.

"You all right?" Doyle asked, his voice rough with concern.

Startlingly, Bodie coughed, a harsh noise; he pushed himself up off the bed with both palms until the spasm ended. Then he sank down again and just lay still for a moment. He looked horribly vulnerable to Doyle, who was not used to thinking of Bodie as vulnerable. "Bodie?" he asked again. He'd have to call a doctor.

Bodie became aware of the discomfort of the cool, wet shirt clinging to him, the damp sheets, and his eyelids pressed down for a moment in weary irritation. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said in answer to Doyle, and began to pull himself up.

"Where you going?"

"Where d'you think?" Bodie picked up the dressing-gown he'd borrowed before and disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of running water followed. Doyle got out of bed and began to strip the soaked sheets. By the time he'd finished that and was laying on fresh ones from the airing cupboard he felt exhausted. His head was beginning to pound sickeningly as he tucked in the sides precisely. He liked a well-made bed.

"I'd've done that."

He looked up. Bodie, wearing his dressing-gown, which rather suited him, Doyle decided, bent to tuck in his side.

"You're in no fit state to do anything. Get in, I'll finish," said Doyle, and then he swore, viciously. "This is *all* we needed!"

Bodie gave him a little, tired smile. "Soon be over, sunshine. You get in. You look all washed up."

"Feel it," muttered Doyle. His head was killing him; he was having to take short, careful breaths to avoid making it worse. He sank between the cool sheets without protest and let Bodie finish off, pressing a hand to his aching temples, trying to ease the pain.

A heavy weight sank down beside his legs. "What's up?" A low murmur.

"Headache."

"Shall I rub it for you?"

"Don't be filthy," said Doyle with grim, muffled humour.

Bodie didn't comment. Strong hands took his shoulders, eased him over; a warm palm smelling faintly of Doyle's soap descended gently on his throbbing brow. Even the weight of it helped, and Bodie began to ease the knotted muscles at the back of his neck with the other hand. The pain didn't magically go, but it subsided to manageable levels beneath the other, more pleasurable sensations in the area, competing for the attention of his nerves. He felt himself relax, and let Bodie do what he would.

Bodie changed the pattern of his movements, began to stroke his temples with slow, practised sweeps of his thumbs. "Help any?"

"Yeah. Don't stop." He was pricked with alarm, that Bodie might stop and let the pain come back, and his eyes flew open.

"Wasn't going to," Bodie assured him, and he closed Doyle's eyes with thumb and forefinger trailing lightly downwards. "Keep 'em shut, sunshine. Just relax."

He kept his hands moving gently over his partner's face and neck, rubbing his fingers on his scalp through the mass of soft hair. Doyle decided, rather dreamily, that he was enjoying this: the light tingle of sensitive stimulated skin seeming to draw out the pain, release it into nothingness...

He realised with a jolt that he was falling asleep and he opened his eyes wide, to see Bodie looking down at him, the smooth, hard face the one he knew better than any other, the days of Bodie at his side merging effortlessly into years. He reached up to still Bodie's hand. "Better stop. You're not fit yourself. Don't want you passing out on me."

Bodie took his hands away. "Any better?"

"Yeah. Thanks." It was brief, but he meant it, and the recollection of the morning came into his mind, himself being sick, Bodie dealing with it with no fuss and no comment. He chuckled. "The things you do for me..."

Bodie's face was quite unreadable, his voice devoid of emotion as he said, "I'd do anything for you."

Doyle stared. "Oh yeah?" He grinned, sure that Bodie was sending him up, but Bodie wasn't smiling and his own grin faded quickly.

"Yeah." Bodie turned away, rearranging his pillow.

Doyle, flat on his back, examined this surprising idea.

"Why?"

"Dunno. Just would."

Doyle decided not to press it. "Yeah, well, we been mates a long time," was his only comment. Bodie seemed to be settling down again. Doyle thumped him on the shoulder. "Oi. Don't go to sleep. Some company you turn out to be. You've been asleep about nine hours out of ten since you got 'ere."

"Yeah. Well, nothing about the way I feel when I wake up persuades me it's such a bad idea. C'mon. Take a nap. We can wake up for Grandstand; there's boxing on. Need lots of sleep, with flu."

Bodie had a point there. The more time one could manage asleep and thus oblivious to the symptoms, the better. Doyle's head still gently rang with the echoes of pain, and it was all hell down his throat. He was also developing a runny nose.

He blew it on a tissue before sliding down in the bed. Outside, the rain beat on the window, the wind blew. It was a grey, dismal day out there, but he, Ray Doyle, was warm and snug and safe. Safe and protected... He shut his eyes. This was better than being out in that cold, driving rain, the high wind cutting through your clothes. A little tingly shiver ran through him at the thought of it and he moved closer to Bodie, who accepted him sleepily, shifting so their bodies curved comfortably together. But Doyle didn't go straight off to sleep; he just lay there, drowsily relaxing for a while.

Bodie was a warm and solid presence close against him, familiar, trusted - 'do anything for you'...the words floated into his mind and he smiled - *idiot* - and put his arm over Bodie's side, letting himself drift, on pleasurable sensations...

...Almost *too* pleasurable - no, nothing could be too pleasurable, but this was strange; he felt a terrible gathering tide of sweetness, deep inside, and it was happening very fast. It made him need to push, press himself forward mindlessly against the answering heat and hardness - too late to stop - and as he did so, muscles taut and straining, he was coming, in gentle, throbbing bursts of warm honey and sweet fire...

He lay there, gasping and dazed. Against him Bodie shifted, sighing, then he moved his hands from Doyle's hips to slide behind him and hold him reassuringly close. Oh, my god, I've come all over Bodie...

Not just cuddling, thought Doyle in hazy amazement, very conscious of the warm stickiness inside his pyjamas, the other, external moisture on his belly beginning to seep through onto his skin; not just cuddling...making love...

Why worry?

No thunderbolts; no fist in his face. And he was too sleepy and relaxed to move. His head in the

warm curve of Bodie's neck and shoulder, he fell asleep.

When he awoke, it was to the sound of the TV. He opened sticky, groggy eyes and found himself alone; horses were galloping endlessly along the screen with jockeys crouched grimly on their necks. He groaned and put a hand over his eyes, then rolled wearily out of bed. 4.30. He felt lightheaded and nauseous again; nothing to eat since last night's milk and he'd probably lost that this morning anyway.

He walked on shaky legs to the kitchen, surveying Bodie from the doorway. Bodie looked just the same - and why shouldn't he? Doyle asked himself. Nevertheless, he felt awkward, almost shy. Then Bodie turned and saw him. He was unsmiling, but not cold as he said, "Making tea. Want some?"

"Yeah."

"Missed the boxing." Bodie turned back to the cooker. "Football results in a few minutes. Fancy anything to eat?"

"Yeah, I feel empty," Doyle announced, and went to the fridge. He checked over the shelves; cheese, butter, eggs. From nowhere, a vision of the runny globular white of an egg swimming in a greasy pool of warm butter assailed him and he closed his eyes, feeling -

A low voice at his side, "You okay?"

"Feel sick. It'll go off," he said between gritted teeth.

Bodie, worried and studying him, said absently, "Go on like this and I'll begin to think you're pregnant."

It was intended lightly, but it fell between them like a plate of blancmange. Doyle stared at the carpet, his hand still pressed to his stomach. Had it really happened? He glanced down quickly at the front of his pyjamas, then he risked looking at Bodie. Unbelievably, he saw the faint pinkness of a flush staining the smooth skin, and Bodie did not meet his eyes.

Doyle made a decision. Whatever happened, and he didn't let himself think about what had - and what might - they were mates, good friends, and very close; nothing must be allowed to spoil that closeness, because he couldn't afford to lose it.

"Nah," he said deliberately, "pregnant, no way. It takes more than that, you know." And was rewarded by an abashed, relieved grin curling Bodie's lips.

"Cup of tea. Fix you up all right. And a biscuit."

"Fine," said Doyle, moving away. "You have whatever you want, okay?" Not that he needed to say it - Bodie was no stranger to his kitchen and not at all bashful about helping himself.

"Can't eat," said Bodie, making a face.

Doyle snorted. "Never thought the day would come I'd hear you say that."

He showered - again - and found fresh pyjamas - the second pair that day, and got back into bed, smoothing it over first, though it was scarcely rumped; this time they must have slept deep and peaceful. He watched the teleprinter chattering out the football results. Bodie came in with the tea.

"My team win? Silly question," he answered himself as he saw Doyle's face. "'Course they did. How many?"

"Six," said Doyle, deadpan, and let Bodie's delighted smile begin. Then, "The other five were sent off," he added, chuckling, as Bodie threw a packet of Rich Tea at him.

When the sports programme ended, Bodie picked up the newspaper he'd eschewed that morning while Doyle struggled on with a Life of Byron he'd picked up in the library the previous week. It was too deep for his state of mind, however, and he glanced over at Bodie to see him throw the paper aside and lie back, an arm flung over his eyes.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

Dark, curled hair, pale skin, faint blue shadows under the lie of his long, dark lashes, white knuckled fists -

"You're not," said Doyle with conviction. Bodie coughed; he sounded hoarse and chesty. "I reckon I'd better call in a doctor," he said decisively.

"Don't *fuss*, Doyle. For god's sake."

Bodie sounded exhausted, and stropky. Even Doyle, who was on the receiving end of the major part of Bodie's liking and respect, knew better than to tangle with the unpredictable ex-SAS trooper when he turned stropky.

On the other hand, that meant nothing if Bodie was really ill.

"Shove it, mate," he snapped, throwing back the covers. "If you've got something nasty, Cowley'd never forgive me if you're a hospital case by Monday and I'd just sat back and watched."

Bodie's hand shot out and closed on his wrist. His eyes snapped open, deep, sharp blue, and fixed on Doyle. He was about to turn nasty, very nasty indeed. Doyle's own expression chilled over, ready for the fight.

Then Bodie's face changed; he dropped Doyle's wrist and looked away. "Don't," he said wearily.

"Don't what?"

"Don't let's fight. I don't need a doctor. Hate 'em. I've had this before, just the same. Tomorrow I'll be a new person."

"You've had it just the same?" demanded Doyle suspiciously.

"Yeah."

"Then why don't I feel as rough as you?"

"You probably do. I just look worse."

Doyle was partly reassured. "You are a sight, that's for sure," he asserted. "Like a bloody lily, wiltin' all over the place. If your bird walked in here now she'd change her mind."

Bodie had a clogged nose, chapped lips, and was emitting harsh, chesty coughs every few minutes. It was true, thought Doyle, watching him, only your partner could love you now, mate...

...He'd spent years in the man's company, learning first to trust him then to like him, gradually realising that it was more than that; they were quite simply very compatible, their likenesses and differences fitted together well, and of course they loved each other. Not in the way they loved women, the way Doyle had loved Ann, but he did love Bodie. It wasn't a surprising thought, but it was a new one.

"Ray," muttered the object of his speculation, head on his pillow.

"Yeah?" he said softly, touched with a new gentleness.

"Let's go to sleep."

"You've slept all day, mate. You'll never sleep tonight if you go off again now."

Bodie didn't answer, but Doyle felt the sudden withdrawal, the off-note. He knew, with sudden clarity, what Bodie wanted and couldn't ask for.

"Okay," he capitulated, sliding down in the bed and reaching for the light switch. "Do feel like gettin' my head down, come to think of it."

It was dark outside now; he was once more conscious of the rain pattering down on the roof, and the warmth and the enclosed security within. Bodie hadn't said anything, was a foot away. Waiting...?

Doyle reached out, slid his arms around Bodie and snuggled against him, from chest to thigh.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" he murmured, low and amused and vastly protective. Bodie - hard, strong Bodie - needed to be cuddled when he was feeling low.

He liked it, too.

He hadn't expected to sleep, and he just lay there quietly, enjoying the feeling of returning well-being. Bodie was making little chokes and grunts as he dozed, one hand clutching convulsively at Doyle's shoulder, and he had buried his face into Doyle's throat. Because of the blocked nose, he was breathing through his mouth, and Doyle felt a trickle of wetness on his neck. Bodie was dribbling. Like nursing a big bloody baby, he thought in amused exasperation, and shunted Bodie's weight onto his right arm so he could reach for a tissue and dry himself off. He squinted down at Bodie and dabbed his mouth, too, then he chucked the tissue aside and lay back down. He still didn't feel remotely sleepy.

After a while he eased himself away from his somnolent partner and sat up, switching on the bedside light. He kept one hand on Bodie's shoulder, pressing lightly when Bodie stirred and muttered, rubbing him gently until he went quiet. He read, turning pages one-handed, and drank a lot of orange juice and water. He thought he was definitely beginning to feel rather better, though he still lacked energy. They symptoms were definitely receding. Thank god... Even a day off work wasn't worth this misery going on any longer than it had to. Bodie, though...

He looked down again, at the sleeping, well-known figure lying beside him. Good job he's here where I can keep an eye on him. Wouldn't trust anyone else to look after him properly - those hard bitches he picks up, bet they believe all there is to Bodie is the image he gives out - tough and hard and brutish; they don't see, thought Doyle, who knew him, what a softy he is deep down.

Unexpectedly, Bodie's curly, dark lashes wavered, his eyes darting from side to side; he didn't seem to know where he was. Doyle squeezed his shoulder, the one he'd never let go of since Bodie fell asleep an hour ago, and Bodie flinched like a startled horse, his whole body going rigid.

"Hey, whoa there, mate. Where'd you think you were, back trenching in the bloody SAS?"

Bodie gave a sneeze, then another, and groped to sit up, one hand blindly going out. Discerning the need, Doyle stuffed a tissue into it. "I'm gonna get you a nice hot drink," he said, swinging his legs out of bed.

Through a noseful of tissue, Bodie had just enough spirit left to wheeze, "Playing nurses and doctors now, are we?"

Doyle said, without turning, "Yeah, why not. You take your clothes off and I'll warm me hands." And grinned to himself with sudden glee as he envisioned the staggered expression behind him.

Sadly, his vegetable rack proved to be lacking a lemon. There were oranges though, and he squeezed several, adding sugar and hot water. He put together a speedy sandwich, too, and

carried the tray back to the bedroom. Bodie had put the TV on, was at least sitting up, and was watching a Western with a lacklustre eye. He took the glass Doyle handed to him with a succinct "Vitamin C," and looked at it.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'll survive."

"Sandwich." Doyle indicated the plate.

"What's in 'em?"

"Marmite. Keep your strength up."

Bodie groaned. "Back to the nursery..." But he ate one, and then another and drank his orange juice while Doyle tidied up. When Bodie was done eating and drinking, Doyle sat on the edge rubbing his hands together, grinning evilly. Bodie watched him with disdainful irritation. "Convalescing with you is about as restful as a day springing mines, mate. What are you doing?" "Playing doctors," Doyle reminded him. "Loved it, when I was a kid." He reached out and pulled gingerly at the bottom of the polo-neck sweater the other man was wearing.

Bodie grabbed his hand, threw it off. "Cut it out," he snapped, not amused.

"Look," said Doyle, suddenly serious. "I just genuinely think I ought to look you over, okay?"

"What the hell for?" Bodie stared, resisting Doyle's attempts to pull up his sweater.

Doyle stopped trying, resting his hands there lightly. "You were in a chemical lab yesterday, remember? And you've had this worse than me. Maybe you picked something up. You might have a rash. C'mon mate, I did me CI5 first-aid course, same as you."

Bodie made a face of absolute, screwed-up irritation. "All those vitamins turned your brain or something?"

"Just let me look," Doyle winked at Bodie's wavering resolution. "You're tempted, aren't you?"

And before Bodie could further protest, he had whisked the sweater up and was examining his chest intently. Despite the light approach, he was quite serious about this. Unhealthy places, experimentation labs. There was a mark near Bodie's right nipple: he made an exclamation and leant to examine it closer. Bodie, alarmed, sat up and peered at it. Then:

"Freckle," he announced laconically, and lay back again, meeting Doyle's relieved eye, amused. "Not plague this time, Doyle..."

"A freckle?" said Doyle, half disappointed. He swept his eye over the rest of Bodie and saw nothing else out of place.

"All right, Dr. Doyle? Can I cover up now?"

But Doyle wasn't listening; he had gone, possibly, slightly mad. He was watching the rise and fall of Bodie's chest, and wondering what would happen if -

With a fingertip, he traced the full outline of Bodie's right nipple. It had an interesting result; flesh rising and hardening to his touch. He fingered it gently, absorbed, and then he trailed his hand across to the other.

Bodie caught it. "Don't."

Doyle felt strange; the lightheadedness, the tingle of air on his suddenly sensitive skin, the tiny hairs pricking up all over him not entirely due to the shivery effect of flu. What the hell was he doing? Drowsy cuddles, unforeseen, unspoken pleasures snatched half-aware on the brink of sleep were one thing. What he had been about to do was something else again, and quite impossible, quite mad... Bodie was watching him, wary and cautious, completely unreadable.

Doyle took his hand away without comment. He picked up his book. Beside him Bodie coughed and reached for a drink. Doyle stared unseeingly at the printed pages for several moments, then threw the book aside and tried to concentrate on the Western, idly picking up a Rubik's cube he'd been given and twiddling it without looking as he watched the screen.

Bodie nudged him "Fancy that? For us?"

The cool, leather-chapped hero flashed a silver pistol from his hip, unleashed a single bullet with a twirl of his fingers.

As Bodie had meant him to be, his partner was diverted. "You an' me? Cowley's cowboys?" "Yeah - roamin' the range." Bodie chuckled and assumed a mean, cowboy's stare. "Howdy, pardner..."

"Be fun," Doyle decided. "Get saddlesore, though."

"Nah, you develop tough, leathery buttocks in a matter of weeks," Bodie assured him.

"Oh, terrific."

The statutory female appeared, a freshfaced girl with a ponytail, whom the hero hugged one-handed to his manly bosom, staring over her head to the mighty, rolling plains. Bodie made a face. "Dunno, though, Doyle. Maybe it wouldn't suit us after all. Look at the women. Gingham turns me right off."

"Yeah?" sympathised Doyle, concentrating on his cube.

"Yeah."

"And what turns you on?" He lifted his eyes unexpectedly, because he wanted to catch the look on Bodie's face, suppressing an inner smile.

"Use your imagination," muttered Bodie curtly; Doyle had taken him by surprise. "The usual things."

Doyle smiled. A promising line of white squares appeared on one face of the cube; he felt sure he was close to cracking it. "Ah, c'mon. You can do better than that. What gets you going, Bodie?"

It wasn't the first time they'd talked about sex; not by a long way. Telling each other larger-than-life stories to amuse, or impress, those conversations always left Doyle vaguely restless. As he waited for Bodie to answer, his hands, working the puzzle, arrested suddenly as another memory came to him - one deep-buried because he'd never wanted, never dared to take it out of the dark recess of fantasy and examine it more closely; now it came to him with blindly clarity.

It was a memory of Bodie; his face, his hands and mouth and strong-muscled body, electric with arousal; not as Doyle had ever seen it in reality, but as he had imagined it, some nights in bed with a girl - or alone...after some uninhibited sexual backchat with the man such as he was trying to instigate now; imagined it, seen it in his mind, used the illicit fantasy to fire himself on, make himself feel good...dark, forbidden fire...

And forgot it after. Until now. Bodie was peering at him closely. "You've gone red," he accused, cheerfully. "Don't think I had better tell you, mate. Wouldn't want to embarrass you, Raymond, my son."

Doyle looked over at him. Bodie was grinning smugly; he'd got himself off the hook and embarrassed Doyle all at one go, though he wasn't quite sure how he'd managed it.

How would he take it, Doyle wondered, if I told him...?

Decision recklessly made, he looked Bodie straight in the eye and said deliberately, "I have sexual fantasies about you. Sometimes."

Bodie's eyes widened, then fell into the usual bored droop as he struggled to conceal the staggering impact Doyle's quiet challenge had had. He didn't let a muscle of his face quiver as he said, "Straight up?"

Doyle nodded, his green eyes very intense as he watched Bodie. "*Very* straight up," he emphasised.

Bodie took a deep breath, striving for normality. He looked into candid, wide eyes. "Shouldn't worry about it if I were you. The human mind - "

"Oh, I wasn't worrying," Doyle assured him. "Never consciously thought about it before."

Bodie shot him a curious look. "So why now?"

To Doyle, it was obvious 'why now'. Had Bodie forgotten, or genuinely been asleep? But he remembered the faint flush, Bodie's awkwardness in the kitchen earlier, and knew that Bodie had not forgotten. Apparently then, in Bodie's book they weren't going to talk about it, must pretend it never happened... If that's what he wants...

So he shrugged. "No reason. Forget it. Fancy a game of Scrabble?"

Bodie gathered his own tattered nerves. "Bath first. Baths are good, with flu. Relaxes the joints." He got out of bed.

Baths, bullshit. You just want to get away from me, thought Doyle, watching him. He repressed a sigh. He didn't really know what he wanted himself. And he was beginning to feel tired, and achy again. When Bodie left the bathroom he took it himself, languishing in warm, scented water until it grew cool; then he made supper - porridge - for himself and his partner. They watched the football, and read, mostly in silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

Doyle couldn't get his earlier musings out of his head. He berated himself, telling himself he was crazy, that he was thinking along dangerous lines. Suppose he *did* get Bodie going, what then? Playing with fire, to invite Bodie to unleash all that burning inner sensuality on him. Leave it to his women, mate; better equipped to deal with it. You'd be asking for trouble...

But Bodie had said 'I love you'. Half-asleep he might have been, but he had meant it, Doyle knew his Bodie well enough for that. Imagine Bodie, then, loving him... holding him close and loving him, like this afternoon... A shiver of anticipation ran hopefully through him; yes, maybe later tonight, when they'd settled down, maybe they would let it happen again -

Bodie glanced over, saw Doyle's troubled face as he propped himself on one elbow, staring at him. "What's up?" he asked, puzzled.

- On the other hand, why wait? -

He didn't answer Bodie; just reached out one-handed and began to slip loose the buttons of Bodie's shirt. "What the hell - ?" Bodie started to ask, watching his partner with a kind of stupefaction, but Doyle silenced him with a look. Come on, Bodie, don't play the innocent... As he laid bare Bodie's chest, for the second time that evening, the look of bewilderment on the dark man's face changed, into dawning understanding. Doyle didn't give him a chance to react.

He surveyed the smooth-planed chest he'd examined earlier, and did what he had wanted to do then: dropped his head to one nipple and tasted the smooth nub of skin with the point of his tongue. As before, the response was immediate and exciting: lazily, the tiny bud gathered itself into a hard puckered peak of arousal as Doyle licked it lightly, over and over.

Beneath him, stunned and helpless, Bodie lay still, his hands coming up to Doyle's shoulders,

but he made no move to pull away, letting the small shocks of pleasure reach him where they would. He glanced down, saw the full mouth widen, fastening on the wonderfully, terribly sensitive area, the long lashes lying luxuriously on the smooth cheek of his partner; and a little sound escaped him. He leant over, dislodging Doyle's lips, and put out the light.

Doyle was temporarily fazed by the sudden darkness, but there were reassuring strong arms there to gather him close, pull his head down again. Last chance to back out... Instead, his searching, hungry mouth found smooth skin, moved softly over it, until he came to the moist roughness once more and fixed on it, nursing at Bodie with lips and tongue, his cheek moving against Bodie's chest.

Bodie groaned - too much, or not enough - and rolled over, pushing Doyle onto his back and leaning over him, palms either side of his partner's shoulders, looking down at the shadowed face, waiting, asking...

But there were no more doubts. Doyle caught him, and pulled him down with desperate strength, holding Bodie tight on top of him, all along the length of his own warm, needing body, pressing the other man into himself with hard fingers. Until Bodie took over and thrust himself urgently against the smaller man beneath, careful even in the egocentricity of arousal not to hurt him, to be gentle.

Better than fantasy, Doyle thought dazedly, responding to the slow thrust and taut-held trembling - Bodie's, or his own? He didn't know, didn't care, but he was trapped inside warm, damp cotton and couldn't find freedom. Drowning in sensation, he felt hot, the flush of sensual heat crowding his senses to the limit, and he arched upwards on a gasp, pressing the other man down fiercely at the same time, grinding himself against the hardness there with near desperation. He badly needed to feel skin against skin, wildly and wantonly to rip off the hampering clothing and rub himself thoroughly into warm, hard/soft flesh; but it was already too late, as Bodie's questing tongue found his ear and flickered inside, the glorious sensations peaking into overload, too fast... Hands desperately gripping, digging into Bodie's buttocks, he was lifting and coming, warm, involuntary pulses of delightful, extreme pleasure leaving him as the glow spread through every part of him, and he was flushed, and damp everywhere as they faded and passed... Beautiful. Oh, beautiful...

He came slowly back to awareness, breathing slowing. Bodie was still, resting on him heavily, heart thundering against Doyle's chest. Left him behind, Doyle realised; then ruefully: I'd've left anyone behind, I went up so fast...

He was hot, and sweaty, and suddenly crushed by Bodie's weight. He pushed him off, and rolled on his side to face him. Squinting in the darkness, he could just make out that Bodie's eyes were closed. For a moment, Doyle hesitated, not knowing what -

Bodie reached out, solemn, unhurried; he searched for and took Doyle's hand in his, squeezed it once. Then he pulled it toward him and placed it on himself, stroking the curled fingers gently before he let him go; undemanding, patient. Doyle, surprised, didn't move for a moment, feeling his hand cool on Bodie's heat.

It seemed a far more intimate touch than had so far passed between them. No going back. If we do this - there'd be no forgetting, no passing this off lightly as a spur of the moment, crazy thing easily put behind them.

But even as he thought it, his wayward hand was moving on Bodie, intrigued despite rationality with the warm, expectant contours of the other man's aroused body. Like - but different, and Bodie, as clearly as if he had spoken aloud, had asked him to do this. He cast caution and tomorrow to the winds, bringing his other hand up to join the first in its exploration of Bodie, cupping him and sliding the edges of his palms around him in a swift, upward movement, pressing the other man's hardness between them...

The effect was immediate, and not entirely unexpected - after all, this was what he'd been trying to bring about, wasn't it? - so he did not move away when Bodie moaned on an indrawn note, and thrust himself into Doyle's hands, entrusting him with all his vulnerability; and for the second time Ray Doyle felt the spurt and pulse of Bodie's coming falling like rain on his chest and belly.

They lay very close, face to face, Bodie's erratic breathing gradually slowing, Doyle's heart still pounding away as he tried to deal with all the turbulent emotions that were rushing him from everywhere. Someone had to say something.

He said, into Bodie's ear, "Wish we didn't both keep coming over my pyjamas. 'M running out of fresh ones."

He felt Bodie's breathing halt, and a moment of tension hit him too - however were they going to cope with this?

The Bodie said softly, against his face, "Wish you didn't have 'em on. I'd've liked to - touch you - " And everything was all right after all as Bodie's hands slid underneath the stretchy cotton to stroke him, run up his sides, warm touch on warm skin in one too-brief caress.

A promise? A valediction?

They fell asleep, the smaller man cuddled into the curve of Bodie's arm, Bodie's lips in his hair; at peace with each other and the world.

When Doyle awoke, he felt good. Instantly wide awake; no hangover, no desire to groan, shut his eyes and burrow down again for a few snatched, precious minutes. He sat up and took stock.

No Bodie. And it was after ten o'clock, he noted with surprise. The Sunday paper was at the foot of the bed, untouched. He felt much better, the sore throat that had plagued him almost gone, his head clear. There was a tantalising smell floating around, and he wrinkled his nostrils, his stomach giving a little, anticipatory twinge. He was ravenous.

Bodie, bathrobed, poked his head around the door. "Sleeping Beauty awakes," he commented

drily, adding, "Breakfast's ready."

Doyle tucked into bacon, eggs, half a sausage - the other half was on Bodie's plate, meticulously shared - toast, jam and coffee. It was good. "I think I'll marry you," he announced around a mouthful.

Bodie said, "Already spoken for," and as Doyle, arrested, stared at him, he elaborated with a faint shrug, "To the job..."

Doyle acknowledged it, slowly, with a tinge of sadness. That was the way it was. For both of them.

Bodie showered first, and emerged fully dressed. Doyle lounged on the bed, still in his pyjamas, reading the newspaper. He glanced up at Bodie and his eyes widened. "Where you off to?"

"Home."

There was a silence. "Why?" was all Doyle could think of to say. He felt winded, as if Bodie had given him an unexpected punch, for real.

Bodie's reply was brusque and to the point. "Don't live here, do I? Gotta go sometime."

Doyle turned cool to match it. "Up to you." The silence lengthened as Bodie went around the room collecting his things and stuffing them into his bag. Doyle broke it at last, exasperated and worried. "I thought you were staying the weekend."

"Have done, haven't I? Fri to Sun, inc."

"Yeah, but I thought... We could go in to work tomorrow from here. What's the point of you going home *now*?"

"Oh, c'mon, Doyle," said Bodie impatiently. "Use your head. I haven't any of my things here; don't suppose it'd go down well with Cowley if I turned up in a shirt I slept in. I'll have to go home for a change of clothes and it's hardly worth coming back. That all right with you, is it?" he said with exaggerated enquiry.

Doyle's comfortable little fantasy of the cosy day remaining, just him and Bodie away from the world in easy companionship - which had been beginning to lace itself with unconscious anticipation of something more - burst and vanished, leaving only coldness.

"Suit yourself, mate. I don't own you. Don't want to," he added as an afterthought in case Bodie should think he was fishing; and then he buried himself in the colour supplement. Bodie frowned, watching him, then he went to the livingroom to pick up his jacket. Doyle didn't stir, nor did he look up from the bed. Bodie, car keys in hand, reappeared at the bedroom door.

"You all right to be left? Feeling all right, are you?"

"On top of the world, compared with yesterday," he answered briefly, flicking over a page.

Bodie lingered. "Sure?"

"Yeah." Then he snapped, looking up, "For godsake, go, if you're going. Just sod off out of here, will you?"

And all the puzzled hurt he felt was too starkly revealed, brought out into the open. He looked down again, angrily scanning unseen pages, willing Bodie to go. He'd had his fun, now he was walking out. Well, that was pretty typical, for Bodie. Par for the course. And he, Doyle, had made a right bloody fool of himself.

Bodie watched him, not knowing what to do or say, seeing the disconsolate, downcast head, the rigid lines of anger tensing the sprawled form. He was pushing it a bit. Any minute now Doyle would be releasing that anger in one of his violent outbursts, and Bodie didn't want to fight with him. No, he wanted...

Making a decision, he dropped his bag, held out an arm. "Ray - c'mere a minute."

"Wha'for?" growled Doyle, looking up, suspicious.

"Just come here," Bodie repeated, but Doyle didn't move. So Bodie crossed the room and dropped beside the bed, putting one hand on his partner's shoulder, shaking him a little until Doyle grudgingly met his eyes.

"Flu's over, sunshine," he told him, gently.

"Yeah." Doyle was scowling, green eyes narrowed feline slits.

Bodie cupped his face in the other hand, eyes on the full mouth. I never even kissed him...
"Wasn't all bad - was it?" he murmured.

And Doyle, startled, read in Bodie's unshielded blue eyes the same confusion, the same ambivalent feelings towards what had happened between them, saw that Bodie knew no more than he did whether it would change things for better or worse, and that there was no arrogance, no triumph in the little, tentative smile curving Bodie's lips. A rueful smile tugged at his own mouth.

"No, not all bad," he conceded.

"Maybe we'll get it again some day."

"Maybe."

Bodie hesitated, then leant forward and kissed him, carefully, just beside his mouth. "I won't

forget," he whispered against his cheek; and then he was gone.

Doyle heard the door slamming, and a little later the sound of a car starting up. He didn't move.

He was left alone with the Sunday papers, the imprint of Bodie's gentle mouth on his cheek, and a handful of memories and unsteady longings.

Flu was over. Time to resume normal function.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Going for the Shore *(Sequel to "Siren" and "Bound to the Mast")*

Bodie rolled over with a start; scanned rapidly for the clock that lived on his bedside cabinet, an automatic, everyday action.

It wasn't there.

It wasn't there because he wasn't at home. With a quick glance at the still form beside him he slid carefully out of bed and fetched his watch from where he'd carelessly dumped it last night.

- last night -

checked the time quickly, and got back into bed. He lay on his side, watching Doyle sleep, studying him.

Long spiked lashes lay on pale skin, stirring as he breathed, deep and regular. The beautiful shaped mouth a little open, revealing a bare flash of white teeth; soft curls spilled over one narrow wrist pinned awkwardly beneath his ear. Gonna have cramp there, sunshine...

- held him close; loved him, excited him as he was exciting me, took him with me all the way; loved him...

And even while he was coming Doyle had been crying; unnoticed tears leaking silently from his screwed-up eyes even as his body gathered and exploded its sweet moist life onto Bodie's.

I was loving him, and he was crying.

He reached out, unable to deny his hungry desperate senses; and touched his hair, the riotous floppy coils of brown shot through here and there with single strands of silver and copper. He was drawn so much to this naked defenceless waif he could hardly bear not to wrap his arms

around him, press him close; waken him with soft kisses, murmured fervent truths.

Oh, you really are far gone, aren't you?

There was a funny feeling in his guts, a strange fluttering; some fate, or intuition, warned him not to welcome Doyle's awakening; not too much.

So he simply lay there, head on the firm white pillow which smelt of Doyle's hair, and watched him, a snatched, secret pleasure, the more sweet because he had been starved of even such simple self-indulgence for so long.

He sighed.

Go home, Bodie. Go home and find a nice girl, nice uncomplicated wife. Giggles and cuddles at bedtime, bacon and eggs for breakfast, hold hands on the settee at night listening to Demis Roussos -

Who needs it? No way.

He smiled to himself, cynical, a little rueful.

Can't always choose who you fall in love with. Not me, not anyone. How many girls have I dropped, even though I knew - maybe because I knew - they were falling in love with me? Tried to be kind about it...make it easier for them... But there's no kind way, not really.

- will Ray be kind, with me?

The unbidden thought chilled him. He pushed it aside, hard. No use thinking about it. No use at all. Things were happening beside him. A cough. A little snuffling sound. Doyle was shifting irritably, the trapped hand flying out from beneath his cheek. Bodie caught it, prosaically straightened out the fingers and began to rub away the stiffness, smoothing out the red patches caused by the pressure of Doyle's cheek-bone. He did all this quite methodically and impersonally. Doyle's eyes had come open and were staring at him, slightly sticky with sleep. Bodie wanted to lick them.

Doyle yawned then, exposing sharp teeth, curved tongue, wobbly red tonsils. Bodie, gazing down his throat with devout fascination, caught himself at it and reflected wryly that to be so in love with the man even the gaping inside of his throat was an object of wonder bespoke a certain eccentricity.

Next stop, trick-cyclist? The funny farm?

Doyle rolled onto his back, leaving his hand in Bodie's in a reserved kind of way. "You still 'ere, then?" His voice was still thick with sleep.

"Yeah. Where'd you think I'd be?" Done with halfheartedness, he twined his fingers firmly

around Doyle's, turned onto his back himself and pulled their joined hands down into the bed.

"Thought you'd have gone home."

"Nah," said Bodie, and gave his arm a little tap. "Told you this last night. I'll keep on saying it as long as it takes for you to believe it. I'm not goin' anywhere, mate, never again. You're stuck with me. Only way you can get rid of me is if - " He didn't want to say this, afraid it might be the straw for Doyle to clutch at, but he wanted no more secrets between them, they had enough to cope with already. He was reminded, distantly, of the old story - close your hand on a fistful of sand and it leaks away through your fingers; carry it open palmed with no restraints, and it stays.

" - is if you tell me you don't want me around. Tell me that - and make me believe it," he said steadfastly, "and I won't hang about."

He had expected a pause, laden with heavy emotion. Instead, Doyle, who had turned his head Bodie's way and was watching him, said straight away, "I couldn't say that. How could I say that?" he asked, quite simply. "I wouldn't mean it."

Bodie shut his eyes. Maybe it was because the sun was shining through the blinds, dazzling him; as cruelly as the moonlight, the night before.

Giving him time, Doyle slid down in the bed, cool naked shoulders disappearing beneath the ridge of cotton sheet folded over the layered blankets. "Cowley-time yet?" he queried, and then elucidated before Bodie had to reply. "Always think of it like that. Lie here every mornin' for a few minutes more, thinkin' of the Old Man dragging that scraggy body out of bed. When I reckon he's up for sure, padding off to the bathroom on the freezin' lino, *then* I get up. Gives me a buzz, thinkin' of the old buzzard suffering before I have to - "

It was cold. The crisp early air burned ice at the back of Bodie's throat every time he inhaled. He pulled the covers up further, over his ear, turned onto his side to face his partner, slipping an arm over his waist.

"Plenty of time. 's not seven yet."

Ridiculous, that in this first awakening together all he could pluck from the mass of things needing to be said were trivialities.

His hand found the small of Doyle's back, pressed him closer. Doyle, summarily gathered, said nothing, his downcast eyes cautious. He smelt of salt and sweat and sex; over it all his own sweetness rose, triumphing: he was warm, soft-haired like a very young animal in Bodie's hands.

Bodie shut his eyes.

"I want to make love to you," he said to the darkness, very quietly.

Lost in a dreamless limbo, too aware of each inch of his own skin alive where it touched Doyle's

he listened for the answer, but none came. Risking it, he traced his hand over Doyle, touched his nipples. Doyle sighed, shut his eyes. Encouraged, heart thudding, Bodie kissed him, mouthing the full lips gently with his, drawing Doyle's tongue into his mouth, his hand exploring Doyle's body as his own need became suddenly more urgent, set dramatically alight by the taste of him, the pressure of the soft warm lips under his.

His demanding fingers sought and found crisp hair, smooth skin, soft -

- and his arousal died, drenched beneath the futility of it all.

"Don't bother to fake it, will you?" he said harshly, and threw himself onto his side. He stared at nothing, and saw nothing there.

He felt a touch on his arm, light, unsure. When he wouldn't turn, refused to face the truth he might read in the other's eyes; than the lie. Acknowledging that refusal, knowing its fear, Doyle spoke to the back of Bodie's head; very quiet.

"Don't - "

One word, meaningless as it stood. Don't what? Don't give way to all this love and longing? Don't imagine I'm ever gonna let this happen again? Don't tell Cowley? Don't ever dare touch me again or you'll be lookin' down the wrong end of a .44?

- don't leave me -

Doyle's words last night; the last thing he had said before they slept.

"Don't what?" he asked at last, voice low, almost inaudible, though he had not intended it to come out that way.

He felt the warmth of Doyle's sigh travel across his skin.

"Don't - go too fast. I told you last night," said Doyle, and paused for a moment - turning, Bodie saw the downcast glint of his eyes, far-off as they studied Bodie's face - "you, you scare me..."

He said it slowly, very serious. No hedging now; no spur-of-the-moment, quick as lightning evasions. Doyle had a swift talent for those, a sharp-edged tongue and wits that could flay the sparks out of any opposition and leave them limp. Bodie knew it all too well. In one way, it made this serious, laboured sincerity the more touching.

Doyle, who had made his decision last night in one blinding moment of madness engendered at the memory of cruel tears in Mediterranean blue eyes, continued: "You scare me. Yeah, I told you that last night. I'm not used to it, an' I -" He stopped, and looked away, his voice quiet. "I can't make the most of it, not yet."

Bleak honesty; and courage. It troubled Bodie. Scare him? He reviewed the night before,

searched the heated memory, his own overwhelming feelings of gentleness as he held him, urging him on, encouraging him towards the culmination; what was in that, to scare him? No, that wasn't it. It came to him immediately as he stared into Doyle's troubled eyes just why he frightened Doyle. It was because, for once and only in his life Doyle knew this was the real thing: Doyle's instincts, sharper than his consciousness, had sensed that this was genuine love. That at last, there was someone for whom he came first; someone who was moved to be loyal to him, gentle with him, accepting him, for motivations that rose above self-interest. Bodie dimly perceived, now, something of the conflict Doyle must be struggling with; shaken to his depths to have Bodie turn his own game so neatly on himself, half of him must want desperately to get away, not get involved, escape the entrapping commitment Bodie was unwittingly binding him with by the very fact of loving him.

The other half of his bruised and lonely personality, the one he kept well-hidden except, briefly in moments of irrational temper when the veneer peeled back, revealing all his bitterness and hurt to someone who knew him well: that side of Doyle was thirsting for it, afraid he couldn't live up to it, afraid that Bodie, too, would eventually give up, leave him behind.

He must never let Doyle see his pity. He vowed this to himself as he pulled him into a close desperate hug, burying his face into warm rough curls so that Doyle would not see the brightness of his eyes. He was thinking that he had never known anyone who needed more to be loved. Nor anyone who would find it more difficult to accept.

"You'll have time," he said muffled, answering Doyle at last. "All you want; I promise. Just lie here with me a minute, nice and close and quiet - " and he added, with a catch in his voice that might have been laughter, "we might as well give it a minute or two. Ol' Man won't be on the freezing lino yet, that's for sure - "

So they held each other without speaking, warm breath falling on each other's skin; and gradually they found a sort of peace.

"Ra-ay!"

Bodie's howl of outraged despair succeeded where subtler summons had failed.

"All *right*."

He swung his feet off the settee where he had been dozing, and jogged unhurriedly into the kitchen. Bodie turned and glared at him. His anger, in fact, melted the instant he saw Doyle's sleepy figure trying to create its usual artistic pose in the doorway; he seemed only half-awake and it was decidedly wilted around the edges. Still, he was absurdly attractive none the less, white woolly cardigan pushed up his arms, rather ruffled, faded jeans, bare feet. One hand came up to rub irritably at his eyes; he yawned. Clearly poor old Doyle had been drowsing away out there, happily oblivious to his soon-to-be announced status as plumber's mate.

Bodie firmly ignored the soft little feelings curling in his guts. "Come and give me a hand," he said, trying for crossness but not making it. "'s your flat for chrissake and who does all the

work?"

"You're not good for me," Doyle told him, crossing the room to join Bodie at the sink. "Makes me lazy, 'avin' you around."

This was perfectly true; and the casual self-honesty removed the last of Bodie's resentment. "Yeah, well, I figured you were due a bit of spoiling," he muttered gruffly, peering back under the sink. "Make the most of it Goldilocks; I'll probably come to me senses soon." He rolled up his sleeves; he was squatting, to get at the U-bend in the kitchen unit where he had detected trouble; there were splashes of water darkening patches of his brown cords. "Can't do this on me own though. There's a leak just here - see - "

Totally disinterested in matters aqueous, Doyle ignored this; unnoticed by Bodie his gaze had been caught by the unconscious beauty of the man working; the line of the powerful shoulders, the muscular forearms revealed where he had pushed up his white shirtsleeves; the strong, beautifully shaped thighs beneath warm corduroy - sinks, leaks...

They talked very little about the things that mattered.

On an impulse, he dropped to his haunches beside him.

"Bodie - "

Caught by the tone of Doyle's voice, Bodie turned. Behind him, unnoticed, the water dripped in erratic rhythm, clear splashes falling down like snow melting from a roof.

Green eyes looked into quizzical blue; trying to understand, wanting, with sudden urgency, to reach out, be there...

They worked together, lived together; and at night, locked close in the dark silence of the bed, they made love together. And yet they were still very far apart.

Lost chances, wasted time distanced once more, the moment passed as suddenly as it was born. Doyle gave a little sigh, dragging his eyes away from Bodie's, for in another minute they would be unconsciously asking him for something he was still unable to give; and said; "Okay, what is it you want me to do?" He peered in at the faulty plumbing arrangements beneath the sink, making the effort to appear interested. "Wield a spanner or somethin'?"

Repressing the frustration and disappointment welling within - his stupid, optimist's heart had been beating wildly - Bodie also set some of his attention to the task and explained in a few curt phrases just what he wanted Doyle to do.

Life had this funny way of doing this to you.

Bodie had, against all odds, been given what he wanted, what he'd dreamed of without hope when Doyle was as elusive as a sunbeam grasped at in the air by a baby: he had been given

Doyle himself. Exclusively, all his.

Therein lay the trouble: it was so near perfection that it was tempting to be greedy, to push for more, more; to stretch that last gruelling inch for the ultimate ideal.

Doyle's love.

No, not that, he admonished himself as he worked on the tight washer with deft fingers, Doyle silent and supportive at his side ready to pass him what he needed; it wasn't that he needed Doyle to love him. He had known from the start that it was unfair to expect love from Doyle; loyalty, trust, sexual attraction would have to be enough. Maybe Doyle would learn to love him in time much as one grew abstractly fond of a room one associated with pleasant times; but if not, if it proved that Doyle was too scarred, too self-protective to give love in return, then they still had enough to make this last, and work. 'Will you ever leave me, Ray?' he had asked into the darkness one night, unable not to, needing to know: and Doyle, spent and sleepy at his side had made his reply unequivocal, instant -

"No."

They needed each other. CI5 screwed you up, if you weren't screwed up already. It made you incapable of handling, or relating normally to normal people. By the very personality that had them selected for CI5, they were forever excluded from the world they were employed to protect. And they suited each other: even Doyle fought against that no longer. Yes; they would stay together, and find a sort of happiness.

So, Bodie excused Doyle for not loving him. He never had expected that, and he had enough love in him for both of them in any case. No, what he could not bear was the emotional solitude. They understood each other with an intensity that was close to telepathy; and yet Bodie was alone. If he ran out on Doyle tomorrow, maybe Doyle would be relieved. It was equally possible that he would commit suicide. It was the not knowing that killed Bodie.

Suddenly angry and miserable, he unscrewed the rusting washer with savage wrenching fingers.

Watching him, Doyle's features twisted momentarily: he knew Bodie too well not to understand the cause of his sudden change of mood. He dragged the back of his hand over his mouth, unseeing eyes darting as he followed the movements of Bodie's dextrous hands. He wanted to put things right.

"Look - "

"What." The other man didn't falter in his actions, keeping his head down.

"Let's go to bed." When this produced no response, he reached out a hand, took a tentative grip on a fold of Bodie's shirt, rubbing it between finger and thumb. "Come to bed? Or stay here - be fun, doin' it on the floor - " he tempted, a sensuous lick of fire curling in his voice.

He had badly misjudged this one.

Whipping round, anger blazing in his eyes, Bodie threw him off with some force. He lost his balance, sat back gracelessly on the floor, his eyes going blank.

"You bastard," Bodie said, breathing hard. "You cheap bastard."

He turned away, fists clenched, stared out of the window. Grey skies, skeletal cranes reared up into grey skies: grey skies, grey streets, grey smoke from the factory chimneys. From the nearby docks, a siren sounded, long and mournful. Behind him, Doyle rose to his feet without a word, slammed the door. Bodie listened for his footsteps, receding along the passage; the thump of the front door. Soon Doyle appeared below, white feet flying down the stone steps, shoulders hunched into fur-lined leather, hands stuffed into his jeans pockets. Too late, already: the car was parked against the kerb and Doyle opened the door, got in, slammed it shut and gunned the engine, revved it with a roar, and was gone.

Bodie turned away. His heart was aching.

I say I love him, and I do that to him.

He moved around the kitchen doing routine things; filling the kettle for some reason, then setting it on one side; aimlessly checking the contents of the freezer.

That's all he needs. He's trying to make things better in the only way he knows and what do I do. Reject him. Push him away, shout at him, turn him down. Bloody good work Bodie. Well done. Know it or not, crying out for affection he is, and instead of giving it to him you go and kick him viciously to the ground when he's trying, for once, to reach out. Must be wondering what the hell he did wrong.

He put the kettle on the gas ring, lit it; looked around for the jar of coffee. Blend 37 because Doyle fancied this fancy freeze-dried stuff for the times he couldn't be bothered perking up the real thing. Expensive tastes, had Doyle. Bodie spooned some into a mug, and stood staring at nothing, jar and spoon still in hand.

He should *know* by now what he did wrong, for godsake. What he did wrong was to throw a quick fuck in my face when he knew I was mourning something different; as if sex could make up for it in some way.

So Bodie thought, looking out at the bleak dockland scene; and then he thought again.

For it had to be faced that he had taken Doyle on just those terms. Doyle had never promised anything, save his body, and his presence, and the acceptance of Bodie's loving; nor ever pretended anything different right from the start. He had his own weird sense of integrity; and he stuck to it. It was Bodie who was failing in this relationship.

The piercing rising whistle of the kettle woke him from his reverie; he set down the coffee-jar

and poured steaming water onto the granules, mouth set in a new, determined line.

It was late when Doyle came home. Swaying a little, he stood blinking in the sudden light as Bodie, who had been waiting out the long hours tensed up for the sound of the car, came out to meet him.

Doyle stared at him for a moment, then made a gesture with finger and thumb at the door. "Been out," he explained with care.

"Yeah, so I see," said Bodie resigned; and relieved that he had come back in one piece, on his feet. "Come on now. Let's get you to bed, mate." He took hold of him, casting a quick eye out of the window to check that Doyle had automatically put out the Capri's headlights - he had - and began to lead him to the bathroom. Doyle went with him willingly enough; perhaps beneath the alcohol-induced numbness of thought he had been instinctively dreading this confrontation, lest Bodie still be angry, and in the mood for a scene. Bodie said nothing; just led him through the usual bathroom routine, encouraging him to drink a glass of water to combat the dehydration, aiding the wildly un-coordinated fingers to unfasten belt, zips, buttons; settling him in bed.

"You shouldn't have driven home like this," was his only comment as he turned Doyle onto his side, folding himself into the curve of his body with the ease of six-week-old familiarity, knees tucking in behind Doyle's, one arm draped over him, cheek on the pillowed curls. "You should have rung and I'd've picked you up." He smelt of sweat, stale smoke, and alcohol. Bodie, who loved him, thought only: thank God he's safe, and nothing worse than drunk. Here, with me...

Drifting towards sleep, his loved one close held, he was not best pleased when Doyle, hyped-up, turned talkative.

"Played darts."

"Good for you, mate."

"S'good, that... You know what Hegel said? 'E said -"

There was silence after this, during which Bodie resisted with ease the temptation to beg for the revelation of what Hegel had to say on the matter.

"Bodie."

"Go to sleep, for chrissake."

"You wanna fuck me? 'S all right if you do."

This thunderbolt, delivered in a sleepy slur, startled Bodie wide awake; but funnily enough did not shock him, nor anger him; nor did it fill him with happiness.

"Well, thanks very much for the charming offer, mate," he murmured, amused, knowing that the

sarcasm would go right over his Dionysian errant's head: "I'll take you up on it some other time, okay?"

"Nah, 's all right. You can. I'd let you." Doyle, urgent, half twisted in his grasp.

Bodie repressed a sigh. Now he was getting restless all over again; and Bodie was very tired. He leaned over, kissed the warm tip of one ear, softly. "Nice thought, sweetheart. But we're too tired tonight, both of us. Some day."

His hand was lying on Doyle's flank. He squeezed it reassuringly, beginning a tiny rhythmic stroking motion there, and the tension gradually eased out of Doyle as he relaxed to the slight, pleasantly soothing stimulation. Bodie had thought him asleep when his last words erupted into the blackness:

"I wouldn't let anyone else."

"I should bloody well hope not."

He wondered, as he drifted to sleep himself, if Doyle would remember any of it in the morning.

Awakening, surfacing through layers of foggy grey and strange shifting figures, he finally opened his eyes to the morning and found Doyle was already up. He lay alone in the bed for a moment trying not to be depressed. When he was on the point of getting up, however, Doyle came into the room. He was wearing a brown silk dressing gown that lent him a rakish, faintly decadent air, and he was carrying two mugs of coffee.

"You're an angel," said Bodie, indicating the coffee; he had meant to be campy but the words came out soft, ridiculous. He grinned and batted his eyelashes, to cover his embarrassment. Doyle raised an eyebrow at him, setting the mugs down beside him, disdaining angelic pretensions.

"Don't get up. Sunday." He crossed to the window, threw aside the curtains; a shaft of bright sun lanced in. He winced, drew them hurriedly close.

"Like that, is it? Got a headache?"

Doyle shook his head, but gently. He sat on the edge of the bed. Picked up his mug, and looked down the length of Bodie's body over the white rim. Then he hooked back the sheet and there Bodie lay revealed, thoroughly naked, and very alive to the morning. His eyes travelled over Bodie, missing no detail; finally they lifted to meet Bodie's, which had a faintly defensive shift to them. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Havin' a good dream, were you?"

"Can't remember," confessed Bodie, adding campily, though his heart was beginning to race, "Maybe I'm just exceptionally virile."

Eyes dwelling on his all the while, Doyle reached down without looking, pulled loose the tie of

his robe so it swung open. He wore nothing beneath.

"Let's put it to the test."

He smelt of soap and water, fresh as early morning sunshine. Afterwards, lying in Doyle's lazy arms, Doyle's fingers curling and uncurling slowly through his hair, Bodie reflected that here at least was one part of their relationship unmarred; for here, Doyle's intense, wanton sexuality worked for them. He had a flair for it; an instinctive intuition for the erotic, driving Bodie and himself to wild heights of fire and sweetness where they would drown and surface, gasping. He flogged them on, wore them out, drained them dry. Lying here with him like this, Bodie made a resolution, half-formed last night; never again. Never again reproach him for what he can't give; live out what you've got, to the full. It was as easy as that.

His hand traced subtle patterns on the damp silky skin of Doyle's stomach.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he said abruptly.

Doyle stirred, but didn't look at him. "Don't talk about it."

"Wasn't going to. Just wanted you to know I'm sorry."

Doyle made a sound which might have meant anything. He then verbalised it. "'S not you who ought to be sorry, mate."

Bodie didn't want to delve into that strange, cool statement any more deeply. It had the queer, icy slant of dangerous waters about it. He changed the subject remembering Doyle's drunken pledge in the middle of the night.

"You ever get screwed, Ray?" he asked, fiddling with a loose thread in the blanket. "Don't have to answer, if you don't want."

Doyle didn't startle all over in alarm, though his fingers stilled in Bodie's hair. "You want to do that? With me?"

Bodie's heart gave a peculiar jolt; there was also a sudden diving sensation in his stomach. Despite the fact that he was emptied, for now, of all desire, he found the simple, curious question intensely erotic.

"I dunno. Maybe. That's not what I asked."

Doyle's reply was prompt. "Yeah."

Bodie wasn't surprised, but he was seized with an intolerable curiosity to know more. Although he said nothing, Doyle perhaps sensed this, for he continued abruptly: "Knew this bloke once. I thought he was okay. We saw a fair bit of each other, ten years or so back. He wanted to try it. I -"

" - you?" prompted Bodie when it seemed that Doyle had sunk into a frowning reverie.

Doyle snapped out of it, and set about being resolute. He wanted to give Bodie honesty, though he supposed this particular truth would give him little pleasure. "I trusted him and so I thought it would all be okay," he said all in a rush, "but I'd judged him all wrong, I'm always doin' that with people, and it wasn't like I'd thought."

Bodie was silent; tightlipped and bitter with the fury that had set him on fire, imagination fleshing out the bones of the stranger who had known Ray, gained his trust, then violated it. Hurt him, most probably. The mental picture was far too graphic: Doyle, in pain, hurting and bewildered, while some selfish bastard used his body, slamming into him, too insensitive to comprehend what he had been offered, too ignorant to know how to accept it.

His grip on Doyle tightened. "I'd never do that to you, Ray," he muttered fiercely into nutbrown curls. "Never hurt you like that."

He thought in his evangelism that they had never been closer.

Then Doyle looked over at him, perfectly sincere. "I know that. That's why, last night, I told you you could, if that's what you wanted," he said; and then was left to wonder why Bodie, frozen and bleak and absolutely alone in the chasm that had suddenly split them apart, left the bed and stalked to the bathroom, with cold, dead eyes.

They were too different.

Lying alone in the bed, he wondered how much longer Bodie would stick it.

Although it was only midday, the bar and restroom was crowded with off-duty CI5 agents: an operation had been wound up that morning and for once, nothing had arrived to take its place, though no one expected that to last. The jukebox had been fed with a steady stream of 10p pieces, and was blasting out something forgettable. The new recruit was not listening. Slightly drunk on two pints of shandy - he was learning: at first he had ordered them in halves - he was utterly captivated by a stranger who had just presented himself at the bar.

"That's pretty," he said to Murphy at his side, indicating the object of his attention.

This sort of thing did not come easily to Tony Jones. It had had to be learnt for the sake of fitting in; for he had already gathered in a mere two weeks' apprenticeship to various areas of that powerful organisation of macho he-men known as CI5 that gay jokes were in: campy innuendo not just respectable but obligatory. Even sleepy-eyed, powerful Murph, who was his mentor in these early weeks and who seemed saner than most, had this morning jumped a colleague and bitten him on the neck, Dracula-wise. Perhaps it was understandable; CI5 was a strange place, a tense, strained environment in which every premium was placed on the strength of male-male bonds to win out over whatever entity was threatening the fabric of society and its prowling two-by-two guardians. At its most successful - and the least successful did not survive

very long - that bonding was more intense than friendship, more demanding than marriage; they *had* to joke about it. Thus, queerness was rife at CI5 in counterfeit.

For some, maybe, it was for real. But that was never discussed.

The young Jones, Murphy's protege, had collared onto all of this in a misty kind of way; and, seeking acceptance as any new member of an established group will, was trying to conform. He had not yet, however, got the balance right - as witness this unabashed appreciation of an extremely senior agent. Murphy had a secret chuckle to himself imagining Doyle's reaction if Jones, unchecked, let that appreciation get heard of. He therefore decided it was time for a little fun - and a lesson, along the way, in what was allowed, with whom, and what was beyond the bounds of discretion.

With a wink at the other occupants of their table - unseen by Jones, and also, he took care to ensure, by agent 3.7 who was sitting a little way apart with Lucas, engaged in a discussion of the latest weaponry, both their heads bent over a gun catalogue, oblivious both to the nearby revellers and the latest entrant into the bar - he leant nearer Jones and said in a pseudo- whisper:

"Camp fairy."

"Never?" said Jones, eyes roaming over the slight man with brown curls, rather long; wearing a white shirt with the sleeves turned back to mid-forearm, and close-fitting brown velvet trousers that highlighted the slenderness of his hips.

It was an attire, artful in that it suited him to perfection, and at once very faintly slightly foppish - he looked like an artist, perhaps; certainly someone who lived on the fringes of convention both in fashion and sexuality.

"Yeah," chipped in McCabe, delighted with the whole panoramic fairytale of deception he glimpsed weaved into Murph's two careless words, and anxious to extend and amplify this new and fallacious background for Ray Doyle (a man who, in McCabe's book, got what he was asking for far too seldom): "Good for a - " he leant close to Tony Jones' fascinated ear and whispered - "anytime, he is. S'pitiful, really."

Picking up on this with equal gusto, and before Jones could get a chance to scent the lie, Sam Price took a long swallow of his beer, shaking his head with mournful wisdom. "Poor fellow," he intoned, "in his blood, y'see. Gets 'em like that, sometimes. Can't help himself." His eye ran over the lithe, compact form draped over the bar with malicious pity.

"Ah, come on Sam," put in McCabe. "Don't try and come on so bloody holier-than-thou. *We* know, don't we, just between friends - " he leant forward and gave Price a hefty nudge in the ribs, accompanying it with a meaningful smile.

"What, not you too?" asked Price in surprise. "*And* you, Ned?"

"Well, you know, any port in a storm, any hole with a - "

"Sshh - "

" - horn," he completed, unashamed; and so it was, with half-reluctant confession, the whole table admitted that they had, at some point of desperation, availed themselves of the decidedly shopsoiled charms the man at the bar had on offer. Murphy didn't know how much longer they could keep straight faces. He had started all this off with that one brief comment, and although it hadn't turned out as he had intended, he decided to play along with it for a while. Jones, with his long pale face (now pink-tinged with shandy and animation) was inclined to take himself too seriously; and as for Doyle, he had been an awkward little sod lately. Stroppey as hell.

"Does he work here? What's he called?" said Jones, for all his outward cool rather shocked by the proximity of depravity.

"Raymond," said McCabe, dodging the first question, caressing the consonants as he drew them out and managing to make a dark, sinful houri of the name. "That's our Raymond, that is. Sugar-sweet and good to eat." He liked the sound of that and chuckled to himself, raising the pint to his lips. "Sugar-sweet!"

Murphy cast a glance across: but no, Bodie hadn't heard a word of this elaborate put-on, because he would certainly have intervened if he had. Guarded Doyle and his reputation very watchfully, did Bodie: but he was still deep in conversation with McCabe's partner. Doyle himself was totally unaware of the sensation he was creating in one corner of the bar; his back to them, he was just lifting a full pint of beer to his lips, the other hand reaching into his rear pocket to tuck his wallet back in, one buttock lifting to accommodate the sliding fingers.

McCabe moaned in ecstasy, eyes rivetted; and Sam Price made cupping motions with his palms, a lingering caress on imaginary curves, lips pursed in soundless appreciation. It was one of those days when puerility seem inevitable, and fitting. Puerility, Murph mused into his pint was not an attribute one could often associate with Ray Doyle. Though Bodie seemed to find him amusing; Murphy had often observed the two of them, heads close, attentive solely to one another, lit with the appreciation of some private joke; Doyle had a surprisingly deep, earthy chuckle that surfaced at such times, and Bodie an easy, affectionate expression that was almost indulgent, almost -

But that was another story.

Bodie and Doyle were a very exclusive pairing, in all senses of the word. Rigidly exclusive: barriers up everywhere, sealing them within, keep out, trespassers will be executed.

Doyle was turning now, pint in hand, surveying the bar and its occupants with distant preoccupation; his eyes passed over the table of miscreants without interest. All of the old hands had averted their eyes in plenty of time; and it was only Tony Jones, who was not part of the joke, who remained staring, captivated by the odd, unsculpted face which seemed first hard, then delicate as the lights falling on it shifted, drawing different moods. A fallen angel, yes: burning religious fanatic turned courtesan. Doyle registered the glance but passed over it, only returning

when he sensed it persist beyond chance. For a moment he stared out over the room and the new recruit, and met Jones' gaze, holding it for a second in incurious appraisal before he turned away, seeking something else.

McCabe's devil was quick to jump in and make capital on this. "See that? See the way he looked at you?" he said in an aside to Jones. "That's the look, that was. Seen it before when he gets a glimpse of a new face."

"Scented new blood," confirmed Sam Price, sagely. "S' like an obsession with him."

Murphy, as suddenly as if it had been switched off, had ceased to pay the running hoax any attention; something more interesting was happening. Doyle had seen Bodie, had started to move that way; then he had spotted Lucas and checked, staying where he was. He hooked a bar stool towards him and rested one foot on its rung, propped an elbow on the bar, and looked outwards again. Murphy, fanciful, imagined an electric stream of compulsion there; Doyle bringing every inch of his will into unseen force, focusing every atom of concentration onto Bodie.

Bodie looked up.

Murphy watched; he had totally left the antics of his companions aside to participate, instead, in this. Not that there was much to see: Bodie looked away again quite soon and Doyle lowered his eyes.

That's it then, thought Murph amused: you've had it, Lucas. Bodie's had his summons; you can write off your cosy little chat about the biggest and best blasters 'cause however much he might look as if he's still right there beside you, take it from me - he's gone -

For a moment, Murphy, who was not prone to jealousy of any sort, wondered what it must be like: to be the one, and only, person Ray Doyle searched out, looked for when he came into a room...

He was drawn abruptly out of these oddly wistful musings as Tony Jones stepped across his line of vision, heading for the bar. Murphy lifted his drained glass in a tragic pose, studying it. "Remind me," he said to no one in particular, "to give a refresher course for the babes on the politics of getting in rounds for the oldtimers."

No one was paying him any attention. McCabe nudged him, his face stretched wide in a delighted, transfixed grin as he stared concentratedly ahead. "He's gonna do it. He's really gonna do it. Watch. *Watch.*"

A tiny flicker of apprehension started up in Murphy's belly.

"Gonna do what?" he asked, his attention with all of theirs on the tobacco-coloured head weaving in and out, tracking a path for the long curve of the bar.

Sam Price set his glass down with deliberation, smacking his lips preparing.

"This is Tony Jones," he declared dramatically, "taking CI5 by storm. Leaping right in at the deep end, through the door of the tiger's cage, unafraid. He, bold, brave, and full of spunk - " McCabe cackled obscenely which earned him a severe look from the newscaster - "is about to make the very first - and, friends, the very last - pass at CI5's very own Goldilocks..." He raised his voice a fraction at this; the ex-SAS man's unselfconscious predilection for nicknaming his partner in a succession of occasionally unmacho ways raised many opportunities for ragging ribaldry.

Murphy: the flicker had knotted into fullscale unease. "You bloody idiots. Don't you ever know when to draw the line?" he muttered, watching with a fatalistic sense of pending disaster. Bodie had heard Sam's final words and had glanced their way at last, then keenly, with dawning concentration to the bar.

The tobacco-coloured head leant near to the mop of dun curls. In an agony of gleeful anticipation, McCabe squeezed something hard; it turned out to be Ned Starmer's left knee but Ned was also too caught up in the tiny drama to notice.

Bodie stood up, knocking back his chair.

There was a brief, but conclusive, scuffle at the bar.

Murphy's table of pranksters fell about with knee-slapping laughter. In the melee two pints of beer got slopped over and nobody cared. The rest of the occupants of the room were beginning, lumberingly, to be aware that something, somewhere, was going on; and were looking for its epicentre.

Doyle took no notice of any of it. His concentration was frozen, narrowed down entirely onto the man he was holding. Unexpectedly green eyes like winter ice speared into the new recruit, who was in fact taller than himself, but who was at present forced to look up due to the position Doyle held him pinned in, back bent like a clumsy bow over the bar stool.

Doyle hitched up one buttock casually onto another stool and continued to hold him there, gripping the open neck of Jones' shirt tightly so that it was half-choking him; he took a long, thoughtful sip of his pint, eyes never leaving the half-terrified face of the other man. He spoke for the first time, in a conversational, affable tone:

"Someone's got itchy fingers. You'll just have to learn to keep them to yourself, won't you? I'm sure you won't forget again."

Tony Jones coughed, because he could scarcely breathe. One foot kicked weakly and impotently at the tubular feet of the stool Doyle was perched on with such humiliating casualness; his hand came up and scrabbled desperately at the fingers twining his own shirt tightly around his windpipe. Watching the struggles with a dispassionate eye, Doyle loosened the steely grip of his fingers just a little. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that Bodie had arrived by now, was standing a little way off, just watching, hands clenched, then flexing by his sides. Playing to

Bodie now, as he always did without being altogether aware of it, he took another leisurely sip of beer, savouring the taste, and looking down in a reflective kind of way at his victim: up and down, from his face to his knees, missing no detail.

Tony Jones, pale, dazed, and abruptly sobered out of the hazy warmth of two pints and flowing camaraderie which had dissolved the instant the shock of his ghastly mistake was made clear to him, couldn't move: although the strained discomfort of his pose was ricking his back painfully. Unable to take his eyes off the fascinating presence that held him in thrall, he stayed very still. The whole room was still with him; Doyle's quietness projecting an aura of leashed, volatile power, a terrible waiting menace.

"What's your name. Who the hell are you anyway?"

And, breaking the tension so that one and all jumped, the jukebox burst loudly into life, blaring out Derek and the Dominoes. Gradually, interest faded, people turned away, resumed conversation. Only Jones and Doyle were left, locked in silent combat where there was room for one will alone to prevail.

Jones said nothing. His tongue came out, moistened dry lips; he swallowed convulsively, eyes darting around. Swift as a serpent, Doyle kicked the chair away from beneath him with sudden, shocking violence, rescued Jones' dive with a jerking hand, and slammed him upright against the bar, pinning him.

'Layla' screamed out the jukebox, 'got me on my knees...' Green eyes stabbed smiling merciless anger at him. Teeth bared, Doyle whispered, a caress of sibilant suggestion.

"I asked you: what's your name?"

His voice was hoarse and wouldn't work right at the first attempt. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Anthony Jones."

After a moment Doyle nodded, eyes sliding incuriously over Jones' dead-white face. He allowed a small, white-toothed shark's smile to curl aside the corner of one lip.

"And so, Tonio," he drawled, "you want to play games with me? Is that right?" Playful now, a sunwarmed tiger patting a dying mouse around, he thrust his hips forward, once, twice bumping their groins together. He was very close. He smelt of beer and bruised pine needles, and he was warm and very masculine against Jones' skinny length, every muscle relaxed yet on the brink of tension, ready to pounce should Jones unwarily seek to escape. For a moment his mouth hovered, slightly parted.

"Let me go," said Jones, turning his head aside.

"Let you go?" repeated Doyle astounded, insanely cheerful now. "What, when I'm just

beginning to enjoy it so much?" He had both hands pressed to the bar, encaging Jones' sagging frame; now he removed one and slipped it around him, rubbing the small of his back intimately, a slow, insistent pressure.

Bodie caught the eye of the girl behind the bar who was watching the whole thing with barely concealed disgust; he gave her an encouraging smile which forced her into looking away, embarrassed. He himself had said nothing, just looked on. He ordered a drink as if nothing was happening.

"Please let me go," said Jones quietly.

'Layla' wailed the banshee, 'beggin' you darlin' please - '. The insistent jangling guitars were fading now as the record came to an end; beneath its cover the scene in the bar had been forgotten. Only Murphy kept a weather eye that way. Another record was beginning, something quieter, and Doyle's mood changed with it. The wild mocking light in his eyes snapped out and the cruelly careless amusement faded from his face, leaving him cold. He stared at Jones, keeping him close with that one locking an arm around him like a steel hoop, rocking him slightly.

"On the other hand," he said, and now his voice was ice once more; "on the other hand, Tony-boy, if all this is just a put-on, some mudlark's bright idea for a good laugh at your expense and mine: then you can notch it up to experience, and then go and lay one into whoever set you up for it, can't you?"

Tony Jones was released then, so suddenly that he sagged and clutched at the bar for support. Smoothly, Bodie was there with him, watching Doyle's unhurried retreat from the room with half an eye. "Get this down you old son," he said amiably enough, and handed the younger man a tumbler of neat whisky. Jones took it, numb, hardly conscious of his surroundings. Bodie guided him across the room, pushed him down beside Murphy.

"Look after him a bit better, can't you Murph?" he said with a flash of the irritability that comes with the release of tension.

Murphy acknowledged that with a glance. He had, in fact, been mad with himself for starting the whole thing off in the first place, and for misjudging Jones' nerve. "Don't you take any more notice of these nutters," he said in a friendly, casual way, ruffling the brown head, "and especially not if they tell you George Cowley likes whisky and orange when it's your round." And that, he hoped, would put an end to it, get it into perspective, a joke that rebounded with no harm done. An encounter with Ray Doyle at his most caustic was not the best way to begin your acquaintance of your colleagues to be, true: but on the other hand, it was no good being too sensitive, not in this company...

McCabe had practically forgotten the whole thing already, but he had noticed Bodie. And the picture of Doyle's anger had burned into his memory.

"Hey, Bodie. Your partner - 'e's a bloody head job," he said, shaking his head disgustedly.

"Absolute bloody head-case."

Bodie gave it a moment; just long enough so that the silence became pricked with tension. Then: "Maybe. But my partner doesn't get his kicks," he said with deliberation, jet-hard eyes staring them all down, "from setting up amateurs to get kicked in the teeth. He - " a dark-fringed glance flicked towards Jones - "maybe didn't deserve what 'e got. Have a think about who did." With this parting shot, he left.

"We know how his bloody partner *does* get his kicks, anyway," growled McCabe; and then, immeasurably cheered out of the sudden discomfort by the astounding wit of his own comment, began a long, bawdy and totally improbable tale about the secret orgies held behind locked doors in the CI5 typing pool.

Doyle was waiting for him in the corridor not far away; leaning against the wall, arms folded.

"Bit hard on him, weren't you, mate?" was Bodie's only remark as Doyle fell into step beside him.

"Scared the living daylight's out of me," muttered Doyle scowling. "Then he had the bloody nerve to come on at me as if I were some slack-assed fairy queen..."

"He's only a kid," commented Bodie mildly; he was treading warily around Doyle these days. "McCabe led him on, bit of a dare maybe. He'd never have done it off his own bat."

"McCabe's a nutter," was Doyle's opinion; happily unaware of that same agent's identical avowal concerning him. He was experiencing a tiny prick of conscience, remembering the stark white face, the panicking brown eyes. "Ah well," he shrugged, "nothin' worse than 'is pride got hurt. Make it up to him sometime."

He stashed the promise aside carefully in his memory, and promptly forgot the incident. As everyone had.

In the bar, Tony Jones nursed a fresh pint and a sorely hurt ego, brooding.

In the matter of their personal affairs, there was still worse to come.

There began a new, unsettled phase, where Doyle seemed to be throwing everything at Bodie, testing him to the limit as if experimenting with the risk, calculating icebloodedly just how far he could push Bodie before he fell; at this time he seemed deliberately to be inviting Bodie's default. They lived through it: mainly because Bodie found reserves of tireless strength and sensitivity to cope with it, reminding himself over and over to see it for what it was, a harrowing desperation on Doyle's part, one he should have worked through in the process of childhood and presumably never got the chance; a desperation to find a proven security, rock-solid, one he could believe in with unswerving faith and rest. For Doyle, despite the cool ultra-selfconfidence he faced the world with, suspected himself of being unlovable, past hope and help, a bit of warped human trash. Bodie stayed steady, holding on, drifting over the storms and the vicious

drunken abuse; remaining grittily unprovoked when Doyle, eyes shining with wild, malicious misery would stand before him, inviting with all the force he could project some physical retaliation, ritual castigation for the hurt he knew he was giving Bodie without being able to stop himself.

It was, too often, a temptation that was almost painful to do just that: lay into him, thrash the violent anger out of him till he had no spirit left to wound them.

Ruled rigidly by instinct, Bodie knew that to do anything of the sort would be disastrous. He continued to cling on, meeting anything Doyle threw at him with steadiness, with commonsense, with love. Caught in a crazy, bleak whirl of destructiveness that none of those they worked with would have even guessed at, they simply existed, from day to day, emotion to emotion.

Just when Bodie was beginning to think that none of it was worth it, that they were doing each other nothing but harm; as has a way of happening, just as it became unbearable, it changed.

It was a cool early-Spring day, but he was sweating even while the violent chills ran through him. There was a stinging pain in his left arm. Stumbling, too; and that wouldn't help. He had to stay alert, or he wouldn't have a lump of lard's chance in Hell.

Split up from Murphy, who now seemed to have vanished entirely, along with the entire stock of CI5 agents drafted in on this job, he had no idea what to do. Instincts, training, well-memorised scribbings on lecture blackboards, all had fled him and left him drifting, because nothing here bore any resemblance to anything he had been taught. Go back to the cars, his dazed mind urged: only the cars were on the far side of the complex of soon-to-be-demolished buildings, and he was by no means sure that the armed men they had been trying to round up had conveniently left. Be nice to be picked off as he tried to sprint across the courtyard: his mum'd be glad of the extra money, what were the pension rates, now?

He recognised the rising bubble of laughter in his chest for hysteria and stopped, taking several deep breaths. Then he peered around the crumbling corner of an edifice, blinking to clear his sight. Jesus Christ.

That shootout.

Nothing, but nothing he'd come across in two years on the Fraud Squad had prepared him for the sick reality of concentrated volleys of spattering bullets flying right and left, spraying dust around his feet, smacking into stone-work. He had lost his nerve completely, though he was not a coward, and with it control of his guts, involuntary terror weakening him. But the shame of that, plus the bitterness of the knowing that he had been absolutely no use to anyone, dead wood, had yet to sink in fully. For now, he was focussing every sense on the most basic instinct of them all: survival.

Had to risk it. He took a step forward, walking awkwardly because of the state of his clothing - christ, bloody legs won't stop shaking. Then another step. Past a little alleyway between the shells of two houses, tripping over rubble. Absolute silence, everywhere. On -

He was, shockingly, seized by the hips, dragged backwards, a silky voice coiling danger in his ear through his damaged nerves:

"If I were the bad guys, sunshine; you'd be dead."

And weak-kneed with further shock, he twisted to face the mocking, slant-eyed gaze of Tony Jones' personal bete noir: the pose - hand poised on hip, curly head arrogantly tilted - unmistakable. Ray Doyle.

Disliked, feared, distrusted. But not the enemy, as such.

"Fuckin' 'ell, Doyle," he snapped, tearing himself free, "watch what you're fuckin' doin'."

He met the suddenly measuring gaze with resentment, unconscious of the appraisal there which had quickly taken in the marks of panic, shock, not-quite-rationality about their newest recruit. By rights, Jones should never have been in this at all, even if it hadn't gone disastrously wrong. He was a good, skilful man and shaping up nicely, but he should never have been brought out on this, wouldn't have been had they not been so short-handed when the call came in.

"Okay, okay. C'mon in - it's only small, but we're looking around for somewhere more suitable," he said with humourless flippancy, standing aside to usher him in with mocking courtesy; and Jones took stock of the situation, only just beginning to experience the vast relief of realising that he wasn't alone any more, that someone else was here who would cope. For, like them, hate them, hardly know them, you could not help but be aware of one overriding thing about these two: their success-and-survival rate.

For the first time in minutes, the tight pain of fear in his chest eased. The alley was small, barely three feet wide, open at each end. Redbrick walls towered each side; the floor was patched with caved-in rubble. At the other end crouched 4.5's burly sidekick, dark head bowed over the rifle he was checking over, the sheen of his leather jacket dulled with powdery dust. He had glanced up once, briefly, to see Doyle's find, but now his interest seemed to have dwindled and he was once more wholly preoccupied by his swift, methodical care of the gun, and his constant surveillance of the wide-open spaces.

Jones wasn't too sure how he felt about agent 3.7, Bodie by name. On the surface more gregarious than his renownedly difficult, moody partner, he was in fact little different in approachability, just as closed-off beneath the surface. While Doyle, quick and clean, dispensed with camaraderie altogether, Bodie on the other hand projected a friendly air but didn't stand up to any probing. He would coach in arms' use with patience and skill, employing a smirky sort of humour that livened things up: but he was intolerant of incompetence and did not encourage conversation off that confined to the job in hand. Maybe Murph was right: any warmth, any openness these two had, they reserved strictly for one another.

Jones had no particular feelings for Bodie other than ungrudging admiration at his easy skill and accuracy with heavy guns; no, it was this one he disliked, the slippery vicious gutter-rat whose

fur he had so embarrassingly ruffled soon after joining. Not that Doyle seemed to have it in for him personally or anything like that; but the way he looked clear through people with bored disinterest bespoke a definite arrogance that rattled Jones intensely. Of course, it couldn't be denied that they both were superbly good at their job, not only more than competent in any field you cared to name, but they had something else too, something rarer; a blend of keen intuition and sometimes-unconventional initiative. In short, they took risks; which came off, because they had the skill to back them up.

"Check 'is gun," Bodie was saying, briefly, without looking up from his task.

Jones had slid weakly to crouch with his back against the wall. Doyle sank to the same position in front of him, holding out a hand. "Less'ave it."

It took Jones a moment to catch up. "Lemme look over the shooter," Doyle explained shortly. "Just to make sure you 'aven't got a stoppage."

Don't trust the raw recruit to load it right, was Jones' bitter, absolutely correct guess at the motives of that; but at least Doyle hadn't *said* so, which he supposed revealed a certain diplomacy he hadn't before suspected in him. Doyle checked it over quickly, handed it back. "You've got ammo for it? Yeah? Gonna need that, sunshine. So look after it. You're bleeding," he said, abruptly changing the subject, nodding at Jones' hand. "Bullet-flash, is it?"

And before Jones had time either to reply or to object, Doyle, balanced back on his heels, took the injured hand in both of his and turned it in gentle fingers, searching.

"Where the hell is everyone," said Jones between gritted teeth; squeamish, he was not watching what Doyle was doing. "We got split up - "

"Chasin' a red herring, moress'pity." Doyle glossed quickly over the seriousness of this, but in fact he and Bodie had gone through a moment of incredulity, then a flashpoint of gut-twisting fear which settled into grim resignation as they adjusted to the fact that they had been left alone to handle several very dangerous, totally ruthless raiders fighting for their lives, unhampered by the impulse to preserve anyone else's. It had happened before. The thing was, not to dwell on possibilities. Just get on with the job.

He elaborated: "See, after we cornered 'em up there, a few of them managed to break out, Murph and company must've followed them, the cars are gone. Trouble is - " he turned the hand deftly, noting the calibre of Jones' wince with a careful eye - "some of them got left behind. An' only you, me and 'im to stop 'em beating a sharp retreat." He shook his head; and, unexpectedly, grinned. A curl had flopped down to mingle ticklishly with his eyebrow; he brushed it impatiently away.

"How bad is he hurt?" Bodie's voice filtered over to them, abrupt. Jones had not thought him paying any attention to himself and Doyle; he seemed to be concentrating single-mindedly on the lookout he was keeping at his end of the alley.

"Flashburn, messy, not serious. Wrist may be sprained - lucky it's 'is left," answered Doyle, refraining from adding that in his opinion rank fear and hamhanded inexperience were likely to prevent the young man from being anything other than an additional handicap. Bodie would know that, anyway. So they were fighting against uneven odds. It had happened before.

"Good. In that case, we better make a move," came Bodie's grim voice, "'cause if Murph loses the ones that got away they'll be back with a boat, and then, Superman, we won't have a prayer. Nor will their hostage."

"If they've got one."

"Did you ever see a bankrobber in plaid skirt and brogues?"

Much of these seemed to be over Jones' head; belatedly, he realised that the world hadn't, after all, ended; that he was still in a job, and that like it or not he had been adopted into a team and should be making some contribution.

"Lemme just fix 'im up, okay," Doyle was answering. "Don't want CI5's newest and brightest keeling over before 'e makes his mark, do we?" As he spoke, he winked at Jones, making a small conspiracy between them over his partner's edgy impatience; and though the words were mocking his tone was not. Jones found himself responding, a lick of insidious warmth beginning in him that was more than the cessation of enmity: the attraction all the stronger given the previous hot hostility to contrast. From one peak to another. It was a strange feeling; as if he had opened a door at last to confront a long-held prejudice only to find the man he was looking at quite different from the one who had lived in Jones' unforgiving mind.

"What's going on then?" he asked at last, looking down at his own wrist, still captured in one of Doyle's hands; the other was groping around in his jeans' pocket. Neither of them answered for a moment.

"Shit," Doyle swore, screwing up his face in annoyance at the reluctance of his tight jeans to allow him access into the pocket. "Goin' on? There's four, maybe five of them holed up somewhere over there - " Doyle gestured somewhere in Bodie's direction - "probably got the cash with 'em, too, would've been too heavy for the ones who cut and run to handle. They've possibly got a hostage, who may or may not still be alive; they aren't budging for now because they know we're down 'ere just waiting to pick 'em off if they move out, and they don't know there's only two," he covered it without fuss, "three of us. They got the river behind them and while that's good in that we've got them pinned it means that they might be gettin' reinforcements along that way if we don't close 'em out in time."

"Murph and the rest'll be back soon, won't he?" checked Jones, hiding his anxiety under a casual tone.

Noting it, Doyle lied, equally calm, "Oh yeah, sure to be. Spit."

He held a large, folded white hanky in front of Jones' mouth. Diverted as Doyle had intended

him to be, Jones eyed it faintly cross-eyed. "Wha...?"

"Spit," Doyle repeated, and then as Jones goggled at him added patiently, "You got some dirt in there, sunshine. Don't want tetanus, do you? Saliva's antiseptic, not quite Savlon maybe but it'll do." And he watched as Jones tried, drymouthed, to comply. After an unproductive moment he leant his head nearer, murmured with a hint of devilishness:

"If you don't, I will."

Intrigued and amazed by this new side to Doyle, eyes never leaving the faintly malicious slanting gaze, the wolfish grin, Jones absentmindedly dampened the hanky to Doyle's satisfaction.

Doyle cleansed the visible particles of dirt from the angry graze deftly. There were involuntary tears in Jones' eyes by the time he finished, and he was grateful that luckily Doyle had been too preoccupied to look up from his task. Now he was binding up the wrist firmly, the capacious handkerchief flying around the injured area. "Good job you had such a big hanky," he said, because he was embarrassed to be such a nuisance and couldn't think of anything better to say.

Bodie without turning, jumped in instantly: "Nose his size, what'd you expect."

"Thank you, Bodie."

"Given up buyin' 'em for him, now I just quarter sheets."

Doyle raised his eyes heavenwards, pained. Jones smiled, looking down. Doyle was examining his handiwork, hands resting down-palmed on his muscular jean-clad thighs; Jones looked at the downcast head of coppershot curls greying at the temples and realised with a shock that Doyle was not as young as he had assumed, despite the youthful face and style of dress; late thirties rather than early. He was very close, so close that Jones caught a faint whiff of his sweat as he shifted, and a tang of a warm piney aftershave; he seemed somehow at once safer and more endearing than Jones had suspected, but he had no time to savour the sensation because it struck him with a sudden unpleasant jolt that if he could scent Doyle's sweat from here then it was a dead certainty that Doyle -

His thin pale features flushed with mortification as Doyle finished with a neat knot and looked up. One hand pressed to his stomach his eyes slid away from Doyle's with guilty embarrassment. " - bit of an upset stomach - nerves - happened when I - sorry - " he gabbled on and Doyle's brow furrowed a little, whether in distaste or sympathy Jones didn't know.

"Look, don't worry about it, it - "

"What's that?" Bodie demanded, cat-like instincts picking up on what Jones would have far preferred for him to have missed.

Doyle turned his head that way, springing to his feet. "Nothin', just superhero here got a touch of

the squitters," he said casually. "Like, you remember that time I was driving the speedboat and you tipped over the edge - "

Bodie caught on instantly and said, effortlessly aggrieved, "You took your bloody time hauling me back in. Eighty mile an hour you were doing, bloody James Hunt on waves, and me upside down with me head half an inch from the water - "

"He'd 'ad curry," Doyle explained solemnly to Jones as if Bodie had never spoken. "Of all things, he 'ad to have the curry."

"Chicken curry it was. From that little place down Needle Street - " approved Bodie, with a reminiscent smack of his lips.

"*And*", said Doyle with heavy emphasis, staring at Jones with wide, guilefree eyes, "I had to sit next to him in the car on the way home. For an hour. Never said a word, I didn't."

"You shut up, Raymondo," remarked Bodie in a friendly enough way, "or I'll tell 'im about the time you fell off that - "

"Nah, don't do that," interrupted Doyle swiftly, "E thinks I'm made of steel - don't you, Tonio? - and I worked hard enough at the image, don't want it ruined."

He grinned at Jones, chipped tooth showing; one hand combed haphazardly through already haphazard curls and the other he extended. Jones knew perfectly well that Doyle, in some strange diffuse way, was apologising for their disastrous beginning: he hunted around for that lingering resentment to kill it off and found it already gone. Smiling in return, he took the offered hand and was pulled to his feet. He felt ridiculously happy, like this was going to be the best day of his life.

Euphoria vanished quite soon. Bodie too was standing now, squinting out cautiously, rifle at the ready. "We better get going: oh, only if you're ready, of course," he said with exaggerated courtesy, one mobile eyebrow upquirked.

"Are we getting out?" Jones asked, heart taking a dive. His ragged nerves soothed, he had come to feel oddly at home in the peeling narrow alley, buffered by the strength and resource of the other two, their jerky humour helping to establish a web of security, a place to regain one's footing. If they, on whom the burden of decision and action fell, should seem so perfectly in command, perfectly untroubled, why should Jones feel any unease?

Doyle was answering him: "Can't stay 'ere, can we? Pushing our luck as it is. Rats in a corner."

It hadn't occurred to him that that ease might be a façade; a groove they moved into because they had learned at cost that it was necessary, that they might be in deadly danger, the world's end on a countdown of ten and still they had to stay as cool and as clearheaded as if this was a scout's weekend orienteering jaunt, the biggest threat a thunderstorm and only summer uniforms to shield warm skin.

His eyes dark with trouble, he looked up to find Doyle watching him, one hand stilled inside his jacket. Jones had nothing, laid himself open to whatever Doyle could offer; he was bland and formless, waiting for the scrawl of distinction, for Doyle to shape him with a quick, careless hand.

Doyle said: "You'll be all right, Tonio. You better be. Cowley'll kill you if you don't save us, 'cause Bodie 'ere's his blue-eyed boy."

The glitter of a friendship in a tilted gaze. Jones took a deep breath, nodded. He was steady. He'd make it. Satisfied, Doyle slung a rifle over his shoulder, drew his handgun with unconscious left-handed skill, twirled it, replaced it, downcast eyes on some distant inner concern. Feeling Jones' intense, hungry gaze on him, he looked up, tossed him a flying grin. "We're gonna go out and get 'em before the bastards come and get us," he growled, heavily macho, and scowling, punched a fist through the air; then his features smoothed out, levity gone as he added, "S'good policy, that."

Bodie threw back, "Yeah. And it pleases Cowley better." It made Jones jump: for a moment, he had imagined quite stupidly that he and Doyle were alone.

"Who cares," snarled Doyle, "it's my skin I'm aimin' to save, not Cowley's crime quotas. Ready?"

"Yeah."

Eyes slitted in careful concentration, Bodie leant out, sighted in the big gun, and fired.

Far off, a pane of cracked glass shattered. Within, you could just about make out black shapes, scattering. One, a featureless blur, leant far out and Jones watched, mesmerised. A weight leaned in on him, pressed him to the wall as Doyle shielded him against the rip of bullets, staring over his shoulder at the brickwork. Bodie was firing again, a long burst, holding on, overriding the vibration as the heavy retort kicked back at his shoulderblade. A long way away, the figure jerked sideways, toppled out of the sharded window, falling in a graceful arc, turning a perfect somersault in the air. It was a sight almost beautiful for the pure, free movement alone and they all watched hypnotised; but it became real when he hit the ground.

Jones looked away. Bodie stayed where he was, head slightly tilted to one side, hard classic face expressionless.

"Five point eight?" he enquired with economy, the roving eyebrows arching a little.

Jones winced at the black tastelessness, but Doyle looked unconcerned. "Nah, that's ice dancin', mate, not divin'. Lost points on the finish, anyway." Without warning, he hit Jones on the shoulder.

"Go"

Jones ran, blind, following an invisible cord that linked him to the man ahead; ducking and weaving, they took a short-coursed zigzag for shelter. Doyle moved with the agility of a leaping, crouching acrobat, keeping always just ahead. Jones was right there behind him, experiencing a mad uplift in exhilaration; it was all a game, they were desperadoes running wild, fighting devils; they were heroes of a golden age flashing quicksilver swords against the slow cudgel of the ogre, rovers in the greenwood righting wrongs...

When they reached the line of buildings, Doyle threw himself through a doorless entrance, and stopped. Jones, following at speed, cannoned into him. Doyle caught him by the shoulders and steadied him; breathing hard, heart thudding so it seemed it might explode through the walls of his chest Jones looked down dazedly into sea-green eyes.

Unexpected, unstoppable, the urge surged into him; a churning inchoate longing. For a moment, eyes locked together, neither man moved. Then:

"Don't," Doyle said violently, and with one swift movement he had twisted himself free, and away.

The spell had died in the making; the new life pulsing through him blinked out, leaving him cold. Jones dropped his hands, reality drenching him like a shower of sleet. He was shaking. Oh Christ. Jesus Christ.

"I'm sorry."

There was a moment of awful silence. Jones clenched his hands tight on his palms. The scent of pine and sweat; the insistent whining of a guitar - *got me on my knees* - and eyes like winter ice.

Then Doyle turned away, rubbing a weary hand over his eyes. "Gets you like that sometimes. Forget it."

Jones just could not believe what he had done. "That's twice I - oh god, you must think I - "

Turning, hands planted on his hips, Doyle interrupted shortly, "I'm not thinkin' anything. Look, we got a job to do. Just forget it for now, talk about it later, okay? Straighten you out..."

He was breathing harder now than when he had ended his run. Bodie must be wondering what the hell the delay was about. Crouching, manhandling his smg into position, he leant out of the doorway and began firing, offering with the distraction time for Bodie to join them. Jones watched, hugging relief and something else, a dawning anticipation - Doyle was going to talk to him, straighten him out - to himself, a little, secret warmth. They had made some sort of beginning. They were on their way.

Then Bodie appeared, running hard and fast, not from the same place that Doyle and Jones had left; he had doubled back to the other entrance to the alley and instead of crossing the dangerous open space he was keeping to the walls. Doyle, leaning out precariously as he was, must be

partially obscuring the view of him from the raiders, who were firing back at him spasmodically, but their line of fire was as awkward as his and none got close.

"Okay, mate."

Bodie, panting, had flashed past him into the shell of a room. Jones noted abstractedly that he moved with grace and speed, a true athlete rather than the whippy acrobat that was his partner. Doyle had withdrawn instantly, using the butt of the big gun to push aside his leather jacket; he reached inside and rubbed the muscles across his ribs which were aching from the strain of holding the unnatural position. Bodie was wasting no time: he had gone to the back wall and was looking out, assessing chances. A dab of peeling wallpaper, pink roses, hung tenuously from a slab of plaster still adhering to the brickwork near the fireplace; it seemed unbelievable that this place had once been the cosy livingroom of an unknown family long since passed on.

"What now?" asked Jones.

"Now," said Bodie without turning, "we're stormtroopers. You watch the Iranian embassy affair on the box, a few years back? Springing the hostages. That's us. But without..." he swung round and his smile was humourless, dark eyes slanted in devilish array, " - the heavy artillery."

"Innate skill, an' genius, that's what we got," Doyle added. He ran a hand through disordered curls, taking a deep breath. He glanced briefly over at Jones, unfathomable; and with another tang of excitement, fear, anticipation, Jones guessed that Doyle had not yet put what had happened between them aside. He thought again, hazily: today could change my life.

Bodie was unaware of any undercurrent. He was answering Doyle, "Genius is just about what we'll need. Come and look at this."

And then Doyle did forget everything but the reality of the present situation; he recognised Bodie's grim tone all too well. He joined him at the far wall; stuck his head cautiously through the window frame. A single glance was all he needed.

One fist thumped into the wall. "Oh fuck it." His upper lip curled back in a vicious snarl as he spat out the words, whirling around, snappy with temper and tension. "Fuck it." For from here it could be clearly seen that the raiders had chosen a position which was tactically close to impregnable, with the resources they had.

Bad news. There would be no easy cornering of them, no swift sure bloodless coup. Jones moistened his dry lips nervously. All his instincts led him towards staying here, where they were reasonably safe, until they were joined by reinforcements; but it was not they who were the hunted, the prey, the guilty, and logic argued against such inefficiency, such a waste of opportunity. He supposed that there was nothing foolhardy about these two; he trusted them to do the right thing. Including retreat, holding-off, if that was the only option. He glanced over at Doyle, who was staring at the floor, frowning, the toe of one white-trained foot scuffing the eddies of dust; a moody, hunched-shouldered figure.

"When we get out of this," Doyle said at last, without looking up, "tonight; I wanna have the best bloody paella Vesta can come up with."

The drifting, inconsequential remark, at a time like this, puzzled Tony: he had been awaiting the neat verbal delivery of some plan staggering in its infallibility. Bodie was answering as he sorted through the remaining ammo clips, dividing them into two piles. "Yeah? Sunshine; you'll deserve it."

Though they were not even looking at one another, and the words had meant nothing, Jones experienced the sudden intuition, shocking in its irrefutability, that these two were very close; it came to him as a blinding certainty they were, somehow, irrevocably bound up to one another in some way he could not even begin to conceive.

He had never even seen them touch.

The strange feeling that was not even jealousy remained with him even when Doyle, lifting his head, looked straight at him and added: "Or even some of that bloody Needle Street curry. Take you with us, Tonio. How about it? You wanna paint the town red with us tonight?"

He held his head high, because the inclusion of himself had been intended generously, and called forth his pride, answering: "Any damn colour you want," without a tremor in his voice.

It seemed that Doyle, however dearly wanted, was not to be for him.

But Doyle's liking, and respect, he vowed to himself fiercely, that he would have.

Moving on wooden feet, yet with new purpose and new sense of his own adulthood he joined the companions at the other side of the room, where they all looked out in silence at the skeletal wrecks of unsculpted masonry that housed an unknown number of armed and dangerous men, a hostage, and half a million pounds (at a guess) in gold and silver bullion.

Doyle was squinting up towards the leaden sky, measuring, quick eyes darting from strut to exposed girder, to jutting ledge.

"Any chance?"

"Might be. Reckon we better try it, if you're happy about it."

"I'm thrilled."

The short exchange meant nothing to Jones: either he had missed something or they were communicating at some level of shared unspoken conclusion. He stayed quiet; an onlooker.

Decisively, Doyle was stripping off his worn leather jacket, which he tossed over to Tony Jones. "Keep this for me."

As Jones took it, surprised, Doyle was rolling back the sleeves of his thin beige shirt. "I don't wanna mark on it, mind," he warned. "I'm very fond of that jacket."

After a moment's reflection, Jones took off his anorak and slipped into the borrowed jacket; although he was some inches taller than the other man he too was slightly built and it fitted him well. Doyle's warmth rose around him, and with it the faint, not unpleasing scent of his sweat. The jacket hugged him as he slowly eased his anorak back on over it; there was a bittersweet catch in his guts, apricots and aloes. Lovesick...

Bodie was clipping ammo swiftly onto a belt. Task completed, he caught Doyle by one bare forearm and slipped the belt around his hips, deftly fastening it for him. Doyle stood patiently in his grasp, head down, eyelids dropping thoughtfully over darkened eyes, his full consciousness on psyching himself up for the task at hand.

"What you going to do?" Jones finally asked, since it seemed no one was going to volunteer the information.

Checking his handiwork, ensuring the clasp of the belt was secure, it was Bodie who answered, pointing vaguely out of the window frame. "The Human Fly here's going up there, over the roof. Plaster'll be thin between the rafters, or there might be a trap-door. 'E can break through, give 'em a nice surprise."

"I'll go with yah," Jones offered to Doyle over the lump of panic in his throat; it was not just that he would by now have followed Doyle to hell and beyond, but a superstitious reluctance to let Doyle go; it was daft, but as he felt he could be some sort of talisman for him, the feeling growing into near-certainty that he did not want Doyle to go, that nothing could happen to Doyle if he, Tony, were by his side, staunch and faithful... If anyone had reminded him, now, that a few short hours ago he would have sworn hatred for him, he would not have believed them.

Neither of them jeered at his suggestion, nor paid it much attention; neither of them was seeing the premonition of disaster that had swiftly touched Tony. Bodie jabbed a finger at his chest. "You, son, are coming with me. Give 'im back-up. We'll go in the door and up the stairwell while he appears like the Archangel up above. They won't know what hit 'em. You ready?" This to Doyle, who nodded once, tightly.

"But they'll panic. Start shooting," said Jones, and wondered why no one bothered to reply.

At the corner of the building Doyle stopped to tighten the laces on his trainers, overlooking no little detail that might get in his way, slow him down when every slick second was crucial.

"Ey."

Jones withdrew his limbo-like attention from Doyle's feet. Doyle was pointing at him. "Look after 'im," he said jerking a thumb at the other man, whose eyebrows were set in a brooding dark line. "And you. No heroics." He was watching Jones very intently, puckish face aggressively tilted; he shifted the machine gun from one hand to the other and reached inside his shirt to free

the links of silver chain he wore where it had snagged painfully on the fine hair there: continuing, "no heroics, because me, you see I'm greedy for glory and can't stand it if anyone outshines me. So you look after yourself, Tonio."

"I will." He wished he could think of something else to say, something better that Doyle would remember and take with him, but Doyle's attention had left him already, moved onto Bodie. "And you - "

They turned slowly to face one another; Doyle moved until he was within six inches of the bigger man, staring up, eyes bright, almost insolent. " - you, don't you bloody well louse this up," he said with sprite-like aggression, planted on the balls of his feet, rocking a little. "'Cause I wanna get me OBE before I snuff it, okay?"

"I'll keep it ever in mind," Bodie promised smoothly, eyes dwelling on his partner's face, roving over his eyes, the flawed line of his cheek, the sybarite's mouth - "And sod the OBE, mate, I got bigger plans for you than that before you join the harp- and-clouds league."

Caught up in the open implication of that offhand, laden avowal, and in the sight of Ray Doyle, with one foot on a protruding, ragged brick, testing it, then briskly and efficiently beginning to scale the wall towards a black sky, it took Jones several minutes of following Bodie in a weird in-and-out dance of the doorways to realise what they had really been saying to each other while their eyes wove a subtle snake dance of expression, and they didn't touch, once.

They had been saying goodbye.

The ascent of the vertical wall was tiring and strenuous, but not difficult. However, after a gut-diving wrestle with a solid-looking drainpipe that eased itself treacherously away from the wall the instant he entrusted it with half his weight and all his balance, Doyle's nerves were screaming, his muscles protesting fire by the time he finally pulled himself up and over the edge of the roof.

No time to lie there recovering, though he let rip a torrent of swear-words when he discovered a rip in his jeans where they had caught on a nail. He set off immediately, picking his way over the uneven ruined roof, cluttered with struts and slates and areas of unsafe plaster. The big machine gun was an encumbrance, swinging and dangling across his body if he ceased to steady it even for an instant, but he hung onto it grimly. Gonna need you, my friend. Bloody 'ell. Looked routine, today did. How the fuck'd we get into a personal Armageddon?

Bloody Murph. Give him a rocket for skatin' off and leaving us to nursemaid 'is baby in this nestful of vipers...

Tony...

A rueful, involuntary smile traced briefly across his lips.

Not a bad kid, despite - everything. Gonna have to sort him out over all that. S'funny. I thought

he just had the hots for anything wellformed in jeans. It's not that at all... Funny how you can be wrong about people - but me, I do it all the time...

So what is it with Tonio? What's 'e looking for? Needs something, someone, steady, that's it - can't find his feet among us, needs someone behind him to give 'im a cuddle when he has a bad day - christ don't we all - must be days he can't sort out the bad guys from 'is colleagues, Pinnocchio with the Fox 'e is among McCabe and those...

He's okay, though. Scared shitless today - literally - but holding up. He'll make it, that one. Can tell. Give 'im six months - maybe when we get out of this I'll give him some small-arms trainin', he's not 'appy holding that Browning, maybe something smaller...

Have to keep a bit of distance there though. Can' 'ave him jumping me every time we're on our own, not lovesick like Rivers (don't think of Rivers) nah, Tony's got more sense than that.

Lovesick. Bodie was like that; 'e's changed. I thought it wouldn't last - but it isn't that, 's not that he's restless, lookin' to move on, no, whichever way I turn he's there. I hope to christ you find someone like that, Tonio - and till then -

Let 'im tag after me an' Bodie for a bit - do 'im good - just till he finds his feet -

Shit.

Momentarily off balance, one foot wavering precariously over an area of plaster he threw himself neatly forward to brace his hands on wooden rafters which safely took his weight. His palm was shot through with splinters. His train of thought broken, he gave every spare cell of attention now to the scramble across the rooftops, counting the definitions of rooms; five, six, three to go, have to be quiet now, quiet as a bird.

Bodie towed Jones after him into an alcove; dragged a hand over his eyes. Sweat was running off him inside his clothes; the atmosphere was heavy, a thundery stillness about. He cast a quick glance at this partner in loco; mulish brown eyes stared out at him from under a scraggy too-long fringe. God; where was Cowley getting them from these days? Nah, thass not fair, a more generous twinge prompted; the kid's okay. Bit wet maybe; but okay.

Bodie would, however have been a lot happier without him. Himself and Doyle, that was one thing: give them any job like this and they would run easy and uncomplicated, knowing what the other would be doing, thinking, no complications of uncertainty, of lack of faith.

Throw Factor X, like young Jones here, into the works and god knew what might go wrong.

Bodie was far, far happier thinking just for himself: and for Doyle of course, but that came as naturally as breathing. Nevertheless Tony Jones was here like it or not and Bodie had a duty to him as well as to the job.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," said the new recruit, brushing the curt enquiry aside abruptly, staring out and up at the stark skyline. "Will Ray be all right? Those roofs don't look any too safe."

Bodie repressed a grin. Ray, now. So Doyle had charmed his way even behind the stony demeanour of this one. Don't even think about it mate: he'd eat you alive, he was thinking, even as he answered.

"Don't you waste time worrying about Ray. Moves like a cat, he does."

Got instincts like one, too. And you sunshine, couldn't handle him for five minutes - go under without a fight and be left on the floor to watch him walk away, you would.

Bodie recognised in himself a certain satisfaction in thinking this way; he acknowledged it wryly, something sweet for all the pain, that of all the people who would undoubtedly like to imagine themselves mastering Ray, making him melt to them, it was only Bodie who was in with a chance.

Just don't count on it.

"So what now?" Jones was asking, unaware of Bodie's private meanderings though he had noticed the sudden sliding-off of Bodie's attention.

Bodie snapped into it, checking his watch. Ray'd be there now, or not far off. "Now, you listen. We go up the stairs. No noise. When Doyle jumps the roof, then we go for the door. You keep behind me - try and take out one or two if you get the chance. But - " and Bodie's voice slid into a deceptively gentle lilt, silk over ice, and velvet-blue eyes stared down into Jones' as Bodie took hold of his shoulder, squeezing - "remember Ray'll be in the thick of them, most likely. And if you wing him by mistake, sunshine; if there's one mark on him caused by you then I'd be very, very angry with you." He smiled; his eyes stayed hard as flint.

The fingers bit into bone; angrily, Jones twisted himself away. "Of course I bloody well won't. Whaddya take me for?"

Bodie gave a little smile, unseen, amused by the raw touchiness. "Okay. But you'll learn - one of the hardest things isn't how to hit people. It's how to *avoid* hitting the *wrong* people. You get two criminals in a crowd of twenty shoppers on the street - " he shrugged, and, having made his point, smiled again to offset the lecture, and slapped Jones on the back in a brisk, friendly fashion. "There may be a hostage, remember," he thought to add as an afterthought; "same thing applies. C'mon."

Jones supposed that, after a while, he might even begin to like Bodie too.

And there was tonight, he thought as he followed Bodie on the last stage of the journey: tonight, Doyle had said they would paint the town red, just the three of them...

Life turned you upside down sometimes. A new day every morning, and you never knew what each had in store for you.

At last, he had arrived. He was happy for the first time since joining CI5.

Doyle was on target and ready to go. He knew he was in the right place, because he could see them from the pattern of rafters stretching back behind him and from his own careful count that he had reached the seventh room along; was crouching belly-down under an open sky right over a roomful of gun-toting thieves. He could in fact hear them talking, in some excitable middle-eastern tongue. Checking his watch, he guessed that Bodie must also be in position. He gave it another minute to be sure, shivering a little as the icy wind cut through his thin fluttering shirt to strike chills into his warm skin. Roused to fine-drawn tension by the proximity of danger, he was nevertheless unmoved by it; if your number was up, there was fuck-all you could do about it, that was the tenet they all lived by, had to, or be useless wondering. He watched the sixty seconds tick by, precisely. Then he picked up a chip of slate, weighed it in his hand, aimed it carefully and threw it so it landed with a flip and a skid on the plaster over at the far corner of the room beneath. All attention over there, please.

It was a matter of seconds then to dive two-footed through the weak plaster, gun held at the ready, landing squarely in a crouch three yards beneath, facing six, eight bewildered men just as Bodie burst through the door at the side of him. Uzi sighted in to hold them at bay, yelling loudly for them to surrender. It was all noise and confusion and dust, no time to think much, just do what came instinctively, hope to get lucky, force a quick submission by sheer advantage of surprise and aggression.

It deserved success. They didn't even need luck to ensure that success: just the absence of misfortune, but then it had been a day of misfortune.

With a terrible cracking sound, the floor began to subside; rotting timber gave way and fell, masonry cascaded about them and the whole room shivered, and disintegrated.

Shouting unintelligible things, the raiders fell, sliding in a tangle to the lowest corner of the tilting room. One had been knocked out and lay with closed eyes, blood trickling from a marble-white forehead. Another, already recovering, was groping for his gun but the whole structure was unstable and for a moment the two sides were united on a common front: the necessity of escaping from a collapsing building.

Doyle's instincts took him up; with the aid of shifting planks, quick limbed as a monkey he managed to haul himself back onto the roof. Jumping madly from one strut to another, never pausing long enough to test its stability, he was crouching low to avoid any shots loosed his way, but none came. He reached a place which seemed solid enough, and finally he ducked into a natural position of defence between two large redbrick chimneys. He squatted, regaining his breath, rubbing dust out of his eyes, taking stock.

He had ripped his jeans in another place and gashed his thigh beneath. Not serious. He had scraped one elbow: although rivulets of blood were running down ticklishly, it was only a graze.

He did try to lick it, but his tongue simply wouldn't reach that far - where are you when I *really* need you, Bodie? - so he put the raw stinging pain to the back of his mind and concentrated on the rest of his equipment. His R/T was missing: there was something wrong with the damn thing anyway, some radio transmitter in the area perhaps, for when he and Bodie had tried to raise Murph seconds after he and the rest had screeched off and long before they would be out of range, all they had met up with was a low crackle of harsh static. But he still had his rifle, slung from his dust-streaked shoulder; his hand-gun was still safe in its holster though it would be practically useless from this height; and the ammunition belt still circled his hips. Thanks, Bodie.

Where the hell was everyone?

He pivoted cautiously around, checking all angles. Dread struck home: what if Bodie had been trapped down there? Caught, crushed beneath a chunk of wall while Doyle cut and ran, saving his own hide?

He scanned the courtyard beneath him with increasingly panicky eyes.

No, it was all right. There Bodie was, unmistakable the solid powerful figure in black, running; although from this distance Doyle couldn't make out detail he could see in his mind the mouth that would be twisted into a brutal sneer, eyes jetting determination. Eyes that in the dark caressed him naked; lips that, tender, followed the line of his gaze. Bodie was taking a line right across the open space; risky, that. Doyle frowned, teeth sinking into his lower lip as he raised his rifle, watching carefully. Can cover you from 'ere just fine, sunshine; banking on that, are you? Trust me.

Reflexes jumping, he fired a warning burst at a shadow that moved, and another. This was how it should be; his blood sang with the exhilaration of it, strung out on nerves and the excitement of this the deadliest of games. The raiders had split up; Bodie was rounding up one and drawing the others from hiding-places in the process, relying on Doyle for cover. That was just fine; the best fuckin' rifleshot in the squad; not counting you, of course. Everything was looking rosy. They were doing okay.

He had forgotten Tony Jones.

A precise shot of Doyle's winged one of the opposition, non-fatal leg wound, wouldn't do to kill 'em all even when the bloodlust was high. Cowley jibed at wholesale slaughter. The man fell to the ground writhing; reaching out at the extent of the arched agony for the gun he had dropped as he fell. Doyle frowned; raised the gun to his shoulder, considered one more direct shot to end the man's interest in the action once and for all. But then a lanky figure in a dun anorak that matched his hair darted out from one of the entrances and kicked the rifle away.

Doyle relaxed, lowering his gun, using the time to reload. Good for you, Tonio. Make an ace someday, you will.

He looked up again, ready once more.

And all his exhilaration, fled; for all at once the tight line of fine control they had established slipped and fell into tatters, destroyed by a cruel chance that haunted Ray Doyle for years to come, the moment forever frozen in his mind.

Bodie was hustling one of the raiders out of a doorway at gunpoint. Jones was still in the courtyard attempting to haul the wounded man to the support of a wall. It was an operation all but wound up.

And then, incredibly, a gunman, no two, appeared like magic on the roof below Doyle's and perpendicular to him, some ten metres apart from one another, focussing with raised rifles on their two targets down there, exposed and vulnerable out there in the wide open spaces.

Doyle shouted, loud and desperate, but it was already too late, he knew that. As if in a dream, he saw himself lift the rifle, balance it on a braced, crossed arm; judge distance, angle, make the choice of target - unfair, his mind screamed at him, to have this much power - sight it in, fire, hold on firing -

The gunman nearest him folded and fell. Bodie, hearing the shots, scrambled for shelter, but without knowing it, he was already safe. Only Doyle knew that, for he had made the choice.

The other loosed off his shot at his target a second before Doyle shot him, too.

Sweating, sick, Doyle lowered his rifle. His hands were shaking, now it was all over. Over too late for Tony.

Too early.

Oh god, no.

Sprawled out on his back on the cold stone, with the tufts of green grass sprouting in the cracks, lay a young man in a brown anorak, and even from here you could see the ominous rivers of crimson leaching into cloth.

In a frenzy of haste Doyle scrambled, hung, and dropped. The vast leaden sky overhung a deadly silence; and Doyle crossed the courtyard running easily, unscathed, dropping to his haunches beside his young colleague.

He could see at once that there was no hope: that among the lives lost here today - all, every one of them due to him in one way or another - Tony Jones' was destined to be one of them.

Sick to the depths of his heart, he squatted there, watching the flutter that bubbled wetly in scarlet as ruptured lungs made a last desperate bid for oxygen. There was nothing left but this; nothing of life save this last involuntary contraction of unthinking muscle.

"I'm sorry," he said aloud. This was all his; no escape from the accusing finger stabbing his way, not this time.

"Sorry, Tonio."

Revenge, indeed, for a moment of tipsy misguidedness.

"It just wasn't your day, was it?"

Why did it have to be him?

For once, the repetitive rhetorical question hurled out by all those struck by grief was answered at once, no excuses, no excuses.

It had to be him because it couldn't be Bodie, that was why.

"Just not your day at all."

Couldn't be Bodie, because he's all I've ever had in my life and I've got to keep him, you understand that, don't you?

As the flicker in the shattered chest ceased forever, the clouds parted.

When Bodie, covered with a fine sheen of exertion, finally completed his rounding up of the raiders left alive, he went to find his mate, coming out into the courtyard, blinking in the sudden sunlight that had broken through to shine warmly on the carnage beneath.

His heart contracted.

Doyle was squatting beside the body of their colleague. His face looked blurry, as if he were crying, but his eyes were quite dry. He looked up at Bodie's approach.

"I couldn't cover both of you," Doyle said.

"Oh christ - poor kid," Bodie said grimly, tightly. He stared down at the still, ruined chest knowing that there was nothing to say, knowing that after all this time he was still always astounded at the simplicity of death, the way a life could be pinched out in a flash and leave nothing.

"Just wasn't possible," Doyle continued as if Bodie hadn't spoken, "not to give you both cover. Not with two of them goin' for you from different positions. See - I couldn't cover both of you."

This monotonic, lackluster litany was sending a fine prickle down Bodie's spine, alerting him to an instability there somewhere. "Okay," he said quietly, reassuring. "You're not Superman, pet. You did okay. Come on now." He put out a hand, meaning to lay it on Doyle's shoulder, but Doyle ducked, shying violently away.

"Died in my jacket - "

He reached down, touched the still-warm leather; his fingers came away slippery and bloody. They both stared at them. Bodie was the first to avert his eyes.

"I'll buy you a new one."

He realised the seeming unfeelingness of that the moment it left him, wincing inside, but Doyle didn't seem to have noticed anyway, tracing swift gentle fingers down the thin plain face, to close the blank glassy eyes.

"Come on, Ray," said Bodie, suddenly urgent. He had seen Doyle on vicious downers too many times before. "Come away now." And to his relief Doyle came, rising to his feet, rubbing his sticky fingers down the side of his jeans in an absent gesture.

"Got three prisoners back there," said Bodie. "You go check on 'em - no," he quickly revised, with a look at the cold, vengeful eyes fixed beyond him, "I'll do that, you go scout around out there, call up Base from the car, tell 'em we've got three of 'em alive, no hostage, must've dumped her, how about that?"

Action, he decided; the duty, the clinical detachment of reports, that was the way to divert Ray for now.

But the night still had to be faced.

"How about the paella?" asked Bodie entering, decidedly matter-of-fact. He had his sleeves rolled up and was busy projecting the image of a man ready for culinary action.

Doyle had hardly spoken since they left the clearing-up operation to the cavalry who had arrived too late. Murphy's cheerful smile had disappeared and not returned, but he had taken the news quietly. He had hardly known Jones anyway; none of them had. To Cowley would fall the task of informing the young man's parents, for whom, presumably, as for all of them, this had begun as just another day.

Looking at Doyle now, it needed no special insight to see that he was explosive with tension, tensile with banked-down anger and emotion. He only shook his head briefly to the offer of food, throwing one leg up on the coffee-table. As Bodie watched, stilled with apprehensive concern, he tipped back more whisky, and suddenly, in an unpremeditated moment terrifying in its violence hurled the glass overarm across the room: it travelled in an instant and crashed explosively into the wall, splintering into a tinkling myriad of sparkling fragments.

Bodie released a breath, slowly; crossed the room. Unstirred by the fiasco - he had not even bothered to watch the glass hit the wall - Doyle lay there apathetically, looking unkempt. His shirt was carelessly fastened and damp with sweat; his jeans were dirty, streaked with building rubble, torn in two places; his eyes were bloodshot and his breath, already, was warm with the scent of whisky.

"You look like you just knocked off hod-carrying," said Bodie; he picked up one grimy hand which lay passively in his, the fingers slightly curled. Bodie uncurled them onehanded, examined the palm.

"Thought it felt a bit rough. You've got splinters here mate, want me to get 'em out for you? 'S a bit of a cissy complaint, splinters; you'll never live it down if you have to cry off target practice because of these."

Having spoken lightly to fill a void, he had nevertheless forgotten that Doyle would be looking for a fight.

He had stirred at last, kicking irritably at his shoes until they fell off. "Oh yeah. And we mustn't be cissy, must we? 'S a court martial offence, that is, in our job. Gotta stay tough and mean."

"You don't have to be tough all the time," Bodie contradicted him gently; he wasn't having Doyle get away with that. "No one's asking that of you. That's your decision, Ray."

He was keeping his tone brisk, almost impersonal. It wouldn't take much tonight to push Doyle right over the edge into rank self-pity; and ragged himself, Bodie didn't feel up to soothing it away.

When he returned with tweezers, TCP and cottonwool, and squatted by the settee, Doyle was sitting up; a fresh glass of whisky propped on his chest. He did however transfer it to the uninjured hand and held the other out to Bodie, without looking at him. Bodie took hold of his forearm, sliding fingers over warm skin to push up the shirtsleeve; Doyle's arm felt good to hold, fine muscle over bone, silken haired... A moment of erotic yearning pierced him from nowhere and he stayed there, shutting his eyes. Oh Christ, do we have to go through all this?

Bodie too was tired, overwrought and depressed. It came to him in a flash of resentful, instant anger that he was denied the most basic right of any committed relationship; all he wanted now was to slide his arms beneath Doyle's shirt, wrapping them round him, and be held in return, close to him, weep his own anger, frustration, despair at the events of the day into the harbour of Doyle's understanding, for who was better placed to understand, to share in that, than Doyle? - and yet, if he touched Doyle now in that way, Doyle would undoubtedly throw him off, reject him with swift and unloving finality, giving no quarter to Bodie's need for comfort which was just as great as his own, and far easier to satisfy.

Maybe, come to that, Bodie wearily thought, maybe it was Bodie's fault as much as anyone's. He did after all work hard at appearing cool, very much in control, around Doyle these days, always the rocksolid hard man who would cope with anything. He did this out of a very real fear that Doyle, once his eyes were opened to the fact that Bodie was still as vulnerable as himself, would lose respect for him, cease to cede to the ties Bodie bound him with, and drift out of reach.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe what Doyle needed most was to be shown, no punches withheld, and with no chance of mistranslation, that after a bloody day Bodie needed reassurance and comfort, the simple, priceless comfort of sexless physical intimacy. It was little enough to ask.

His heart was aching as he looked at his battered love.

Let me be close to you, sweetheart... It would help, can't you see that?

But no, Doyle couldn't see that; he never could see past the conflicting jungle of his own emotions. Never recognised his own bitter unconscious cry for help that he was projecting in his behaviour, sunk in maudlin self-hatred which moved him to snarl and lash out at every tentative gesture of affection; rejecting all the simple, direct ways of dealing with a dark mood as if they were a weakness.

Bodie could see it all too clearly. But, no gestures, not tonight. Tonight, Doyle was on his own; Bodie was too tired.

He got on with his task, extracting spears of splintered wood from the colourless palm until it was an angry red and beaded with blood. Then he scrubbed it with antiseptic.

"Thanks," Doyle muttered from habit; and rose to get another drink.

"Don't offer me one, will you," said Bodie: and slapped a mental pause on the unstable resentment he could feel beginning to threaten all his determined calm -

Just stay clear. Mustn't lose it - not tonight, of all nights...

Doyle slanted him a glance. "You live 'ere, don't you? If you wanna drink, it's all yours."

"Mind those bare feet on all the glass," said Bodie with deadly sweet temper, and he got up to get his own drink.

"I ever tell you about Joe Aubin?" he asked, concentrating with an effort because now the lonely aching part of him was threatening to swamp him, make him do something ridiculous, "taking a leak at a Beirut bus station, he was. Bomb goes off on the street, blows the window in, glass flying everywhere, blood. Poor old Joe, for a moment there 'e thinks 'e's lost his prizest possession, but you know what it'd done?" He took a thoughtful, smacking swig of his whisky. "Circumcised him. Neater'n a surgeon's knife."

Doyle's predictable lack of reaction snapped something in Bodie. Grim-mouthed, he sat down beside him, took another long swallow to give him strength, set his glass down in front of him with absolute precision, and plunged in.

He took Doyle's chin in his hand, thumbnail caressing the cleft in his chin, then digging, holding him still, beneath the wide startled eyes.

"Okay, Ray. We'll get drunk. We'll do anything you want. We'll go and pick up a bird and take turns with her all night if you think that'll help. Or we'll fight. That's what you want, isn't it? Go on push me a bit further: it won't take long, now. Then I'll guarantee to lay you out cold in ten

seconds if it's that sort of penance and oblivion you're after. Wake you up in the morning with a nice cup of tea, slab of steak for the black eye, how's that?" His tone wavered beneath facetiousness and open bitterness; his eyes never left Doyle's. "What we're not going to do is sit here on the edge all night. But make up your mind soon, mate; I'm shattered and I can't take much more of this."

Too late, he foresaw the reply he had well and truly let himself in for.

"Nobody's asking you to."

Hurt crowded in on him; unseen, Bodie clenched his fists.

Weary, he leaned his head back against the soft plush cushion. "Cruel, Ray," he observed, and the words strung out a frail line of brittle ice between them, "very cruel."

Doyle said nothing. After a moment, Bodie continued. "But as you're likely to point out, that's in the rules, isn't it? Good old Bodie, lies down like a dog every time you feel like kicking something, and without even being asked, too. That's love, Ray. Even the cynics have to admire the blind stupidity of it." Though his tone was light, the bitterness stabbed home.

It got through to Doyle as nothing else had; for the first time he seemed to become aware of Bodie as a physical presence, turning his head to look at him.

"It was my fault he died," he said at last; it was a sort of breakthrough, and in that offered truth Bodie felt the apology, and accepted it: "I might as well have pulled the fuckin' trigger on him myself."

"Oh yeah. And your fault the Molner girl spread wide her arms and took one in the heart. And your fault Ann Seaford ended up face down in the Thames breathing H₂O and slime. Then there was Benny - " he pulled names from places he thought buried, an unfolding catalogue of past lives, stabbing them home until Doyle, his face splintered with anguish, jumped to his feet and howled with a controlled violence.

"Don't list 'em all Bodie: *I know what I've done.*"

"You think you know," Bodie said. "That's your trouble; think too bloody much, you do. You really imagine they'd all be alive today if not for you?" His voice expressed polite incredulity that strengthened, unasked, into open derision. "What it must be, to have such a sway over Fate."

Doyle, restless, turned this way and that making for the window then changing his mind. Moving fast he went to his jacket, hanging over a chairback, extracted an opened packet of cigarettes. He tossed the pack and a lighter over to Bodie and then refilled their glasses; some of the translucent brown liquid slopped over the table and lay there puddled, reflecting the overhead light. Bodie extracted two cigarettes and held out one for him. Doyle's mouth parted for it instantly; he cupped his hand round Bodie's to shield the brief blue flare of the flame, dragged eagerly once, twice, drawing in the smoke. Both behind-the-sheds smokers from an early age,

they had technically given up this habit, resorting to it only occasionally. Bodie exuded a steady stream of smoke from curled nostrils and watched Doyle pacing around, sucking the life out of his cigarette - he was a greedy, impatient smoker. Finally, snatching it away from his lips, Doyle broke the silence.

"Yeah, okay," he said abruptly. "But Tony Jones died today because of me - don't bloody say anything - " his voice had risen to intercept Bodie's instinctive denial - "he was trustin' me, he thought it was 'is lucky day when we popped up from nowhere when he was alone and panickin', and I couldn't help him, I got the bloody kid killed, and it makes me sick, here," he punched one fist into his own chest, hard, so that it hurt.

Without looking at him, Bodie said quietly, "You liked Tony, didn't you."

Doyle stared at him, eyes wide open, the cigarette untended in the corner of his mouth. He brought swift fingers up to it, inhaled sharply; after a moment smoke streamed downwards from his nostrils which flared, very slightly.

"Like him? I didn't even bloodywell know him," he said viciously, and his arm flew to stub out the butt in the ashtray with sharp, jerky movements that sent glowing red sparks everywhere.

At least he was talking. "He seemed to like you," Bodie said, slowly, though he was not sure it was the right thing to say at that time. "Thought you were the Angel Gabriel, mate."

Doyle's reply was swift and unequivocal. "He didn't know me, either." He tipped some more whisky down. It wasn't helping. Maybe the truth would.

"You know why Tony died, Bodie?" He answered himself. "No, you don't know. You weren't up there with me. He died because I had one of those choices to make; two bloody bastards to send into eternity, no time to think even about whether it's right or wrong, they've got to go an' you know it. Which do you take out first? Which?" He stared at him, demanding his answer. "When you know what's hanging on your choice?"

Sudden and sickening, the truth Bodie had been staring in the face had its mask ripped away.

He said into the pause, over the tightness in his throat: "You made the right decision. By the book. If it's any comfort."

It was unarguable. If there had to be a sacrifice, then however great the heartache, or lack of it, then one sacrificed without the damnation of bias, the more expendable, the weaker. There had been no choice, for Doyle. Tony Jones had been training for CI5 for ten weeks. Bodie had as many years of experience.

"Oh yeah. The right decision," Doyle repeated. "But of course, for the wrong reasons." No comfort.

Something died in Bodie; he lost it all, every last impulse to tread with care. Sick, he stared into

Doyle's cool, aquiline face. He spoke slowly, from somewhere far away.

"Right reasons, wrong reasons, you did what had to be done and you know it. You can't really be saying you'd be happier if I'd died out there today instead of him? You'd be feeling better now if you'd done that, would you? Christ," Bodie said, shaking. "It might even have been worth it. At least I'd've escaped this."

Disregarding this for what it was, melodrama from someone tired and hurt and at the limit of reason, Doyle jumped around, staring down. In that moment it all became clear to him, exactly how he felt and why he was feeling it, and he expressed it with perfect clarity:

"I'm sayin' that no one should ever have to make that choice," he said with deliberation; and then, into the silence of comprehension added, "not you, not me, not even on George Cowley's orders. We're not God, or even fate. Look what it's doin' to us, Bodie if you need any proof. Look at you. Look at me, so screwed up I can't - " He stopped, gaze dwelling on the downcast dark head, Bodie's elbows on his knees, hands clenched together, and said abruptly, "I know I don't give you what you want."

If it was a question, Bodie did not choose to reply.

After a moment, Doyle said again, distantly, "No one should ever have to make that sort of choice..."

Bodie let him go then; hoping with weary detached despair that this time Doyle could work things through on his own.

For once, he found he didn't much care what hell Doyle was out there getting himself into so long as he could get some rest. His head was pounding. He dragged himself to bed and was asleep within minutes.

Midnight was long past, and the world slept at peace. Doyle stood for a moment by the open door of the bedroom, looking over at the humped form in the big bed. He was finding it hard to focus; so he crossed the room, walking as precisely as a dancer, and sat down looking at the dark rumpled head. Rudely awakened by the sudden weight beside him, Bodie turned over.

Doyle glanced at the other half of the bed. "Left a space for me."

The light from the hall fell on him in the dark bedroom. He looked severely disordered, a debauched cherub with all his clothing rumpled, his white shirt half out of his jeans, the curls over his forehead limp with sweat. As Bodie, coming round to greater awareness, noticed a bruise darkening the fragile skin beneath one eye. "What the hell happened to you?" he demanded groggily, sitting up and reaching out for the light switch.

Doyle's hand, wildly swinging, knocked it away. "No lights!" he said harshly. "Don't want the light, got enough in my head already, don't put it on."

"Your liver," yawned Bodie resigned, "will be as pickled as a walnut by the time you're forty." He noticed abstractedly as Doyle swayed nearer that his breath was sweet, and natural, hayfields and honey, but the fact didn't slot into place anywhere, he was not awake enough. "Are you hurt? Apart from that?" He stroked the soft skin with a fingertip, the bleakness of the evening dissipated after dreamless sleep.

Doyle smiled at him, a slow lick of warmth. He could, on occasion, be so affectionate when drunk it was tempting to keep him that way. "I'm dyin'," he owned. "Be dead by mornin'."

"What?" Bodie was only half-amused; looking at Doyle anew there was a feverish glitter about his eyes that he didn't like. He reached out, but Doyle's reactions were fast, very fast for a man with six, eight ? doubles inside him; sidestepping the hand.

"S'true. 'ad a premonition. An' - you gonna write my epitaph, Bodie? Make it a good one. Got gypsy blood, I 'ave. Who needs crystal balls?"

He laughed, a surprisingly deep, earthy cackle; it made Bodie laugh too. The sound arrested Doyle's crazily wandering attention, brought it down to the man in the bed.

He stared down at his dark-eyed lover, images flickering through his racing mind: he had killed Tony, no one liked him, but Bodie - oh christ, for Bodie he was the centre of all things - Bodie was pleased he was there. *Bodie was pleased to see him*. He took in the lazy smile lurking in the man's eyes, the bare smooth chest planed and contoured with hard muscle over ridged bone; the bare powerful forearms downed darkly with hair lying at ease on the cover - arms that would wrap him up, fold him in, take the pain on himself...

"Come to bed, Ray," Bodie said softly.

He shook himself, because this was something he had brought upon himself and must be faced out by himself, and stood up, taking two steps back from the bed.

"Love to," he said with exaggerated care. "Just lemme clean up, okay?" Finger and thumb pointed vaguely in the direction of the bathroom. "Then I'll come back an' - " he gazed at Bodie with concentrated sultry promise, "I'm gonna rape yah."

"Oh yeah," scoffed Bodie gently, "Crystal balls and all? Well, I'll be here, mate; I won't go away."

He waited open eyed until he heard the bathroom door close, shutting out the light. Now he was totally in the dark. He meant to wait, until Doyle came back having spewed up [text missing]cls of sour beer or whatever; and he turned onto his side, cheek pressing comfortably into a new, cool patch of pillow.

'Gonna rape yah.'

Bodie smiled to himself. Doyle's self-mocking avowal was not going to be fulfilled tonight, that

was for sure. He liked the sound of it anyway - and the warmth that had prompted Doyle to say it, for although the words were unloving the tone had been soft, lilting. Bodie yawned, hand sliding down his own body to take hold of himself squeezing gently. Yeah, sweetheart, you do that; come and sink into me. I'll take you on, make you forget.

He yawned again. He was exhausted. Bloody CI5. You worked ten, twelve hours; and it took 23 out of you. Maybe Doyle was right. Maybe they ought to get out when they could. Hurry up loved one, wanna sleep with you here safe to hold... He could hear Doyle moving about in the bathroom, a tap running, the toilet flushing. Be here in a moment.

This is what it's going to be like - maybe forever? Things going wrong, arguments. And then he'll come back. He'll always come back...seems happier than when he left, anyway. Tomorrow, on standby, laze in bed till late, lovin' him, make him feel good...sensual little creature, my Ray...make him forget...

Without even knowing it, Bodie had fallen asleep, his hands closing tight on a frail fantasy.

In the bathroom Doyle crouched in a corner, quivering. One hand was wrapped around his stomach, pressing there; but it was a useless gesture because the gripping cramps were far too strong for anything human to assuage. He was not thinking, just concentrating on survival though the price seemed very high. He could see his own blurred image reflected in the polished black side of the bath, a potpourri of angles and lines, it was shaking. Before he had sunk here, doubled over the agony in his guts, he had been followed by this face in the mirrored tiles that seemed to be everywhere, haunting him with his own white blurred face, the peculiar slant of his too-vivid eyes. Capricious... It was better down here, less to see; but oh christ the pain was bad... He'd had similar reactions before, on other oblivion-seeking trips, but never so intolerable as this.

He could hear his own breathing, harsh and fast; with every indrawn breath an agonising spurt of agony would lance through his entrails. He rested his cheek on his jean-clad knee, inhaling the scent of warm denim and himself, and squeezed his eyes shut. If it went on like this, he'd be crying out, and he didn't, didn't want to put Bodie through this. It had become important to him, the only important thing he had left to cling on to, while his head pounded in sickening waves and the pain inside him clamped and twisted down.

Gasping, as it released him, he noticed the unlocked door. Painfully, he began to reach out for it, but before he had made a foot of the way there were other more pressing urges to be considered. Slow and badly co-ordinated he didn't make it to the bowl in time, but it didn't matter, the terrible heaves racking him were dry, wrenching at his empty stomach in vain.

After that he just lay on the carpet, shivering; wondering dimly if his prediction was going to come true.

Be dead by mornin'.

Bodie woke in daylight. The other side of the bed was unoccupied. He slid a hand into it: cool. He frowned, a quick worried twinge stabbing him, but then he remembered, Doyle had come

home. Been talking to him. Seemed okay. Where, then? He sat up, listening, and to his relief heard the sound of running water. He slid his legs out of bed, picked up his [text missing] and went naked to the bathroom to pee, yawning, as he went.

Doyle was in the shower, barely visible behind the shiny green curtains. That image was firmly engrained in Bodie as both strongly erotic and also unhappy. He closed his mind to it as he planted himself in front of the toilet, turning his head to say, "Mornin', angelfish."

The shower stopped, the curtains swept aside, and Doyle appeared stepping over the edge of the bath. He didn't meet Bodie's eyes as he muttered, "Mornin'."

Bodie finished what he was doing and swung around. Doyle was hauling a towel slowly back and forth over his shoulderblades, eyes shut. His hair was dripping all over the carpet. He looked droopy and half asleep.

"Hey," said Bodie, "You okay?"

Doyle nodded. He was feeling raw and dozy; very slow. "Goin' to bed," he managed dropping the towel, giving up.

Bodie debated for half a second whether to follow him now or go to the kitchen and make coffee first. He followed him, snatching up a dry towel on the way.

"What you doin'?"

"Drying your hair, Prince Neptune; don't fancy you dripping all over me." Bodie thought, amended that. "Depends what it is, of course," he murmured in a low and provocative tone; but Doyle didn't respond, lying with closed eyes but leaning Bodie's way, suffering Bodie's rough ministrations with the towel in silence. The sodden brown twists soon began to fluff up as the moisture was absorbed by the towel.

Bodie tossed the soggy thing aside, lying down close to his mate and pulling up the covers once again.

Doyle was chilled to the touch and damp in places. Bodie rubbed him gently here and there, trying to warm him; ignoring the discomfort of the damp bed. He pulled Doyle closer with hands beneath his armpits, clean hair springing there, and settled them both on his own dry patch.

"So, what happened to you?" he asked lightly. "Didn't come to bed last night?"

Doyle shook his head. He looked fragile this morning, very pale-skinned except for the dark bruising around the eye, his eyelids blue-veined eggshell; and every now and then an immense shiver would seize him and then die away. Getting some bug? Bodie wondered, and kissed each eye in turn, while his hands stroked gently up and down naked skin.

"That must have been some hangover," he commented grimly. To have kept Doyle out in the

bathroom all night...

Doyle yawned; he was finding the warmth and comfort of Bodie's soft velvet skin all around him incredibly soothing to his ragged nerve-ends: his terrible racing tension was beginning to subside, leaving him floating. "Yeah, and without the pleasures of drinkin'," he said, lulled; but there was to be no further peace.

Dopy as he was, he knew what he'd done the moment the words left him.

His eyes flew wide open, which of course was his second mistake.

Bodie had not yet arrived, incredulous, a little amused. "Without the - ? Ah, c'mon mate, when you came in here last night you were as high as a - "

Disbelief stopped him; and tumbled into sick certainty as he gazed down into Doyle's wide dark eyes, the pupils huge and velvety with only a narrow pale ring of green surrounding.

"Oh jesus christ."

He didn't know which of them spoke. Frozen quietude broken, he threw back the covers, seized Doyle's limp unresisting arm, searching the tender white skin of the inner elbow with hard, raking eyes.

Sure enough, over the great blue vein pulsing there was the tiny pinprick mark of self-immolation, of utter betrayal.

Bodie threw the arm down with force. "That your handiwork, is it?" he asked with teeth clenched so hard the muscles in his jaw ached: maybe, just maybe someone had done it to Doyle when he was drunk and incapable and it seemed like a good laugh -

From within the echoes of drugged apathy, Doyle found a measure of bravado. "Yeah," he drawled, looking up with bright eyes, "shootin' up - 's a damn sight more fun than shoot-outs."

The weak pun struck him as funny and he started to chuckle.

Bodie put a stop to that by hitting him.

He felt the flat of his hand make sharp contact with Doyle's cheek, jarring the fluffy head on the damp pillow. Doyle winced; but other than a sharp intake of breath made no further sound. Darkly serious now, he watched Bodie all the time.

Bodie stared back, not seeing the naked battered Doyle that lay limply before him, but a terrible vision of Doyle, alert and in full self-possession, sliding up his shirtsleeve above his elbow, with the needle deftly held in the other hand, finding the spot, sliding the point unflinching into the veins: closing his eyes perhaps, head tipped back, as the rush crept through his blood, enchanting.

Doyle would know how to do all that without even thinking.

He was an expert in drugs, was Doyle; knew his way around the haunts, where to get whatever dope you craved a flirtation with, where to put it when you'd got it. As most CI5 men had, both of them occasionally used drugs, to hype themselves up, to stay awake and one step ahead; or to get down, to relax: speed, downers, poppers, coke. The odd joint of marijuana, which Murphy cultivated lovingly in small brown pots on his window ledge.

But this - injecting himself, 'shooting up' with god knew what junk, alone...this was something quite different.

He stared at Doyle, sick. "I thought you despised this shit, Ray," he said, low. "Ray Doyle, moralistic puritan lecturing the gutter kids to stay clean if they don't wanna end up with their brains turned to mush: oh, that's a right bloody laugh now, isn't it. I just bet the pushers are laughing themselves sick right from here to the Heath. You know," Bodie added, dispassionately, eyes sweeping the naked form with bare contempt, "Tony Jones was wrong about you. He thought you had guts."

That got there. Doyle dropped his eyes.

Bodie asked just one question, harsh and tense.

"How many times?"

The answer came at once, unwavering. "Not before."

Bodie nodded, removing his gaze. He got out of bed and walked over to the window, leaning one arm on the wall and resting his forehead on it, thinking.

Okay, so it wasn't serious - yet. One isolated fling with the big H or whatever it had been - and Bodie didn't care - wasn't going to turn Doyle overnight into another Tin Can. His anger had in fact dissipated the instant he had hit Doyle, leaving him only urgent to rescue this; make it impossible for Doyle to wander down that particular path ever again. Anger wasn't the way. Nor recrimination; making him feel sicker about himself than he already did. Or the heavy-handed approach, blackmail - 'you do that again and that's it, I'm sodding off and leaving you to it.'

Defiance alone would probably push Doyle into it if that was the line Bodie used: he supposed, wearily, that that was exactly what Doyle was expecting. One more trial, another fence go scale; pass this one and the sky's the limit, pass Go, pick up \$200...

He pushed himself away from the wall and turned. When he spoke, his voice was steady and impersonal, as were his eyes, resting on the still figure in the bed. Doyle looked marmoreal; a biered corpse in a mausoleum.

"All right, Ray. I'll take you through heroin, if that's what you want. And I'll bring you out the

other side," he said with unemphasised, pure certainty; "yeah, I wouldn't let you go under. I'd even be able to live with you afterwards, because I love you and that won't change. But you," he pushed the point home, sliding it in like a sliver of glass, "you haven't got that advantage, have you? And I doubt very much you'd be able to live with yourself."

There was a long, still pause while Doyle took it in, his flickering eyes the only indication he had heard. Bodie came back to the bed then, leaning over him, the hard resolute glitter of his eyes fading out. Normality was resuming. He touched Doyle on the shoulder. "All right, mate?"

Doyle looked up at him. His hand came up to grasp the one that rested on his shoulder, pressing it there with iron-clad force. "I wouldn't do it again," was all he said.

"No," Bodie answered him, knowing that neither of them need have spoken.

Then Doyle shut his eyes. "I need you," he said fiercely, hoarsely; and sexual tension sprang up between them.

"Maybe you do," said Bodie, and there was a curve of lazy arrogance in his voice: "but this time, sweetheart, is about what *I* need."

At first, Doyle sought to return Bodie's sexual assault with his own fervour, but he soon eased off, his instincts gathering what Bodie needed; this time, all that was required of Doyle was to surrender. It was not that Bodie was rough with him; he handled him with deft care, but for this one time and once only Bodie was taking what he wanted, concentrating on being good to himself. When he drew Doyle's nipples into his mouth, raking them with his tongue, it was not for Doyle's pleasure but his own, the rough/sweet feel of him intoxicating; likewise the hands that roved and plundered the slighter man's body seeking not to excite him but to transfer sensations to Bodie's own inflamed senses; slick and heated, he pressed himself to Doyle. "So fuckin' sexy," he murmured against Doyle's throat, "you are - "

Doyle was himself desperately aroused by the frenetic urgency, the hard power of the lean male body stirring his to life; swept along with it, he nonetheless experienced an extreme shock when Bodie turned him onto his stomach and knelt over his exposed, vulnerable nudity.

Doyle shut his eyes, waiting. Even this - he had promised Bodie this. Unseen, he sank his teeth into his own forearm.

Bodie paused, staring down at the whipcord body lying passive, under his own sway; and his own upthrusting maleness pointing sharp and threatening from the nest of crisp dark hair at his groin. He sucked in a breath, dropped onto Doyle, fitting himself to his curves, easing in between his buttocks, pressing over warm dry flesh. Impatient, he raised up on one forearm, leaned over Doyle and turned his face to one side with a guiding hand in his curls, cupping his hand beneath his mouth.

"Spit."

"What - ?"

"Spit, damn you," Bodie hissed, not bothering with delicacy, and when Doyle obliged he curved his hand over Doyle, parting him with the other hand and stroked in him with the damp palm. Then he sank back into the enveloping channel, burying himself against Doyle, his breath coming hard and fast against the nape of the other man's neck.

Braced for penetration, Doyle tried to force himself to relax, but only succeeded in clenching up with panic. Fists tangled in the bedding, it took him some moments to assimilate the fact that Bodie was not trying to go into him, was merely fucking the warm dark cleft with long slow strokes, pressing Doyle's buttocks tightly around himself, rubbing over the sensitive depression of the opening to his body, dipping into it but withdrawing before he came to the resistance. Bodie's face was turned into the meeting of neck and shoulder, his breath warm against Doyle's skin, his face screwed up with anguish and ecstasy; "So beautiful," he whispered there, "you're so beautiful, Ray..."

All of Doyle lifted in response, lit with the same fervour. He wriggled, to allow his cramped cock to spring free, ground it down into the yielding bed. Doyle's movements excited Bodie; he slipped his hands around his chest, cradling him close beneath himself, lifting him up, pressing down into the slick soft welcome and holding still: with a choked sob he was coming, the warm bolts of sweetness running freely between Doyle's thighs.

Doyle stiffened with him, catching a breath; but it wasn't - quite - enough, just too soon for him. He let out a wheeze of frustration, his balls knotting in a sharp spasm of intense disappointment, Bodie soft and limp on him, sticky. Mindless, Doyle bit into the pillow.

After a moment Bodie moved away from him and rolled back onto his back, his arm over his eyes, still very much within himself. Accepting that this time he was on his own, even understanding it, Doyle too turned slowly onto his back. He shut his eyes. Beside him Bodie breathed, light and regular. Perhaps he was falling asleep. Drifting, unhurried, Doyle touched his hand to his own skin, stirring whirls in the soft body hair, finding a nipple still damp from Bodie's tongue, fingertip teasing it softly. The tingling shot through him and he drew in a sharp breath, the other hand sliding down himself until it came to his parted thighs, and curled around the warm shaft of flesh, fitting there with knowing ease. He handled himself with unrushed surety, letting the scattered remnants of pleasure slowly gather together once more under the steady, sweet fondling.

Bodie woke only slowly to the awareness of what Doyle was doing. Even then he made no move to take over, merely shifting to one side so he could watch him, pulling down the sheets. As the cold draught of air swept over his glowing skin Doyle slowed the movements of his hands, but he showed no other reaction to Bodie's attention, picking up the slow, rhythmic build towards the end. Though his own orgasm was so recent, Bodie felt an arrow-leap of arousal watching Doyle's face, absorbed by himself, the changing expressions touching it, then passing on as he focussed all his concentration on the inner voice leading him to what felt good, how to hold it - there - make it sweet, let it grow. Bodie leant over him, placed one hand on Doyle's flat chest, gently massaging him; with the other hand he searched out the cleft beneath him, lush with

Bodie's own seed. He watched Doyle's face intently; and as he penetrated him the round features twisted and he made a little whimpering noise, his hand lying still and flat-palmed on himself.

"Go on," Bodie whispered into his ear. "Finish it. Go on. I love you." And he played with him gently, rubbing the nerve-rich sphincter with his thumb until Doyle, wordless and gasping, shuddered convulsively and came, spurting over and over his own stilled careless fingers, Bodie taking his mouth, kissing him with tender bruising force, completing the dual penetration of his body, Doyle helpless in his hands.

When they were peaceful again, Bodie whispered against tender, swollen lips, "How was that? That the way you like it?"

Breathless still, Doyle instantly shook his head. "Too lonely."

You know, thought Bodie amazed, we might actually be getting somewhere.

Lush with sudden love, he settled down beside him, turning them face to face, warm bare skin pressed close. "Too lonely - you're right."

Unasked, Doyle pressed a brief kiss onto the forearm lying beneath his chin. He had his eyes shut; a relaxed sprawl. All the signs were that he was going to sleep.

"Made me a promise, I seem to remember," said Bodie amused, into an ear. "You gonna rape me now, then?"

"Yeah, okay," Doyle yawned, flat out. "Just give me two, three minutes."

"I'll set the alarm."

The clatter of the letterbox which signified the arrival of the newspaper woke Bodie from his semi-doze, with a start as if he had fallen off a cliff. He looked down at the half-doped tousle-haired bundle he held; gave it a little nudge.

"We better shower, Oliver Twist. So high in here I can hardly breathe."

Doyle barely stirred, only to snuggle down further in the bed. "Nah. Need some kip."

Bodie looked down at the relaxed form, taking in the little lines of stress tightening the skin around his closed eyes, the shadows of exhaustion in the hollows of his face.

"Bad night, huh," he said softly. There was a silence. Then:

"Yeah," said Doyle, muffled.

"You bloody idiot," said Bodie roughly, because he wanted too much to be soft, "you should have called me."

"You couldn't have done anything."

"Still a bloody idiot."

Again silence. Then Doyle gave a little smile into his pillow, his lip curling back; the chipped tooth curiously attractive. It was funny, Bodie thought as he watched him, every flaw Doyle had, managed to lend him a little extra unconscious charm. Or maybe it was just that Bodie was in love.

Doyle said: "I bet you wonder why the bloody hell you got yourself into this."

"Only sometimes," Bodie told him; and his eyes said much, much more as he ruffled still-drying curls and left him to sleep.

It was strange, but Bodie knew beyond doubt at that moment that the worst was behind them.

Premonition being two-faced, he was, of course, quite wrong.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Going for the Shore - Part II

Sebastian

Bodie, not so much reluctantly as with resignation, did the housework, shoving the Hoover and even moving the furniture - Doyle, impatient, would skim around it - and cleaned the kitchen.

It was an unremarkable flat, spacious but not luxurious. He, at least, had been saving quite a lot of money lately as Doyle must have been; their social expenses had dropped dramatically, they were only using one car and were halving one lot of rent. It was hardly worth improving this place on the excess cash and neither did Bodie fancy letting it all build up on paper in some impersonal bank account; life was just too uncertain for that. Might as well enjoy its material comforts while you could; no heirs now and never would be.

No, Bodie resolved, it was time to look around for somewhere better. A service flat, perhaps, in a not-too-classy area - Knightsbridge was out - but something more unusual, more luxurious; take out a mortgage, bank loan, something like that. Bodie fancied something on different levels - big living room, cushioned pit maybe, sunken bath even, Persian rugs; classic and beautiful. After all, some people managed to support a wife and four kids on half the salary he was getting, so he supposed he could give Doyle a bit more comfort. Untrammelled by jeans, Doyle was an exotic creature who deserved surroundings to match. Yes, Bodie would start looking around. A shared, big investment, too; another bit of security for Ray. Pleased with his little secret, he checked on Doyle before leaving to do the shopping.

The exotic creature was lying on his stomach, head turned to one side on the pillow, one knee drawn up. Bodie experienced a shiver as he visualised the form lying beneath the covering sheet; a living sculpture in warm honey, tapering curves and planes of warm, scant flesh, easily stirred: he could rouse all the tiny hairs of Doyle's skin with the application of one fingertip down the hobbled hollows of his spine. Bodie smiled, involuntarily, then abruptly the smile faded, the horror of the morning still too close. Over now, thank god. Poor little sod. Really cut up about Jones for some reason; what went on there I never saw? Nearly lost him today, but we got there in the end, sorted it out. And then I -

Sorry, sunshine. Left you out on the edge, didn't I?

He crossed to the bed quietly, stood looking down at the sleeping face, eggshell eyelids laid shut. Doyle had more purity, less sensuality in sleep.

Do better for you later on, he promised silently, and bent to brush a kiss on the side of his mouth.

"Back soon, sweetheart," and Doyle didn't stir, but his senses took the gentle touch and bound it into his dreams.

Bodie took the car - somehow unfazed as confirmed bachelors have to be about the sexual stereo-typing of household chores, he still disliked carrying home bags of shopping - and loaded it with enough food and other necessities to withstand a small siege. It was now after midday. He unpacked all that, put chops and large scrubbed potatoes into the oven because it would cook itself and Doyle would likely be starved when he awoke; had a sandwich, a coffee, while he glanced rapidly through the newspaper as he stood up against the breakfast bar.

Alarmingly loud in the peace of the flat, the phone went, and he nearly ruptured something trying to get to it before it woke Doyle.

It was Murphy.

"Oh, christ," groaned Bodie, "Not callin' us in, are you, Murph? 'cause I'm telling you here and now - "

"You got Doyle there?" Murphy's voice came over brisk, tinny.

"Yes," said Bodie cautiously, senses springing alert.

Murphy was hurrying, now. "That's okay, then. Saw him last night, that's why I called in case you're wondering. Running a bit wild, he was, and I didn't see you anywhere around. Just wanted to check he got home all right. Okay?"

Bodie was rather touched by that, the other agent's brusque concern. On the whole, he and Doyle tended to be left well alone. "Thanks for worrying."

The response was immediate. "I didn't. That's your department." But the concern was real, the motivations sincere. Bodie felt warmed by Murph; he was the closest thing to a friend they had. It made him want to say a little more; to explain.

He cradled the phone in his hand, glanced round. The bedroom door was shut. "He was cut up about Jones," he said in a low voice. He wondered just what Murphy had seen; not Doyle soliciting the services of a pusher, certainly, or he would have intervened. 'Running wild'; well, that could mean anything.

There was a pause. "About Tony? I thought there was little enough love lost there," said Murphy grimly, having to put up with weeks of Jones' strongly verbalised distrust of Doyle.

Bodie hesitated, not knowing how much to say. "They were getting on okay yesterday."

There was another pause as Murphy searched Bodie's words for enlightenment; finding little, he said, "Well, that's good. Tony'd have been glad. He had this idea Ray was a kind of cross between de Sade and Hitler."

"He changed his mind," was all Bodie said.

Suddenly, Murphy knew; more clearly than if Bodie had used a hundred words. "Well, thass good. Glad about that. Didn't like to think of him dying with that on his mind. What happened out there yesterday? Never got a chance to see the reports." That wasn't true. But the reports had told him little, about just how his partner had died.

Bodie sighed and went for the truth. "Were out in the open; seemed like the whole thing was over. Doyle was on the roof, covering us. Two of the bastards came out from nowhere and what the hell could Doyle do? We were both dead. He only had time to make one shot. I was okay; Tony wasn't."

Seeing it all behind the bleak words, Murphy said, testing a little, "Well, in a way...that was lucky for you. And," he added, "for Doyle."

Bodie gripped the phone tightly. "Doyle didn't seem to see it that way," he said softly; and regretted it. Unfair, so bloody unfair... to let his own unreasoning hurt make him misrepresent Doyle's actions so -

It was too late. In the silence Murphy had tied up ends, made connections, unravelling just why Ray Doyle had been out there bent on self-destruction last night. His voice when it came was forceful. "Jesus Christ, Bodie. I wouldn't want your set-up, not for a million quid. McCabe's right about Doyle. He needs his bloody head examined, and a good kick up the backside."

Bodie smiled, wryly amused by Murph's vehemence and touched by the implications of it. Something he had never before realised, fell unsurprised into place...

"And a ritual flayin' at dawn? Nah," he demurred softly. "What he needs - is a good night's sleep. He's exhausted."

Noting the hesitation, Murphy knew only that he would never be privy to what Bodie had been going to say; that that was part of Bodie's life with Ray Doyle. Determination rose hotly in him; white-knuckled, he said all in a rush, "If you ever decide to get out - "

"Yes?" prompted Bodie, after a hectic pause.

But Murphy, who was fiercely shy and proud in his inner self, ducked out of it at the last moment. " - I know a nice young lass'd be just right for you. Eyes of blue, 38, 24 - "

Respecting that evasion, and in a way grateful for it, Bodie said, "I'm too old, Murph."

Regret, relief. Murphy stared at the wall ahead. After a moment, he said, "I mean it. You're worth ten of him. Don't let him screw up your life. That's all I'm gonna say."

Embarrassment met up with something else rising in Bodie and lost out without a fight. "Wait a minute, Murph - "

"What?" Murph was also thoroughly embarrassed by all he had said, and by more that he had not, and was keen to get away and submerge the memory as fast as possible. "C'mon, get on with it, I got things to do."

"About Doyle. He's - all right. You don't know him like I do. He's a tricky bastard, yeah, but - "

" - he's all right," completed Murph, resigned. "Yeah, with you, 3.7."

"Over and out, 6.2"

"ang on, Bodie. You still there? Stuart's called choir practice. Usual time. Be there."

"Oh, god," groaned Bodie, and he put down the phone.

In the bedroom, Doyle still slept. Stripping quickly, Bodie slid, chilled, into the space beside him, curling limbs around the bare hot skin.

"I'm awake," came a deep growl from somewhere.

"Oh, good."

Doyle rolled lazily onto his back within Bodie's encircling arms.

Foggy with sleep, he yawned very widely, jaw cracking with the strain of it; sniffed a few times, rubbed his eyes, cleared his throat: all part of the Doyle early morning, face-the-world routine.

Bodie slid a flat-palmed hand slowly from cheek to navel, fingers curling around the warm hardness he found there, up and taut over Doyle's belly.

"Always wake up hard, you do," he murmured amused, rolling his hand in a sensuous circle. "What did you do before you 'ad me? Eh?" His teeth snapped an earlobe. Doyle had a warm sleepy smell about him which Bodie found more arousing than pure soap and water. "Come on, confess. What did you do?"

"Jerk off," said Doyle, casually honest, his eyes still closed. His back arched, pressing his sex

upwards against Bodie's hand; he stretched, from flexing shoulders to the tips of curling toes, knuckles rubbing into his eyes, making a high-pitched noise in the back of his throat. Creaking gates. Bodie grinned, and trailed his tongue-tip to his jawline, was prickled by the stubble there, bluish beneath the pale smooth skin of his cheek.

Down at the other end, he threaded his fingers through the springy body hair, brushing the tender nestlings within.

"Go and get shaved," he said from the vast superiority of one smooth-skinned and fragrant.

"What, down there?" said Doyle lazily. "Thass a bit kinky, innit?" He arched again, clenching his buttocks together; Bodie raised his palm a little to let the round tip of Doyle's cock nudge there, into his cupped hand.

"Get up," he said into his ear, "I'm giving the orders around here today."

And at the same time he withdrew his hand; sliding it up and around.

Doyle's eyes came open then, wide with startled disappointment. Bodie was looking under the covers, at the rosy harness of Doyle's sex; it gave a tiny twitch and then another, blindly seeking the pleasure that had been so abruptly curtailed, totally [without] Doyle's command.

"That's cruel," Doyle said flatly, following Bodie's gaze downwards.

"Maybe I'm a sadist?" Bodie offered, the fingers smoothing down Doyle's soft-haired sinewy forearm giving it the lie.

"Well, no point lying round here chatting all day?" Doyle was on his knees in a bound, eyes lit with a flash of reluctant laughter, leaning over him. Bodie bit the soft inner thigh close to his face; Doyle's eyes fell instantly shut, and expression of absorbed pleasure stealing over his face as he tilted his chin back, steadying himself with one hand pressed to the headboard.

All Bodie's resolve to get him clean and shaved first melted away, lost beneath the sudden swelling urge to take all that hopeful attentive need into himself and make it good for him, make it up to him, hell of a time he's had these last days -

He turned, slipping one arm around Doyle, pressing him down again.

"Hey." Doyle, summarily brought down, pushed at his shoulders.

"Ssh," Bodie murmured, nudging his cheek over the warm soft-hard swell of Doyle's sex, "changed my mind. Like you this way." He opened his mouth, let his tongue flick over the salty tip. Doyle pushed on his shoulders again; for some reason he was always on edge when Bodie tried this, always restless, pulling Bodie up the bed as soon as he could capture him. Just personal preference, Bodie had wondered? Or something more behind it?

"Lie still," he said, mouth moving against silk-over-steel - for whatever instinct it was in Doyle that moved him to reject this particular sexual caress, his body betrayed him every time, as it was doing now, lifting and searching for Bodie's playful tongue. He parted Doyle's thighs firmly with strong thumbs; pillowed his head on the curved thigh.

Doyle twisted in his grasp, testing the restraint.

"Let me," Bodie said, low. "Ray, let me. Please."

Doyle met his eyes. He looked hunted and desperate, almost feverish with desire and turmoil. He didn't move.

Bodie ran his hand over the pale curved buttock presented to him, the skin roughened with goose-bumps; without warning he struck at it, snakelike, and bit him sharply. Doyle made a small sound and moved instinctively; but he said nothing.

Bodie considered the scarlet oval of abuse imprinted on white skin; soothed it with fingertips to lave away the tiny hurt.

"Sometimes it's like dealing with a rescue case from the animal shelter," said Bodie absently, eyes intent on his brand; then they lifted, sharp tender blue, to catch Doyle's gaze retreating too late.

"All right, Ray, what is it this time? Someone once hurt you really bad did they, is that it? Get nipped in a tender place?"

Doyle sniffed loudly into the ensuing silence, rubbed his nose with one hand and pushed himself into a sitting position. Bodie let him go, gracefully; let the bare limbs slide upwards through his hands.

Doyle crossed his legs yoga-style, curly head bowed as he appeared to contemplate his own navel. Bodie rolled so he could rest his chin on the confluence of Doyle's ankles; finding it a bony unwelcoming, he turned his cheek so it rested on the softer calf, blowing gently to stir the down-drift of hair there.

"C'mon, sweetheart," he encouraged, voice soft, velvetdark with gentle promise of mystery. "Let me do it for you, I won't hurt you, don't get off on hurting you, you should bloody well know that by now. I wanna do it for you 'cause it's such a - such a sweet feelin', Ray , and I want you to have that... "

The echo of that trailed off as Bodie, listening to it, wondered wryly how that would jar on Doyle, who did not respond to sentiment.

Then, unexpectedly, the hard tense set of Doyle's face softened; he reached out and touched his hair, thin strong fingers twining in feathery dark.

"Bet it would be, with you..."

And Bodie, startled, met eyes which had lost their winter; now they were drifting, dreamy. It struck him that Doyle was still drugged, a little doopey, a little stoned with strangeness; his head tipped a little to one side as if he had forgotten to lift it, his expression a conflation of blurry, easily readable emotions. Unfair to take advantage of him -

"Come on, dreamer," he said, resigned, abandoning all enticement; "Get back in the warm and sleep it off. Lotus eating has its price, y'know."

Doyle shook his head. He raised one arm, rubbed it through the curls at the nape of his neck; decidedly flirtatious but soft, drowsy, with it. Almost irresistible: but Bodie had come a long way since the dark forbidden magic weaved in secret, snatched at least it disappear.

"Oh, no. You need sleep. Now will you lie down," and Bodie's lifted eyes were mercilessly tender, ruthless with love, "or shall I make you?"

Doyle did so, quite suddenly. He looked down at Bodie who was propped on an elbow at the foot of the bed and, unexpectedly, smiled. Doyle was not the smiley type; the times he showed his pointed white teeth it was more likely to be in a snarl. But this was a smile all right, unselfconscious; he looked like a ragged-haired street urchin, off school, in bed with a cold, difficult but appealing, raffish. He said, his voice warm through the smile, "I want to fuck you."

"Promises," Bodie grumbled lightly, "you're all promises. Told me that in the middle of the night you did, and look what happens?"

"I want to fuck you," insisted the urchin, wanton and undisciplined with narcotics.

Bodie's heart jolted, though he kept his face calm. Fear and excitement had lifted him; Doyle trailed his gaze down to the upthrusting cock from the nest of black curls which graced Bodie's elegant groin.

"That scare you?" he asked curiously.

Bodie dodged it. Of course it scared him; on an instinctive level below thought, the idea would scare anybody. That didn't mean he didn't want it. Doyle could see that, surely.

"Does it look like it?" He trapped Doyle's hand, pressed it to himself, encouraging the cool fingers to squeeze him.

"Fright, you know, it take people different ways," Doyle said, eyes closing thoughtfully as he concentrated on handling Bodie, barely malleable, warm smooth skin stretched over the rigidity within. "Jones, remember, got to him in the guts. Me, it makes me hard. First hint of danger, when you know this is it, the bullets with your name on are gonna fly, let rip any second and you have to run out there into 'em, first bloody prickle of terror runs down my spine and up it goes." He opened his eyes and grinned again.

Bodie had to laugh. "You're in a disgustin' mood, you are."

"I don't disgust you," said Doyle, and the total conviction in that sobered Bodie, made him think.

He said after a moment, "No, you don't. Whatever you do... Want to tie me up, Ray? Force me? Want me to? Or, let's get really heavy: pissing games, rape? You name it and I'll try it, with you. But you - " and Bodie's voice was soft, a lilt in the menace as he stroked a curved fingertip over Doyle's exposed, vulnerable Adam's apple, "what do I do, for you?"

Doyle's eyes dropped, like Bodie's, all laughter gone, leaving only the light of intensity, a thin glittering line beneath dark lashes. "You? You - mystify me."

"I thought I scared you."

But Doyle was beyond comprehending mockery, remembering old quotes from times gone; he was living for now alone. "Yeah, that too. But you mystify me because I couldn't do what you do. If I were you, I'd have walked out on me a long time ago."

"It's easy for you to say that," said Bodie slowly. "All seems very odd to you, I daresay; but you see, you can't think yourself into me because it isn't the same for you." Love made such a difference: altered perception, motivation, like a catalyst. But Doyle would not understand that. "If you felt the way I do, you'd understand." He offered it as a simple fact, no reproach, no plea for contradiction.

Doyle's hand shot out; gripped him like steel. "You think so much," he said steadily. "And you get it all wrong."

There was a pause.

"I don't get much help," Bodie said with equal balance, holding his eyes.

Doyle dropped his. "I know." He looked as if he were about to say more.

Possessed by a sudden dread that Doyle might be moved, at this too-rare moment of understanding, to offer him falsehoods, Bodie cut him off.

"Don't lie to me," he said. "Don't ever lie, Ray. That, I couldn't take."

"Would you lie to me?" Doyle shot back at him, suddenly bruisingly fierce.

Bodie stared, off-key. "Of course not."

"Then don't - don't say that to me again. We're not that different, Bodie."

Repentant of his lack of trust, Bodie kissed him, offering wordless apology.

Doyle kissed him back, hands slipping round Bodie's head, cradling his skull, fingertips stroking his ears. Then he held him away, eyes lazy, tender as he searched Bodie face. With his index finger he slowly traced the outline of the other man's mouth, with absorbed care. "I'll let you do anything you want," he said, and Bodie understood him perfectly.

It had, however, the tang of future promise about it. Drugged on sweetness alone, for now, he let it ride. Doyle's eyes widened; hands stilling. "What's that smell?"

"I said you should have showered; but I can live with it."

Doyle sat up, urgent, stomach reaching out in a surging wave for the promise wafting on the air. Nothing solid had reached it for 24 hours.

"Bodie, I'm starving. Ravenous. Gotta eat."

"They won't be done yet," said Bodie amused, recalling the chops. He too sniffed the air, caught the lush scent of roasting meat spitting fat and hot potato skin. He flicked up a glance at the clock on the wall - automatic now; it had been weeks since he had looked first towards the bedside, and he had not noticed the change. "Or - you might be in luck, sunshine. I'll go and stick a fork in 'em, see if they're tender."

Doyle was pushing back the bedcovers, animated with the need for sustenance.

"I'm hurt," said Bodie who was in fact delighted to see Doyle for once so enthusiastic about food, and pleased with himself for having the forethought to take care of it in advance, "Spurned, again."

"I'll get back to you," avowed Doyle vanishing, "but I gotta eat, my guts're twisting up."

"Choir practice tonight," Bodie called after him; but there was no reply, Doyle being bent on more basic needs.

Things were different. Perhaps better.

Bodie rose from the bed, pulled on a robe and went leisurely to join his mate.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

The Homecoming *Part 3 of the Adagio series*

Bodie brought the car to a rest by the roadside, easing it in behind the similar one Doyle had left there that morning when he'd arrived at Bodie's flat; lifting his hands off the wheel in a little gesture of relief. They were both tired; it had been a long fruitless day, driving almost non-stop in pursuit of a tip-off which had eventually proved false. Not the kind of day to bring out the best in two action-ready CI5 agents; but for all of that, Bodie thought as he looked over at his unshaven, tousle-headed partner leaning idly back, one white-booted foot up on the map shelf, Doyle had stayed sweet-tempered throughout, calming Bodie down with easy words when that volatile gentleman's frustrations threatened to explode.

"Here you are then, sunshine. Not quite door to door transport, but not bad eh?"

"Me stomach's still somewhere back on the MI; otherwise, yeah, not bad..."

Doyle didn't seem inclined to move. A tiny spark of hope kindled itself in Bodie's mind but he did nothing, didn't allow it to grow. He looked out into the dark, himself reluctant to leave the warmth of the car. It was icy cold, and no stars could be seen; that would have been all they needed, he mused, recognising the signs: snow hurtling against the windscreen to compound the numerous annoyances of the day.

Six months, half a year ago...then he'd have reached out a hand to Doyle now without a second thought, and Doyle would have looked up, tilting that wide slow smile at him, half shy; and they would have gone in together side by side. Different flat now from the one they had briefly shared. Different every thing.

Doyle studied the lacing of his ankle boot. "Got any beer up there?"

Not a muscle of Bodie's face showed his sudden tension as he said easily, "For you? Always, sunshine. C'mon up."

Doyle paced around the new flat slowly, taking it in. He hadn't been in before, not for a proper look around. It was pleasant enough, furnished rather more luxuriously than the last, and was slightly larger. All very tidy. Not very lived-in, yet. He wound up in the living-room, crouched on his heels and flipped through the rack of LPs, coming across one he recognised as his own which had clearly been overlooked when he'd moved out. He dusted it off, set on the turntable and laid on the stylus. The gentle strains of Albinoni filtered into the room.

Bodie, entering with two pints of lager, twisted his face into a comical grimace. "Bit funereal, isn't it?"

"Nah, just needs someone sensitive to appreciate it," answered Doyle, reaching out a hand for the proffered glass. "Cheers, mate."

"Cheers." Bodie remained standing. "You fancy something to eat? Me, I'm famished." Also, he had reasoned to himself, an unfed Doyle might take off for his own place the minute he finished his drink.

"You would be." Doyle checked his watch. Nearly ten. Hours since they'd eaten, and then it had only been a hurried sandwich bought from a roadside caf and put down in the car. "Yeah, wouldn't mind."

"Like what?"

Doyle stretched out, kicking off his boots with relief, curling and uncurling his toes. He placed his hands behind his head and considered. "Rice," he said dreamily, "...and prawns. Rice, prawns and nice chilled glass of Montrachet."

Behind him, Albinoni reached dizzying heights of stereo mournfulness. He was waiting for Bodie to snort some sarky comment about having beans and liking it; but the silence finally got through. He opened his eyes to find Bodie gone.

He was in the kitchen, squatting, busily unearthing half-forgotten packets from a box he hadn't got around to sorting out yet. A bedraggled bag of rice with an incongruous peg on top was in one hand; the other was in the process of extricating a rusty-looking can. He heard Doyle's entrance and sat back on his heels, triumphant. "Knew I had some somewhere. Shrimps; they're just the same. But smaller," he explained.

Doyle stared down, hands on hips, about to throw his head back and let fly a rip-snorting blast of laughter. Bodie looked so ridiculously pleased with himself.

He stopped himself instantly; gave himself a severe mental shake, because he suddenly knew it was not funny, not funny at all, this big hard fighting man squatting on his heels seriously trying to do something which would please him, Ray Doyle. And he had only been going to respond with a jeer, a self-satisfied smirk to have successfully got Bodie going, that was all.

He had been quick enough to accuse Bodie, during the disastrous storm they had shakily ridden,

and come through into a tenuous calm, of not trying hard enough in the difficult field of learning to adapt, to be supportive and positive towards the person one loved and was trying to learn to live with. And here he himself had been about to tread heartlessly on one of Bodie's hopeful, almost pathetic gestures of reconciliation. He knew Bodie was crazy about him, hopelessly in love though God alone knew why and he knew how hard Bodie had been trying these past weeks not to push, clinging on tightly to his self-control so as not to demand of Doyle too much too soon. He knew too, about Bodie's continual battle not to be resentful, not to burst out with accusations that Doyle didn't feel the same about him as he did about Doyle. What he most definitely didn't need was Doyle fuelling that feeling of imbalance by mocking his generosity.

So he grinned, cheerfully enough, and said, "Nice thought. But save it for a celebration, shall we mate? Sure to be something to celebrate soon enough. I make a great rice a la Milanese. This time of night I'll settle for cheese on toast."

"Cheese give you bad dreams," said Bodie, scowling, not sure whether or not he'd been sent up. At least he was now sure he'd been sent up; it was Doyle's gentle reaction causing his unease. The last thing he wanted was Doyle's pity. If that ever happened, Doyle pitying him, he'd get out, he swore fiercely to himself. Once and for all. His moody dark gaze passed over Doyle, taking him in: Doyle was standing there, asking for it as usual with the aggressively masculine stance that Bodie found so startlingly sensual, the light casting shadows on the flawed beauty of his features, picking out bronze highlights in the curly hair.

"Not tonight, it won't," said Doyle softly, holding his eyes.

After a breath, Bodie nodded and stashed the bag and tin away. He began cutting slices of bread, Doyle took over the cheese, and ten minutes later they were sitting down to a plateful of bubbling golden cheese-on-toast.

Doyle pushed his plate aside at last, brushing the crumbs from his shirt and leaning back. "Better," he acknowledged; and took a long draught of his beer.

Bodie was up in a bound, collecting his plate. Albinoni had long since concluded his haunting strains, and when he returned from the kitchen he took it off the turn table, replaced it carefully in its sleeve and held it out. "Yours, isn't it? Want to take it with you?"

Dangerous question, although very simple at face value. Apparently Bodie was still brooding. "Nope, it's OK. You're hardly bloody likely to wear it out anyway judgin' by your reaction to it," he said with an easy grin, rising to his feet. He had spotted on the carved white mantelpiece beneath the mirror one Christmas card, a jolly red Santa cheerily waving a bunch of mistletoe and clearly on the verge of uttering the immortal line "Ho, ho, ho." It was only ten days till Christmas, and the card stood out merely because it was the solitary concession to the festive season around. Still, looking at Bodie hard and smooth and dark, one could see that he wasn't the sort many people would put top of their lists as susceptible to the fripperies of the season. He picked it up, idly. The message read: 'Thinking of you fondly at this time of year, Hope your Xmas is a good one with lots and lots of cheer,' and it was signed 'Marie, xx.'

"You had many yet?" he said rather awkwardly because he hadn't meant to pry. "Cards, that is," he added.

"Nah," said Bodie. "Never get any, as a rule."

He seemed not at all nonplussed, so Doyle replaced the card and sat down.

"You make any plans for Christmas yet?" he asked, casually.

"Christmas; what's that?" snorted Bodie, turning the album over in his hand. "The ol' man'll see to it we never find out."

"Oh, I dunno. He told me we were gettin' five days off."

Bodie stared, amazed. "He actually categorically stated that -- ?"

Doyle confirmed it with a nod.

"-- in writing?" pressed Bodie.

Doyle smiled, shook his head. He watched his partner, smooth-haired and unsmiling, in the wrinkled brown shirt that always looked as if he'd slept in it, and made a mental note to urge Bodie to use it up as a duster.

"Presumin', then that Cowley doesn't need us on hand to save the civilised-world-as-we-know-it from some impending disaster, what are you planning on doing?"

Bodie reached for another can, snapped the ring-pull. He got up and poured some into Doyle's lazily proffered glass. "Stick around here, see a few shows maybe. I dunno. Nothing special."

"I thought I might move in on you over Christmas," said Doyle, lightly. "What d'you think?"

Bodie was flopping back down into the plush velvet armchair across from Doyle's, clearly a little tense, though he met Doyle's eyes. "Yeah. OK. Why not?"

Suddenly the tension was gone; it was easy, like it had been before, for too short a time. That was all they needed, Doyle thought as they smiled at each other; just time... "Bring mine with me," he said, indicating the cards. "Brighten the place up a bit."

"More Santas?" said Bodie gently, because he was happy.

"Pine trees and drunk reindeer as variation. Who is Marie, anyway? Or shouldn't I ask?"

Bodie's mouth turned down at the corners. He looked inscrutable. Well, Doyle thought with a surprising pang; he'd hardly expected Bodie to be celibate over the weeks of their semi-separation. Or had he expected just that? He smiled, anyway, because it didn't matter. "S'OK.

Whoever she is --" he glanced up suddenly, from beneath his eyelashes with a little, mysterious smile -- "let's see if I make you forget her. Give me the chance to try."

Bodie looked frowning and uncertain. Lying back Doyle let his arms fall away from his sides, relaxed and sensuous as a cat, the sexual invitation clear.

"Don't play with me, Doyle," said Bodie, very low, a husky warning.

Doyle allowed one eyebrow to rise, slowly; refusing to go Bodie's obdurate way. "O..K...Then you play -- with me." He smiled; provocative and mischievous.

Bodie was there at his side, kneeling; the hunger in his eyes undisguised, his weariness forgotten. He slid his hands under Doyle; and stopped.

"Go on," said Doyle, watching him through half-closed eyes.

"What?"

"I thought you were going to try carryin' me off to bed."

"Think I couldn't?" growled Bodie, deep in his throat.

"Believe it when I see it."

But for all that, he made himself very pliant, very amenable as Bodie lifted him, swung him off the chair in strong arms; and as his own arms went around Bodie's neck, he tipped his head back on his partner's shoulder, exposing the long hollows of his throat, the chain that glinted there. Unable to help himself, halfway to the bedroom Bodie stopped.

"Whassa matter, tiring?" murmured Doyle; but he didn't open his eyes, shivering a little when Bodie's mouth touched the sensitive skin of his throat, tracing a delicate pattern there with gentle lips. "Mmmn -- don't stop that, it's nice --"

Bodie found he was beginning to lose his balance. Lifting his head with reluctance, he completed the journey to the bedroom and threw his precious burden unceremoniously onto the bed.

Doyle whooshed in surprise, his eyes flying open as he thudded unexpectedly down. "Be gentle, mate."

Bodie stilled his harsh breathing instantly, slamming a hold on his emotions; on the strong urge to rip the clothes off his maddeningly provocative, smaller mate; wrap him in his arms, and fuck him rigid.

"Or not," backtracked Doyle quickly, not having intended his light remark to cramp Bodie's style. "Be rough, if that's what you want." He smiled up wickedly; and punched the air with

mock-heavy scowl on his face, right hook, left, right again --

"Don't tempt me," Bodie let out from between clenched teeth. He meant it. had been so long; he was pent-up with tension and seriously afraid of what he might do if he lost control; and he could not bear the thought of hurting Doyle, losing his fragile new trust once again, because he would surely get no more chances if he blew this one. He began to undo his shirt, keeping his back to the bed; buying time.

Doyle sat up, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and also began to undress, thoughtful. He was at a loss to know how to play this; he knew instinctively that Bodie needed, wanted to be more aggressive in bed at least some of the time, and yet for some conflicting reason he was reluctant, even unable to be. Doyle didn't have the experience to deal with it; there were no such problems with a woman, at least not the ones Doyle had known -- there, who played which role was written in the rules from the start. But in any case, he didn't want that for himself and Bodie; he wanted them to share everything, to try everything without any inhibitions; no secret fantasy left unexplored. And here was Bodie falling at the first fence. Not that he was a disappointment - - he was, as Doyle had expected, as passionate and sensual as Doyle himself, and Doyle found his love-making exciting, more exciting than anything he'd ever known. But it was always the same -- whenever Doyle made gentle hints with his body, his attitude, even his words, that indicated he was receptive, submissive, it seemed to freeze Bodie up.

I don't know, Doyle thought in exasperation, staring at Bodie's back, I could sit here all night and try to rationalise it by spouting guff about him doubtin' his own self-image and all that psycho-analytical claptrap, and I still wouldn't be any nearer findin' out what makes him tick...

I want him to have what he wants. But how can I give it to him if he's too scared by it to let go? Plenty of time, he soothed himself; don't push. Don't push -- he'd said that often enough to Bodie, about other things. Made no difference that Bodie's personal hang-up seemed to be a sexual one while Doyle's was an inner reluctance to abandon his hard-won, carefully built-up independence.

You'd think it would be the other way round, he thought to himself; bet that's what Cowley thinks... The thought amused him and he gave a little chuckle. Bodie turned, startled, and Doyle realised that Bodie hadn't heard one word of the things on his mind; was still out on a limb alone fighting whatever devil it was he had conjured into being. He finished undressing, quickly, and rose, reaching out for Bodie, sliding cool arms around warm flesh, hugging Bodie tight in a loving, protective gesture, regretful of the long silence; wanting to make it good for him, wanting him to know there was nothing to be afraid of --

"Whatever you want," he said softly, close to Bodie's ear. "Don't worry about it. Just relax; ease up. It'll all come right..."

"Will it?" said Bodie, low.

"Yeah," said Doyle with absolute, final conviction. "I've got this feelin'."

Doyle grinned. He studied Bodie's face very deliberately, sweeping a provocative eye over every

inch of it; and he locked his wrists behind Bodie's neck, arching his spine and leaning back on the support of Bodie's hands around his waist. The tip of hard upthrusting maleness was revealed, captured there between their close-pressed bellies.

"This one," Doyle told him lazily, "can't go wrong."

Doyle backheeled the door to the flat shut, his arms loaded with overflowing carrier bags, and hefted them into the kitchen, dropping them on to the table with a sigh. One drooped to one side instantly and he rescued it, pulling out the precious bottle of Dom Perignon and setting it carefully to one side; likewise the two bottles of scotch. The rest could wait; it was cold outside, he'd had a long tiring trail around the shops and he was desperate for a cup of tea. He put the kettle on and while he was waiting for it to boil, he took from his pocket the sheaf of letters he'd collected without inspecting on a brief mail stop at his presently unoccupied apartment. He flipped through them quickly, whistling; bill, publicity Christmas card from the leatherwear shop, leaflet from the milkman --

He stared at the next, startled silent as he saw the postmark of a London suburb; recognised the handwriting. The kettle was beginning to whistle, at first a plaintive whine, then really getting up steam, a loud anguished howl demanding his attention. He got up absently, still staring at the cheap white envelope he held, turned off the gas; and ripped it open.

He was still holding the letter when he heard the door open, and a moment later Bodie came in, grumbling vociferously and noisily about the crowds and the cold, dropping the laundry bags onto the floor.

"Reckon you got the easy option, mate. The woman wasn't there so I 'ad to do it myself, two bloody machines of it, and somebody's towel ran --" he rummaged in the bag, mournfully held up a pair of streaked roseate underpants for Doyle's inspection.

"Too hot a wash," responded Doyle absently. "You should use a cool one for a mixed load like that..."

Bodie had noticed his abstraction and had forgotten the laundry. He was then behind him, his hands on Doyle's shoulders, his head bent over him. "What's up, mate?"

Bodie still had the scent of the crisp night on him; and his hands were cold. Doyle reached up to cover them with his own, not really conscious of what he was doing. "Nothing much." He met Bodie's frowning dark gaze and shrugged indicating the letter he had thrown onto the table.

"Bad news?" said Bodie from between compressed lips.

"Read it. I'm gettin' a drink." He pulled away from Bodie and took off for the living room.

Bodie watched him go. Then he picked up the letter from among the various groceries spilling out onto the table and stared at the hand-written sheet. After the first few words, his eyes scanned quickly down to the signature; then returned to the top and read on.

Dear Ray,

It's been such a long time since I heard anything from you. I expect you lead a busy life. It would be nice to know that you're all right and happy. I have been in the hospital lately for an operation. It was then I began thinking that life is short and whatever the past I would like us to forget it, if you were willing. I'm having Karen and Stan for Christmas and if you could possibly find the time to come and stay for a few days we'd all be glad to see you. It would make me very happy. It's never seemed really Christmas without you.

If you're too busy to manage that, then please just find time to drop me a card or telephone. I would like to know that you're all right.

We are all well dear except as I say I have had some troubles but hopefully they are all behind me now.

Best wishes from your ever-loving mother.

RitaBodie read it through again, no expression visible on his face. Finally he put it down and went into the living room.

Doyle was standing by the window, a glass in his hand, staring out. Chillingly, it reminded Bodie --

He put his hands on Doyle's waist, got him away from the window and settled beside him on the couch. "Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?" Doyle turned a maddeningly cool eye on him.

Bodie was not best placed to deal with this; he didn't understand families, nor mother-son ties, but he could see well enough from the way this was affecting Doyle that it had stirred one of his guilt complexes. "When d'you last see her?"

Doyle dropped his head, fiddling with his glass, elbows on his knees. Bodie stared at the nape of his neck; he reached out and touched it with one finger as Doyle answered, "Not since I joined CI5."

"She didn't like it?"

Doyle glanced up, angrily. "She thinks I'm hooked on violence. She thinks CI5 is the way I've found to carry it out legally. She's always thought that..."

Bodie didn't ask any stupid questions, like whether Doyle had tried to explain or not. Right enough, he didn't understand families, but he knew all too well the problems one faced trying to bring it home to ordinary god-fearing, violence-abhorring citizens that like it or not, there were times, too many of them, when men were needed who could kill, seeing the necessity of it; could

use merciless violence to stop more of the same.

"Well," he said quietly, "Isn't true, is it."

Bodie slid an arm around him, reassuring, his fingers curling gently around the hard shoulder. "I know you better than anyone. Better than she does. I know it isn't true. Christ, mate; if your bleedin' guilt complex didn't exist, you'd have joined the bloody pacifists. But it does, and that's why you're the right man for the job, and one of you's more use in CI5 than ten of you wearing a CND badge and brandishing a fuckin' truncheon: OK?"

After a tense moment, Doyle nodded. He didn't say anything more, but he relaxed against Bodie. Bodie took the glass from his fingers, had a sip from it and set it aside. He pulled Doyle closer against him, and ran his fingers through the wavy hair, smoothing it away from his forehead. "So what do you want to do?"

"I dunno."

"You could give her a ring. Now. She's practically begging you to."

"You think that's the best thing?" Doyle asked; then continued with a snarl of anguish that spoke of shadows Bodie, who was totally unacquainted with Doyle's background, knew nothing of. "Christ, she's asked me home for Christmas! They make a big thing of Christmas, always have done. It'd be like a bloody slap in the face if I turned her down flat, rang up: Hi mum, yeah I'm fine, how've the last x years bin for you, have a jolly Christmas, cheerio till next year --"

Bodie realised where Doyle's conscience was leading him, and his first reaction was anger, and hurt. After a brief battle with himself, however; he pushed it down. He could take it. It was just another time of year, that was all; just a few wintry days. He'd be here, when Doyle came back.

He said firmly: "Course you have to go. If she's been ill and all... Go Christmas Eve, come back Boxing Day. Should be enough time to straighten out the differences over a few mince pies, eh sunshine? I'll save a turkey sandwich for you, OK?"

Doyle twisted to look at him, incredulous and exasperated as he realised that Bodie was moving along a totally different line of thought. He grabbed his partner between iron-hard hands. "Not just me, idiot. Think I'd go without you? Need you there, wouldn't I. I've needed you there all my life..."

He crushed Bodie's mouth beneath his, until the world belonged to them both again, the only reality a shared one.

"Did you really think," said Doyle, releasing him and getting his breath back, "I was plannin' on leaving you here?"

"Yeah," muttered Bodie, slanting a dark look at Doyle from under his lashes.

Doyle gave him a disgusted look. "You're daft. Mad. Can't you get it into your head even now?" But he didn't say it with any heat, his mind already sliding off onto other things as he settled back against the reassuring solidity of his mate.

Bodie looked down at the head on his shoulder, a new thought striking him. "You're mad," he grunted. "I'd fit in just beautiful with your family, wouldn't I?" He slid his hand slowly down Doyle's arm to his waist, pulling the warm cotton shirt free of Doyle's waistband.

"Why not?"

"Oh, c'mon, mate." Bodie moved his head, in half-amused exasperation. He wasn't sure he like the way things were going, and the idea of living through a traditional family Christmas filled him with distant horror. "They won't want me there."

"I want you there," said Doyle flatly.

Bodie grinned. "Hi, mum, a lot's changed since I last saw you and by the way this is the man I love?" he drawled. "Not you, Doyle. Not you at all."

Doyle didn't respond to the heavy-handed humour. "It's my life. They've never accepted me the way I am. One more kink in my nature isn't gonna come as a hell of a surprise, is it?"

"Oh," growled Bodie between his teeth, "A kink in your nature, it that what I am?" He slid both hands around Doyle, who was lying half on top of him, and under the loosened shirt to touch his warm skin.

Doyle, who knew how Bodie retreated swiftly into kidding around when faced with something he wasn't happy about confronting, shelved his own bitter, far-off concerns. Bodie came first, and that was that. He shifted his hips automatically as Bodie stroked him, abstractly waiting for Bodie's cool hands to slide under the waistband of his jeans; and said, "OK, mate. Scratch the idea. I'll drive down Christmas Day, and after lunch, spend an hour or two there distributin' cheer, be back with you by dinner time. That be better?"

He sounded unresentful, perfectly grudgeless. But Bodie snapped instantly into thoughtfulness, staring out over Doyle's tipped-back head, his hands stilling. Doyle was offering him a generous proof of where his allegiance lay, and yes, it was true that for a moment back there Bodie had felt doubt, threatened by the unknown family tie pulling at Doyle. But even more generous had been Doyle's first idea of taking him with him, making him part of it. If that was what Ray wanted --

He withdrew his hands from his partner's waist and gave him a friendly upward push. "Go, mate," he said amiably. "Get on the phone and warn Mama she'll need a bigger turkey this year."

After a moment, Doyle nodded. "Thanks." He rose and went to the phone, squaring his shoulders. No point in putting it off.

Bodie went into the kitchen and began to unpack the shopping; but he left the door to the living room open. If this was going to shake Doyle up he wanted to be right on hand. Damn, damn, damn, he cursed silently. They'd needed this leave so badly. A thousand curses on whatever bloody fate had thrown this in their path.

"Mother?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Yeah, I know, only got it today, an hour or so ago --"

"Yeah. Yeah, fine. You? Yeah, I know. Been busy --"

"Yeah, that's why I was ringing...gettin' a few days off. Could come down on Christmas Eve, get back on Boxing Day, if you --"

"Yeah good, listen: I'll be bringing a mate with me, OK?"

"Nah, that's OK, we're used to sharing --"

"He can go on the floor then, bring a bag --"

"Yeah. Well, I dunno. Shouldn't be. We've bin promised five days off, and we'll kick up one helluva stink if it's called off --"

"Yeah, OK then. See you Christmas Eve."

When Doyle put down the phone, he stood by it for a moment, remembering. In one way, he'd rather forget: just leave it out of the rest of his life, he didn't need it. But in another, the gap of incomprehension was something that had often bothered him, made him feel bitter, and guilty. It was the same old story: they said they loved you, then they tore you apart; because of the way you were made, the job you did.

Restless, his steps took him to the kitchen, for there was someone who loved him the way he was. He leant against the door, watching. Bodie was there, stashing the last of the perishable provisions into the freezer, speedy and efficient as in everything he did. Domestic life didn't really suit him, Doyle thought, watching the big dark man: he should be out running, or taking a punchbag apart with vicious, controlled energy; or in action on a front line, shooting with that deadly accurate ease of his, teeth gritted, resolute in his determination to come out on top; not piddling around a kitchen stuffing sausages into a freezer...

A man of action, Bodie.

But action could mean death. He shivered involuntarily, remembering Bodie shot, lying bleeding at his feet, and shut his eyes. He felt arms go around him, warm lips on his; Bodie whispering against his mouth, gentle, and humorous: "All right, sunshine?"

Doyle held him tight, pressing Bodie against him, his eyes still shut. At least Bodie would be safe; whether here or with his family they would be together, have five days when he need not fear for Bodie, nor Bodie for him.

Then he let Bodie go.

"Want to talk about it?" said Bodie, hands still on his hips, very serious.

"Not now," Doyle answered pulling away. He looked around for the champagne, saw it on a shelf, fetched it down and put it in the fridge. "Drink it later tonight," he explained. "Right now --"

"Right now, what you need is something to eat," decided Bodie, practical.

Doyle caught him as he passed determinedly en route for the chopping board, pulled him towards himself. "No. Right now, what I need is you."

"I'm sorry, 3.7, 4.5."

"Sir, it isn't fair," protested Bodie.

Cowley was hard, brittle, and absolutely unmovable. "Life never is, 3.7."

Bodie bent a bitter eye on his boss. "I'm beginning to notice that. At least, it never is if you work for CI5."

Doyle drew a sharp breath from where he stood, arms folded, leaning against the wall. Cowley was in a bleak mood today, and Bodie was pushing it a bit. It always surprised Doyle, what Cowley would take from Bodie. Anyone else, he'd have chewed up and spat out as a mangled bleeding mess by now. He wondered briefly if Cowley ever realised he had a weakness for the dark, solid ex-para moodily examining the floor in an attitude of absolute insubordination. But he could see that even Bodie wasn't going to win through today.

"-- no need to change your plans," Cowley was continuing. "Quiet Christmas at home, I think you said."

"Yeah, only now Doyle's going to have to tell his mother sorry, we can't make it after all, we're baby-sitting." Bodie cast a dark, evil glance at the slight fair girl sitting composedly across the room; absently registering surprise: to look at her, you'd think 'nursery nurse', 'typist', and look away. You'd never guess that that same milk-and-water type was responsible for the death of seven soldiers and two civilians in a Beirut bar. Now she'd apparently had a change of heart; lost her nerve and run screaming for protection right into the arms of CI5.

"I can't see why you don't just hand her over to the boys in blue and get her behind bars," he growled, flicking a glance at Doyle, who was cool, unreadable: had himself very much in hand.

"She'd be safe enough there."

"CI5's holding her under special powers, Bodie, because there are some questions I want her to answer; and I have no intention of letting her out of our hands until they are. And before you ask; she's not top of my priority and I haven't time nor manpower to spare to deal with her at present."

"It's always us," muttered Bodie; then he made one final appeal. "Look, sir; you know we've made plans. Couldn't you find someone else? We'll work double time after Christmas..."

Cowley remained unfazed by the resentful glances trading back and forth between his two top operatives. "There's no reason for you to change your plans, as I thought I said. This lady's friends have disbanded temporarily; and they aren't as yet aware of her defection, let alone do they know that CI5 has her. Doyle's family will make as good cover as anywhere; though you'll need to keep her with you at all times, and keep her out of sight, of course. You know your jobs, gentlemen. I leave it up to you." He picked up his briefcase. "Keep me informed of your whereabouts," he said and paused, as if there was something he'd forgotten to mention. "By the way --"

"Yeah?" drawled Doyle, shooting a glance at Bodie. The old man had the nerve of a bloody politician; you had to give him that.

"Merry Christmas, gentlemen," said Cowley smoothly, putting his collar firmly straight; and he left.

Bodie and Doyle were now alone with the thin blonde girl whose bodyguards they now were, and who so far had not said a word, sitting straight-backed on Bodie's blue velvet armchair. They exchanged disgusted glances.

"Unwanted," said Doyle, "Christmas present."

Bodie let his eyes glint murder. He hated terrorists. "Watch out before you unwrap it mate, it's probably rigged to explode." They both stared at her provocatively; but she didn't respond.

"Bloody Cowley," said Doyle moodily, turning away.

"Yeah. Look mate, s'hardly bloody fair to unload her on your family, is it? You go, an' I'll stay on the job." It almost seemed preferable, to the package he'd get if he went -- Doyle's family, Christmas, and a terrorist to nursemaid all at one go. Terrific.

"Nah, it'll be OK. Cowley's right, it won't make no difference where we have her. She'll have to lie low in any case. Very low. Like in the attic, locked-up low," he said, jettisoning a cold glance towards the girl.

"And just in case," said Bodie aggressively, planting himself in front of the girl and staring viciously down, "We stop off on the way and stock up on a few extra -- Christmas decorations. Just in case someone comes looking for our pretty maid."

"Can't hurt," shrugged Doyle. He moved in next to Bodie, alert. Cowley would have made sure she wasn't armed; and seemed sure she wasn't dangerous, but one could never be too careful.

"Haven't heard much from you," growled Bodie. "On your feet."

The pinched white face looked up. She had a little pointed chin, pale skin; a childish waif of a girl. Only her eyes gave some hint of what she had been, what she had willingly done in the name of one group's non-conformist view of freedom; they were cold, hard grey.

"I said, on your feet," Bodie deadlined, and one smooth hand shot out and yanked her off the chair, the other frisking her with hard efficiency.

"Go easy, mate," said Doyle. He despised terrorism no less than Bodie did for possibly more moral reasons; but this slight elfin female in jeans and sweatshirt could pose them no threat, and he saw no reason for unnecessary brutality. He even felt sorry for her: what kind of bloody Christmas was she going to have? Or life, come to that. Spent her formative years blowing people up; and all she had to look forward to now was a grilling from Cowley in the New Year and years behind bars after that.

"What's your name, love?" he asked.

She stared at him without replying, standing passive in Bodie's hard grip. Then she shook her head, and said in a small, clear voice, "Signome," then "Milao anglika."

The two CI5 men stared at each other. The Doyle threw his head back and laughed, harshly, "Happy Christmas, mate," he said, and thumped Bodie on the shoulder, going to get their bags.

Bodie opened the back, threw in the suitcase, shut and locked it again and got in the passenger seat beside Doyle. The weight of the case had made the car sink towards the rear.

"Bloody hell, mate," said Doyle as he slid the Capri into gear, "You got enough, didn't you? We're not takin' on the Magnificent Seven."

"Can take it all back," said Bodie with dignity, "If you're lying awake worrying about CI5's finances." More seriously, he added, staring out of the window, "Put rifles in. And smg's. Might need 'em if her friends show up intent on a quick assassination. They don't like it when one of their number turns yellow and runs. Or, should I say, has a change of ideals."

He jerked an eye over into the back seat. No movement from beneath the rug and the wrapped presents on top of it; she was scared for her life, all right, and co-operating beautifully.

"You think I'd land her on my mother if I thought there was the least chance of it?"

"You never know," quoted Bodie, very serious, "Sunshine, you never know."

They forgot about the passenger after that, Bodie being more interested in the other opposition. Which was how he thought of Doyle's family.

" -- father?"

"Dead," said Doyle shortly. "Died when I was 18. Heart."

"Mmm," grunted Bodie, not sure whether or not to commiserate. The decision was taken out of his hands when Doyle said, out of a brooding silence, "Christ, I hated him."

"Oh," said Bodie after a pause. Then, "Mine was an old bastard too," he offered. That was true. At the tender age of six, little William Bodie had made a solemn vow one stormy, painful night to himself; that one day he'd kill the man he hated so much. The fantasy had kept him going for years. He wondered idly sometimes why he hadn't kept the vow; hadn't sought the vicious drunken old sod out and blasted his balls off. Because he didn't care any more, that was why.

"He 'ad nothin' on mine. Believe me," said Doyle, with intense, dark feeling; and changed the subject.

Bodie had to head it back, or arrive totally unprepared. There couldn't be far to go now; he knew the Doyle family house was in East London and they were well out that way. The area was getting seedier by the moment; run-down buildings sporting broken glass patched over with boards; red paint graffiti scrawled on crumbling walls, gasworks looming ugly; and rows and rows of tiny identical houses bisected by rigid grey streets; litter everywhere and scruffy kids playing about in the clogged gutters. So this was where Doyle grew up.

"Just your mother then, is it?" he said, and a hopeful vision crept into his mind of little apple-cheeked lady wearing a flour-smudged apron and a wide smile.

"Sister too. Nosy piece. And her husband." said Doyle shortly, concentrating on the heavy pre-Christmas traffic. Momentarily diverted, Bodie scanned the following cars, for about the hundredth unconscious time since leaving the office where he'd picked up the rifles and ammo; but all was normal, no sign of the tail they searched for unceasingly and automatically even on an innocuous trip to the cinema, or the pub, so deep was their CI5 grounding. Satisfied, he turned from the mirror.

"Brother-in-law? What's he like?"

Doyle swung around a corner. "Only met him once."

"And?"

"Didn't hit it off," came Doyle's laconic reply.

Bodie sat back, grimly. He had the definite feeling he didn't want hear any more. How the hell did I get into this, he thought with feeling; what I needed was a nice few days relaxing, no sweat,

no hassle...

Instead, here he was in a car loaded down with a terrorist under his protection, a suitcase full of deadly weaponry, Doyle in a mood; and a hostile family of nutters to face at the end of the journey. Some bloody relaxation. Why the hell was he here...?

He was here because he belonged here; at Doyle's side.

"For better or worse --" he said, aloud.

"Uh?" Doyle queried, darting a quick glance.

Bodie smiled enigmatically, sliding down in his seat, hands behind his head. "Better or worse. Richer or poorer. Sickness and in health --"

The sombre weight of tension that had been assailing Doyle all the way here lifted, suddenly, and he smiled in return joining in: "With my body I thee worship, and all my worldly goods I thee endow. Which includes my family. Put your party smile on, sunshine; we're here."

Rita Doyle had a lot to do; a fridge full of food needing preparation, a hundred and one things to time right and fit into a busy Christmas schedule; she was on edge and uncharacteristically snappy; and she was at the window every five minutes, looking out.

"Waiting for the prodigal, mum?" said the pretty dark girl, entering the kitchen and catching her at it.

Rita jumped, left the unproductive vista of the street, and went back to the fridge. "You could make yourself useful, Karen. Where's Stan? If he's still asleep you might as well put the telly off. It's a waste of electricity."

"He's tired," said her daughter, unperturbed. "If you turn it off he'll wake up, and he needs his sleep. He's had ever such a busy run-up to Christmas."

Rita snorted. A thin woman in late fifties, with mousy brown hair beginning to grey, she knew the Stans of the world well, without necessarily disliking them. "I'm sure he has. Busy in the pub." She checked the wipe-clean board on the wall. "There's still the potatoes to do. They're in the bag under the sink." She glanced again out of the window. Nothing.

"What time did he say?"

"He just said Christmas Eve. He didn't give a time."

Karen was not inclined to give the return of her brother more attention than in her opinion it merited; they'd never had much in common. He was, after all, six years older, and of very uncomplimentary temperament. She'd been quite glad when he'd left home; but it would be -- well, interesting to see him again. "You know Ray. Could be midnight. If he shows up at all."

She pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and bent to extract potatoes from the paper sack.

"He'll come."

"Like he did to our wedding, I suppose." It was still a sore point, especially with Stan. Their father being dead, Ray had been the obvious choice to perform the duty of giving Karen away. But at the last possible moment they'd had a message saying he was detained in London and couldn't make it. They hadn't seen him since; there had been some sort of row between him and their mother, which Karen had never heard the details of, despite intense curiosity. Stan, who'd taken an instant dislike to him, calling him a "scruffy young tearaway" -- but behind his back, since he'd been warned about Ray's volatile temper -- had been none too pleased to hear he was coming for Christmas, but was determined to make the best of it. Rita Doyle, however, was pink around the cheeks with suppressed excitement and was barely able to concentrate, to Karen's amusement.

"Women are funny about their sons, aren't they," she said, after a brief pause furiously scrubbing the muddy potato skins so the peeler wouldn't snag.

"I don't know how you'd know," returned her mother, shortly.

"Everyone knows. Oedipus, and all that."

"I think you mean Jocasta, dear," said Rita Doyle, and began to wipe over the joint of beef with Kitchen paper.

Karen wasn't to be put off. "They are, though. My friend Chris; she's all over Damien, you should see her. She practically necks with the kid. Her Mandy, though; she's lucky if she gets a goodnight peck on the cheek."

Rita Doyle was used to her daughter, and did not reply.

"Who'd he say he was bringing with him?"

"He didn't give his name."

"Funny thing to do. Bring a bloke home at Christmas with him. Now a girl, I could understand." She snickered. "You remember our Ray."

Yes, Rita did remember. Her enigmatic, hot-tempered young son; whom she'd adored and protected though it had meant the final death of her dying marriage; she remembered the cold pale beauty of his changeling features: the violence of his temper; the warmth of his love. But there had always been depths to Ray she couldn't reach, couldn't come close to understanding; and finally those differences had driven them apart.

Now he was coming home.

Surely that was the sound of a car. She was at the window in an instant; and saw it, a low metallic Capri slowly cruising along the line of parked vehicles on the road. She watched it, slowly pulling off her apron and running a hand through her hair.

Totally unexpectedly, the side door to the kitchen opened and smooth dark head popped around it. "Anything in the garage?" it enquired, politely.

Rita Doyle and her daughter stared at the intruder. Then, turning her head Rita looked out of the window again, saw the waiting Capri and its driver, his cap of curls identical to her own; and she answered before Karen, who was drawing an angry breath to blast the stranger out.

"No, there's room."

"Keys?" asked the man, the rest of him coming around the door. He had an engaging smile, an attractive face, a powerful body -- and hard, appraising dark eyes that were totally at odds with his relaxed manner, and his charming smile.

She reached them down and held them out.

"Thank you," he said as he took them, tipping them another warm, courteous smile; and then he was gone.

Karen joined her mother at the window, looking out to the tall dark man in a leather jacket, loping down the path to the Capri. "So that's Ray's friend, then. Good-looking so and so, don't you think?"

"It depends what you're looking for, dear," said Mrs. Doyle.

The Capri turned off the road and drew into the garage. Rita Doyle opened the side-door to the covered passage-way onto which the garage joined; she heard the care door slamming, quiet voices, and tensed. But the door into the garage didn't open.

Karen said, from the kitchen window, "Come and look at this." Her mother joined her there, and had her first good look at her son, the eldest child; and the best loved.

He was standing in the front garden, one hand on his hip, the other making gesticulations to his dark friend. They were both looking upwards, surveying the house.

"Whatever are they up to?" said Karen, perplexed.

The dark good-looking friend was turning, looking first at the neighbouring semi; then the next pair along. He disappeared momentarily around the side of the house, returned swiftly and they exchanged a few words.

"Really showing him around, isn't he?" said Karen, mockingly. "You'd think our Ray was trying to sell him the place. Probably is," she added.

At last Ray was swinging his way up the path, making for the front door; and Rita Doyle went to let him in, noting distractedly that her hands were shaking and her mouth dry.

He gave her a brief glance and nodded. "Hello. You look well."

He looked older, little lines of stress on his forehead and around his eyes, threads of silver glinting in the bronze hair, which she hadn't expected; but the lean hungry look, the measuring green slant of his eyes, the rough quiet voice were all the same.

"Scuse me just a moment, OK?" he was saying, and going past her. Gathering her wits, she followed him to the kitchen. "Hi, you," he was saying briefly to Karen, but all his attention was on the side door. "OK. Window to the right," he said to it.

The dark man edged around the door once more; only this time he was carrying a suitcase in one hand, and the other was holding the shoulder of a young, thin girl. "Not in front of the window, love," he said pleasantly to her. "Head down, OK. And you keep it down, all the time you're here." To emphasise his point, he pushed on her shoulder, and she crouched suddenly, her head twisting around.

Rita Doyle wondered, fleetingly, if she were imagining all this.

"Get her upstairs," her son said to his friend, irritably. "Two flights, it's on the right. It's got a lock. Better make a bathroom stop, too."

"Cuffs on her?" the dark man wondered, aloud.

Her son shook his head. "Not unless she turns awkward. It is Christmas."

His friend's lip curled, emitting the muttered words: "Not for her. They don't have it till Easter, mate."

And then he was gone, pulling the girl against him through the door and up the stairs.

Karen's "Who the hell is that?" clashed with her mother's "Whatever is going on, Ray?"

"Sorry, mother. Got landed with a last minute baby-sitting job. She'll have my room and we'll kip down in the lounge." He was by the sink, pouring himself a glass of water, as cool and collected as if he'd never been away; as if all this was perfectly unremarkable.

She took a deep breath. The job; always the job. "Ray. You aren't telling me you've brought a criminal here? Into my house? At Christmas?"

He deflected it, calmly "She's no criminal. Not -- exactly. No, we're just lookin' after her for a friend you might say. Just forget she's here." He took another long draught of the water, leaning on the draining board and surveying his mother and sister with inexpressive eyes. "Happy

Christmas, by the way."

There was noise from the hall. Karen recognised her husband's voice, loud and aggressive. A moment later he burst through the door, red-faced and irascible, ahead of a cool unsmiling Bodie who was in no mood to treat peripherals with anything other than the utmost disdain. Stan Howard said; "There's a man in the house with a girl, and he's locked her in the floodin' bedroom --"

Bodie's grave eye met Doyle's. Neither of them moved a facial muscle.

"Well, hello Stan," said Doyle coolly, pushing himself away from the sink and coming upright.

The big balding man breathed heavily; he'd been rudely awakened from a peaceful nap to find the house had gone mad. Might have guessed his brother-in-law, the pixie-faced, arrogant, violent son of a twister was at the bottom of it. About to speak, he caught his wife's quelling eye and thought better of it. "Hello there, uh -- Ray. Nice to meet you again."

Doyle acknowledged it. "Got a few things to get straight. Let's have everyone in the lounge for five minutes." Recognising the note of authority, they began to go ahead of him. "Oh, and --" he reached out a hand, and the dark watchful-eyed one at his side turned -- "this is Bodie. You'll like 'im mum; he eats a lot."

And Bodie gave everyone an encompassing, cheerful smile.

Doyle checked that the door was closed, that there was no sound from upstairs and took a look through the living-room window. Bodie was at the other side squinting that way, out towards the back. Mrs. Doyle and the Howards took seats, recognising with varying degrees of bemusement and indignance that they'd been taken in hand; that these two young men were making the rules right now; and the return home of the rebellious only son was not going at all how any of them had expected.

"Shutter," said the man called Bodie briefly to his partner, and pulled them, fastening them securely, reclosing the window and pulling the curtain across. "There's a sheet or two of bpg in the car; fix it later."

Doyle at his window answered over his shoulder: "Yeah, leave this one. This one's going to be the weakest point, right, need a firing point here. Kitchen entry we can block off; there's a window on the landing but nothing overlooks it. Two more possibilities next floor, our girl's room, that'll have to be shuttered and bpg'd too. The other's her room --" he jerked a thumb at his bewildered mother -- "that'll be our other station, I'll take that one if it comes and this one's yours."

"Garage, access door. Front, sites, back; all secure then," checked off Bodie.

"Yeah, but we'll 'ave to make another check. Boost some of the locks, and there's too much glass around that side complex to make me happy," decreed Doyle.

The two CI5 men were totally ignoring the silent family. Rita Doyle, who knew more than the other two, was feeling a spark of anger; a resentment she'd hoped to be able to shelve for this reunion. Stan and Karen were exchanging expressive glances.

" -- check?"

"Yeah, subject to refinements, all OK."

And, like the snapping off a switch, the two CI5 men came smoothly off the job and returned to normal function.

Ray Doyle crossed the room and sat down. "Well then, how's things?" he asked, crossing one ankle over his knee and looking around.

The others, however, were unable to make such a sudden change.

"You an' him playing at spies or something, Ray?" demanded Karen, inclined to mock. "And who is that girl, anyway? Don't tell me she's married and her husband's looking for you with a shotgun."

"Look, just don't even think about her. I told you," said Doyle, trying not to be impatient, "She's nothing to do with you, or us. She's just in need of place to stay. Me an' Bodie'll look after her; you won't even need to see her." Bodie said nothing, his dark eyes watching everyone.

"All the same, son; I think you might have warned Mother you were landing with an extra guest. And what's all this bolting shutters in the middle of the day?" rumbled Stan, portentously.

Watching them, Bodie saw that spark of unvoiced contention leap between them again. "Stan's right," chipped in Karen. "We don't see hide nor hair of you for years and then the minute you walk in there's trouble."

Never far from the surface in this house, Doyle's tension snapped; he jumped to his feet, eyes flashing cold temper. "Look, I got landed with a last minute job and it was either bring her or not come. I didn't want to let you down an' we're doing all we can to make sure it doesn't affect you; but if it isn't enough you just say and we'll go somewhere else, right now, OK?" His eyes sought out Bodie's, and found reassurance, support there, for whatever decision he might make.

"No! don't," said his mother with more force than she'd intended; and she looked across at her daughter and son-in-law. "Leave him alone, he's only just got here. It's all right, Ray; just -- a bit of a surprise, that's all."

After a second, he nodded, and sat down again. "Yeah, OK." He thrust his hands into his pockets and glowered at his feet. Not half an hour in the house, and already they were at it. God: two more days of it.

"Telephone," Bodie reminded him out of the side of his mouth.

"Oh yeah. Get this out of the way once and for all, OK, and then we can drop the subject. No-one uses the telephone --"

"What? God, Ray, you really are too much." This from his sister.

"There's a coinbox down the road, love, if you can't live without it till Monday. We need the line clear all the time. And no-one answers it, or the door, except him --" he jerked an eye at his partner -- "or me. Clear? None of you mentions the girl to anyone, that vital that is. And if you leave the house for any reason you use the front door. Got all that?"

There was a silence.

"Are you in some sort of trouble, son?" enquired Stan in an unctuous tone. He was forty; and had once been in Personnel.

Doyle took a deep breath to reply; but Bodie was in there first, coming away from the wall where he'd been leaning, watching the dangerous signs of impending explosion building up in his volatile mate. "Nah, he's fine," he said easily. "He's had a long day. He just needs a cup of tea, right, sunshine? I'll get it. If someone shows me where everything is."

"I will," said Rita, and got to her feet. Bodie bent a smile towards her, and like a true gentleman held the door open for her to pass through, closing it behind him with a backwards grin at his uptight mate.

"What --" began Karen, with a hard stare at her surly brother.

"Drop it," growled Doyle, meaning it.

She looked at him a moment longer, and shook her dark head. "You really take the biscuit, you do our Ray." Stan gave the sorrowful headshake of a man who has expected no more, from the man who let his sister down on the most important day in her life.

"Yeah, well... Any kids yet, you two?" Silly question. But he was determined to change the subject; and it worked.

"Not likely," said his sister. "Not going to be either. Me and Stan, we're not keen. Looks like mum's grandchildren are up to you."

Terrific. That wasn't the way he wanted the conversation to go, either. He made a non-committal noise, looking Karen over. She was so unlike him, this sister of his; dark haired, pretty in a long-faced way; sharp as nails. She was his father's child, he his mother's; they'd never had much to say to each other and now didn't look like being any different. Instead of trying he looked around the room, seeing it for the first time since his arrival; there was a large, real Christmas tree in one corner decorated with tinsel, fairy lights, cotton wool, and there were wrapped presents lying

beneath it. It was the same heavy mahogany furniture he remembered; but the dark patterned carpet was new, as was the large colour TV; and that relieved him of one worry: at least Rita Doyle seemed to be financially secure.

Stan got up, switched on the television. A troupe of fur-clad dancers expanded into view, singing. Karen Howard reached for a handful of crisps, her eyes fixed on the screen. Doyle slid down further in his chair and shut his eyes, giving up on the threesome.

Things were going rather better in the kitchen, where Bodie was finding it surprisingly easy to talk to Ray's small mother. He found her resemblance to his mate touching; it was just the hair, and the wide-set eyes, really; but nonetheless it was a reminder that here was the person who had brought Ray Doyle into the world, someone else who loved him; and it caused him to make a deliberate social effort to win her liking.

She was also quite taken by him, this smoothly capable man whom Ray had chosen to bring along. "Bodie, did Ray say? Nickname, I expect."

"Surname. Where d'you keep the cups?"

He wasn't exactly wasteful of words; clearly not a man much given to small talk. But to his credit he was making the effort; and he had, after all, diverted the impending conflict between her son and his brother-in-law. "Top cupboard, love. Thanks. The milk's in the fridge. Have you known Ray long?"

"Yeah, ever since he --" Bodie stopped, remembering; and carried on smoothly, "A few years, yeah."

She gave him a quick glance. "You don't need to avoid mentioning CI5, love. If you were. I suppose you work for them too?"

He handed her the milk. "That's right. We're partners. Have been from the start."

She spooned tea from the caddy into the pot. "It must be an exciting job."

"Yeah," Bodie agreed, soberly. "Too exciting, sometimes." Her son had been shot through the heart less than a year ago, in one particularly exciting experience.

"Do you know Ray well?"

The question caught Bodie unawares; he glanced at her with caution, a totally unreadable expression smoothing over his features. "We're good mates, yeah."

"He looks very tense."

He was doing fine until he got your letter, thought Bodie viciously: then he caught the thought back and killed it. "Yeah, well he's only just got here. Give 'im a chance to unwind a bit."

"It must be a hard job. Not everyone could do it..."

Hooked on violence... Bodie had Doyle's stark, bleak words engraved on his heart, and this at least he'd come prepared to deal with, if he'd got the chance. "Yeah, well: he's got too soft a heart, our Raymond has. It all gets on top of him, sometimes," he said firmly, and met her eyes -- hazel, not green -- as she turned to face him holding a spoon in uncaring fingers.

"And you? Doesn't it get on top of you? Killing people, guns?"

Bodie shrugged, his face hard. He'd heard this too many times before. "It's a job. Someone has to do it. Would you rather we let 'em get away with it? Jesus, you don't know 'em." He turned away, aware that he'd probably blown it; but she had made him angry, even though he'd liked her on sight. She made him angry because she'd tortured Ray with her guilt. Just as if he needed any help.

She said, behind him, quiet and distant, "Ray's a grown man and it's up to him what he does. No; I'm long past the mood to try and change him. Some of the things you see on television nowadays -- there are times when I even understand."

"Yeah, well make sure he knows that, will you?" was all Bodie said. They completed the tea-making operation in a not unfriendly silence.

In the living room, Stan and Karen watched TV.

"What the hell are they doing out there," muttered Doyle, jerking an edgy eye at the door. "When they said tea, I didn't know the leaves needed curin' first."

Stan and Karen turned to look at him. He met their curious eyes with a scowl, eyes drawn together, mouth set in a narrow line, his thumbs hooked defiantly in his belt.

Karen began to laugh. "Oh lord..." She doubled up, shaking, watched by the two surprised men. Eventually she lifted her head, just as Bodie burst through the door with a tray; and explained, still laughing: "Mother always used to call you a little ray of sunshine when you looked like that, and god, you 'aven't changed..."

Her laughter was infectious, and Bodie's lips quirked upwards as he set the tray down, surveying his truculent mate. Rita Doyle chuckled, remembering; and Stan Howard let go a snort or two of amusement.

Everyone was laughing at him. Doyle's scowl deepened; he hunched his shoulders further into his jacket; then, he too, suddenly saw the funny side of it and he had to smile, feeling his tension slacken at long last.

The first hurdle had been passed. The conversation settled quite naturally over the practicalities of distributing the tea with the right amount of milk, sugar per cup. Bodie brought Doyle his, and

smiled at him.

" -- ray of sunshine..." he murmured, under cover of the extraneous chatter, and on impulse reached out and ruffled the curly hair with a quick hand.

Doyle tilted his head back to smile in return. Bodie was here. He'd known everything would be all right; if Bodie was here. He had someone of his own, at last. "You havin' a cup?"

"Better take something upstairs, first." Bodie lifted an expressive eye upwards.

"Christ, I'd nearly forgotten her."

"Good job one of us had his mind on the job," sniffed Bodie and tugged Doyle's hair one last time before leaving the room.

It was all much more relaxed, suddenly; they'd found markers in the give and take of conversation. Stan talked football in a solemn, man to man way; he seem to take it for granted that it was an essential masculine duty. Doyle was comfortable enough on that tack; it was easy enough to avoid contention, and when it petered out there was something equally unthreatening to take its place.

Karen asked: "Where's your friend gone?" but he was able to turn it aside without once more sparking off a heated discussion about the girl upstairs; he'd known that side of things would be all right once the first surprise was over. He and Bodie were perfectly capable of ensuring that a - guest -- remained invisible. Karen, however, seemed fascinated by Bodie and returned to him again.

"Does he work with you?"

"Yeah."

"How old is he?"

"Younger'n me."

"Is he married?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Same reason I'm not," growled Doyle in an attempt to halt the line of questioning; but no such luck. He remembered Karen's tenacity of old -- "Can I have it? No. Why not? Because it's mine. Will you lend it to me? No. Why not? Because I don't want to. Why not?" Until he'd give in, and throw it at her. Hard.

"He's very good looking," she said, darting a sidelong glance at Stan; no harm in getting him going a bit.

Stan snorted, on cue. "Like a floodin' gorilla. Wouldn't like to meet him on a dark night."

"Well, I wouldn't mind." She giggled.

"You would," said Doyle, cryptically.

"Why?"

He bared his teeth at her. "He's very unstable. Needs careful handlin'."

His mother interposed, for the first time. "I rather like him."

"Yeah?" It pleased Doyle, that. He hadn't considered before that it might matter to him, what his mother thought of Bodie, but he discovered that it did. He wondered what would happen if he said, "That's good, because he's in love with me," and whether she'd guess even if he didn't. He let his tired mind dwell, idly, on some vision of the future; he'd be the black sheep of the family, the one no-one talked about and who was not to be left alone with any of nephews; the one with the roommate nobody was allowed to mention...

Or he'd be the one who'd died young, in some hushed-up, mystery-clouded incident, buried in a closed coffin so that no-one could see the bullet wounds...

He realised with a jerk that he'd been falling asleep, and that Bodie was back in the room.

"-- line of work, exactly?" That from Karen, still snooping.

"Roadsweepers," Doyle said loudly, without opening his eyes.

"Uh?" She turned to look at him. "Thought you'd dropped off. Roadsweepers?"

"We clean up the streets. Right, mate?"

"Yeah," Bodie confirmed.

She laughed. "Bit of come down, that, isn't it? Thought you were the smart-alec, clever one in the family."

"I am," said Doyle with an edge of bitterness. "Oh, I am."

"Didn't drink your tea, mate." Bodie was there, giving him a tiny smile, dark eyes serious and tender. Doyle held his eyes. He wanted to reach out and touch him. And he did. Laying his hand on Bodie's shoulder, gripping him.

"All right upstairs?" He took a casual glance around, no-one was listening.

"Yeah." Bodie's mouth turned down. "Doesn't drink tea. Only coffee. Eats though. Like a horse." He rolled his eyes, thinking of the hurried sandwich he'd had to put together in an unfamiliar kitchen; and then another when the first disappeared in record time, leaving her still looking half-starved.

"Said anything?"

"Not much. Understands a few simple phrases. She's terrified out of her wits." Bodie was thoughtful.

"They'll never trace her here."

"Bodie snorted. "Don't you believe it. Easy. You and I could do it, no sweat," he offered, as confirmation.

"Not a fair parallel." But Doyle, too, was thoughtful.

"It's not a bad one to go by. If you want a safety margin." Their eyes met.

"Hey, you two. Want to play cards?"

Bodie roused himself. "Not me, ta. I always lose. Got a few things to take care of." He exited, distributing an all-purpose smile around.

Doyle played cards for while with his sister and brother-in-law, for 10p a round. The telly blared on in the background, some holly-festooned quiz show; Rita Doyle was in the kitchen, getting dinner.

She was thinking about the strange actions of Doyle's dark friend; he'd been to the car for a suitcase, been running all over the house as if he owned it, fiddling with things; and now he was around the side, very close, banging. She took time off from the roasting meat and went to see what he was doing.

He was attaching a sheet of tinted glass to the garage access door.

"What are you doing?"

He turned, unenthusiastic about the interruption but making the best of it. He had to keep reminding himself that he wasn't on an ordinary job; that he was in Doyle's family home, and that the conventions he usually dispensed with had to be observed.

So he smiled, good-temperedly. "Making this a safe house..."

"Do you mean," she said, "it wasn't a safe house before?"

"No harm in a few extra precautions. It'll soon come off."

"Bodie."

He turned, at the name she hadn't used before. "Yes?"

"That girl --"

"Yes?"

"This is all about her, isn't it... Who is she?"

He drew a deep breath. "Doyle told you. No-one you'd even think about."

Her eyes flicked around; there was a new, solid-looking lock on the front door. "There's someone after her, isn't there."

"Not that we know," he hedged.

"But someone might be?"

He conceded that, seeing she was determined. "But we're very nervous in CI5," he told her with a wry smile. "When we're staying in hotels on holiday, we make Room Service go through all kinds of rituals before we're finally happy enough to open the door. Plays hell with the bacon and eggs."

Her mouth lifted, despite her doubts, and he smiled, relieved. "You don't want to worry about it, love. Doyle's not worried; and he's probably right. He'd never have brought her here otherwise. No; I'm just making sure, that's all."

I mean, I'm trying to reduce the odds. 'Make sure' isn't ever possible. It just sounds better.

He thrust his pessimism aside. He was probably being unnecessarily edgy; and not at all in the Christmas spirit. He slanted a thoughtful eye up at the slight, curly-headed woman, and wondered how she was enjoying her Christmas, her reunion with her son; not much, so far, the mood Doyle was in.

There was a light swinging above her head, and the plastic shade had hanging from it a lopsided bunch of mistletoe. He rose, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes; grabbed her in strong, gentle hands, pushing her beneath the green leaves and milky-white berries; and kissed her.

"Well, that's more than my son's managed do to me yet," she said when he released her, breathless and laughing.

The evening meal was going well. There was roast sirloin, thick juicy slices of it; Yorkshire

pudding, crisp and brown and golden; roast potatoes, creamy mashed ones; carrots and aromatic gravy. Bodie had done more than justice to it, which had gratified Mrs. Doyle no end. There was plenty of wine too; everyone had enough to make them talkative, though Bodie kept an unobtrusive eye on his and Doyle's intake. You're crazy, he told himself; he's right, there's no way they could trace you here. At least, not this fast... All the same, he wanted them to stay sober. Damn Cowley; he'd far rather be drunk. Bet the old man was on his fifth double malt by now...

They were eating by candlelight and the table was loaded; silver cutlery red-foiled crackers, shiny crystal glasses, the curly sculpted silver candelabra the centrepiece of the table, bearing three tall red candles aloft. Bodie was beginning to see what Doyle meant about his family making a lot of Christmas, and enjoying it if only for the sight of Ray Doyle beside him, the lines on his face softened by the aura of the candles, his hair glinting occasionally gold as he moved in the flickering light, his green eyes glowing. Bodie was frequently amazed by his own romanticism concerning Doyle; but Doyle didn't seem to mind it so he supposed it didn't matter.

Karen was flirting with him outrageously; but that didn't matter either, he was fending her off with perfect parries. The conversation was going well; Bodie and Doyle fell into their old double act; Stan rumbled out a rugby anecdote or two that had the two CI5 men chuckling, Karen sniggering and Rita Doyle briefly smiling. An apple pie was brought in; Bodie smothered his portion happily with thick yellow custard, watched approvingly by Mrs. Doyle, who'd never been able to feed up her two slender children to her satisfaction.

"You'll get fat you will," came a low voice near his ear; and he turned to look into the smiling, gentle eyes of his partner.

"Not with you around as an example, sunshine," he answered in the same soft tone, and they watched each other for a moment longer, amused by the strangeness of life, the odd twist of fate that had made them fall in love. Breaking free with an effort, Bodie turned at last to his pie.

He nearly dropped his spoon.

Everyone was watching them silent and surprised. It seemed to him that he was facing three pairs of identical, accusing eyes. "I beg your pardon?" he said to no-one in particular, and began to eat to cover his sudden confusion.

Ray Doyle took it in his stride, gazing coolly around. "Something the matter?" he observed, and he too began to eat.

"Do you live together?" asked Karen, alight with curiosity, her brown-button eyes direct and inquisitive.

"No," said Bodie, just as his partner avowed the opposite.

"I see," said Karen, and she sent an expressive glance to one side of her. Deciding there might be more mileage left in it, she continued, "Or maybe I don't. It can't be no and yes, can it?"

Bodie would have snapped "Mind your own bloody business," at anyone else. Doyle, unperturbed, finished his pie in a few speedy spoonfuls and looked measuringly at his sister. "What he meant was, we tried living together but it didn't work out. I expect we'll get there again sometime."

Bodie had the feeling he was flushing, but it wouldn't show in this light. He didn't want to meet Mrs. Doyle's eyes but he forced himself to because he liked her the best of them, and because it was Ray's family, not his, and it was up to Ray how they played this. "I was hell to live with," he told her, apologetically.

"Ray's never been the easiest person to have around the house, either." She rose. "I'll make some coffee."

Doyle was leaning towards him, holding something out. "Pull my cracker with me," he said, with perfect, soulful innocence.

Over coffee, Stan lit a huge, fat cigar and puffed out clouds of evil-smelling smoke. The television was on again; some celebrity's Christmas special. When Rita Doyle began to clear the table, her son jumped to his feet. "Leave it, we'll see to it." He reached out, pulled Bodie up without looking.

"Don't be silly," she protested; but he was adamant. "It's OK. You sit down love. Me and him; we'll soon get it done."

"Well, if you're sure --" She cast a glance towards her daughter, who was pretending not to hear.

"We're sure," said Bodie, smiling down at the small woman, his dark eyes warily friendly.

"In that case, I might have a quick bath. There's a lot to do tomorrow."

As the last of the dishes carried in, Bodie shut the door, and let out a long whoosh of only partly-mock relief.

"You're doing fine," Doyle told him from the sink. "Behavin' beautifully."

"Yeah, I might be," Bodie said, darkly. He crossed the room and grabbed Doyle around the waist: and his partner laughed, and tried unsuccessfully to wriggle free. "But you?"

"What did I say?" Doyle asked, mildly.

Bodie just shook his head, and kissed him. Quick as a flash, even as he opened his mouth, hungry for Bodie's searching tongue, Doyle reached around behind his mate and dropped the wet dishcloth down the back of Bodie's shirt. Bodie yelped and jumped back. He wrenched around and managed to extract it. Doyle, chuckling, was switching on the radio; watching Bodie cautiously.

Bodie weighed the dripping object in his hand, staring at his partner, looking dangerous. "You're so beautiful when you're heavy," said Doyle, and ducked as the cloth hurled safely past him.

The washing-up was seriously under way when Doyle made a noise of surprise, reached out and turned the radio up, loud. It was a track well-known to them; one that had often blasted through their flats on late-night drinking jags; they knew every word. When the kitchen door opened they were in full swing, too far gone to stop. Doyle was playing an imaginary piano, really pounding it out; Bodie was on the drums, an expression of concentrated ecstasy on his face. "Every night you're out there darling," yelled Doyle; "You're always out there running --" Bodie bellowed. "And I see that lost look in your eyes!" Doyle completed, lustily: and bent to wring the most from his instrument. "Dark is the road you wander --" they caterwauled in unison, and Doyle grinned over at his mother, playing it out to the last, receding note.

"Are you two drunk?" she said, eventually, as the drummer finally halted his sticks, and came down to earth.

"Too drunk for what? Try us..." said Doyle instantly.

"Definitely drunk," she decided, shaking her head.

"Nah, we're not drunk," said her son. "Just crazy." He threw his arm around Bodie, hugged him once, and then went unconcernedly back to his chores.

"That'll do now, love," she said, gathering her wits. "The rest can wait. You two go and relax, you've done a lot. There's some beer in the fridge; take one for Stan, he likes one around this time of night --"

"Oh, I'll just bet he floodin' does," snorted Doyle. He wiped his hands on a towel and went to the fridge, singing "Confusion!" to himself, the tune still ringing through his mind.

His mother watched him silently. In their whole experience, in all his too often explosive life at home, she could only remember a handful of occasions when her highly strung son had been as relaxed, as happy as he was right now; and even those had been when he was much younger. Why? she wondered. What had changed?

Bodie, very solemn now, moved round to face her. "All right if I requisition a few things?" he asked, and looked meaningfully upwards.

She'd almost forgotten... "Just help yourself, love."

"You'll get reimbursed," he assured her, quite serious. "What's the rate, Ray?"

"Eight quid a day," his mate answered from where he squatted, shoving a few cans at him. "Might even get a bit more out of Cowley, since it's Christmas, what d'you think?"

"Some hope," sniffed Bodie, and winced as the ice-cold metal bit into his warm hands. "Shit --"

"Oh Bodie, Bodie," reproved Doyle, rising and putting his hands on his hips, surveying him sorrowfully. "You mustn't swear, not here. I used to get my mouth washed out with carbolic, and when I was too big for that, it was a shillin' in the swear box --"

"Christ, I forgot." He looked at Mrs. Doyle as he set the cans hurriedly down, rubbing his hands. "Sorry --"

"That's all right. At least it's more honest than 'floodin'," she said, and they were all grinning suddenly, sharing a moment of malicious unity.

Bodie was filling a tray with cold meat, pie, bread, and milk. "You want me to do it?" Doyle asked. Bodie'd had to do everything so far, he belatedly realised.

"S'all right, sunshine. You're on holiday. Besides, I'm getting quite attached to her..."

"I'm definitely goin', then."

"Not likely," tossed back Bodie, exiting. "She's too small for you, sweetheart."

Doyle looked after him, with a grin. He took the beer, ready to leave for the battleground of the living room once more -- and stopped.

His mother had her back to him, at the sink; and he hadn't spoken more than the most cursory of words to her since his arrival.

Coming to a decision, he perched on the kitchen table, opened a can of beer and took a long pull at it, swallowed. "You keeping all right?" he asked.

She dried her hands and turned to face him. "Fine thanks, love." Even in the fluffy pink dressing gown she had donned after the bath, he could see she was thinner.

"You said you'd been in hospital," he said, frowning. "How long ago was that?"

"A month or so."

"What for?"

"A small operation. Nothing to worry about."

"You should have let me know."

She took off her apron, folding it placidly. "You couldn't have done anything, love."

"Yeah, but you should still have told me."

The awkward conversation came to a halt. Neither of them knew what to say. Ray Doyle raised the can of beer to her. "Well, I'll take Stan's in, shall I? He's probably floodin' wonderin' where it's got to."

The weak joke didn't make her smile. "Don't go -- not for a moment, Ray --" and put out an impulsive hand.

He halted, and looked at her, green eyes wary. She knew too well his dislike of overt emotion, of anything tasting of sentimentality; and his determined shunning of physical contact had always hurt her, especially since it seemed to be more pronounced in him even than in other off-hand young boys of his own age. Another, closer memory touched her, and she made herself smile. "Don't worry, I'm not going to try and hug you. Your friend, though; d'you know what he did? Gave me a thumping kiss."

After a moment he smiled, and relaxed. "Well, he would. Bodie; he's all over everyone." He paced around the kitchen, restless as a wild animal, and she followed him with her eyes, unable to get enough of the sight of him, after so long. He had been a strange-looking child, green-eyed, curly-headed and wild; all that had settled down now. He had a trim athletic body that moved with careless, feral grace; his face had an aloof, unusual kind of beauty; he was self-assured: an extremely attractive man.

"I thought you might be married by now," she said.

He picked up his can of beer and drank, looking at her over it. "It's not easy...in my job."

"I'm sure you're right," she said, with a hint of bitterness.

Ray Doyle tensed inside, because he did not want, now or ever, to thrash out again the rights and wrongs of CI5 with his mother. The last time he had seen her they'd said it all, thrashing it out over and over until it was done and they were further apart than they'd ever been. He'd been proud of having been selected for CI5, was inwardly hurt that she was not, and that she would not listen to his justifications, even as a voice whispered to him that he was not all sure that he believed in them himself...

He thrust that thought aside, hard, and concentrated on the task in hand; a difficult one even if his mother did appear ready for reconciliation to the fact that her eldest child was a paid assassin, a professional killer.

"I do it because I have to," he said, aloud.

She had been remembering that night, too. "Don't let's talk about your job. You know how I feel about it. But -- you're still my son. You're still you. That's all that needs to be said."

He nodded, and took a deep breath; relieved by the compromise.

"Are you happy, love?" she asked, gently. "I'd like to know you were."

Bodie slid into his mind; Bodie who'd be here at his side in moment, snarling and snapping at the world, fighting them off if he let out one whimper of need for help. "Happy," he said thoughtfully, "Yeah, I suppose I am."

She went on stumbling a little over the words because at any moment he might freeze up, withdraw into himself, "That was why I hoped you'd meet someone; because you always seem very much alone Ray, and no-one can live that way and be happy. You're young and you always were one to be alone, and maybe you don't realise it yet, but it's true and I couldn't bear to think it would always be that way..."

He hesitated for several heartbeats, wondering. She was neither as hard nor as blatant as Karen, who'd ask right out and probably would before much more time passed; maybe it would be better not to tell her too much; even if she guessed as the years went on she could pretend to herself what she liked. Even as he thought all this, another part of himself was registering surprise even to be considering telling his mother about Bodie must mean that he was surer of himself; surer of Bodie and their future together than he had ever been.

He didn't feel guilty about what there was between himself and Bodie; he never had done, not one twinge of shame even right at the beginning when he realised he was sexually attracted to his heavily masculine partner. That very fact meant something to him; but it might mean something altogether different to someone who already saw him a moralless killer, even if she did think she no longer saw him that way.

"I'm not alone," he said clearly. "Not now. So don't worry about that."

She was startled, he could see that; and still uncomprehending. Damn, he cursed to himself much too late: I shouldn't have told her. Half the truth wasn't going to be enough. He hadn't been trying to hide anything and he supposed he'd been somewhat idealistically hoping that she already knew, had already accepted it, with no more words needed.

Instead of that, it was going to be "Who?" and "When can I meet her?"

The kitchen door opened and they both jumped; Doyle's right hand making the customary, unconscious slide up towards the inside of his jacket. It was Bodie, hard faced and serious, his mouth aggressively out, very much on the job, totally unaware of anything else right now.

"Christ, she's tense," he growled at Doyle. "I've tried to get over that she's got the flower of CI5 on her side but it's fuckin' difficult with a twenty-word vocabulary. "You don't happen to have Nembutal about, barbiturates, that sort of thing? Or Valium?" This last, in a slightly softer tone of voice was addressed to Doyle's mother, but she was looking only at Doyle himself, the spark of sudden understanding leaping into her eyes as she watched her son, her mind tracing back over the day, the little things --

"Yes; yes I have," she said slowly. "In the bathroom cabinet."

"Thanks, love." Bodie was about to leave when he suddenly saw Doyle's face. He stopped, putting a hand on his mate's shoulder. "All right sunshine?" he said quietly, puzzled and concerned, suddenly oblivious to anything else.

Doyle flinched from the touch as if burned, shrugging Bodie angrily off.

Bodie's face changed; his eyes black and unreadable. "All right," he answered himself cynically; and left, heroically without slamming the door.

They could hear him taking the stairs, one, two, three -- Doyle remembered leaping up those stairs, hurt and angry, making it in three strides to the sanctuary of his bedroom, slamming the door and locking out the bitter world that didn't understand him. Above, the same door opened and shut; but there was no sanctuary for Bodie here, none at all save himself and he had just pushed Bodie away.

Sick with himself and his instinctive reaction, he said a cool "Excuse me," to his mother, and went to follow Bodie, to make it up.

"Ray!"

Arrested by her unusually forceful tone, he turned at the door, not knowing what to expect, braced for anything.

You had dreams. When they never came true, you lived your life through your children, you wished on them all the things you had never achieved, all the happiness and contentment you had never known.

They never made it either, and you had a choice. To turn them away, rejecting them openly because they had failed you, and their own potential; because the object of your own creation turned out, after all, to be no better than yourself --

Or you accepted the reality, made the most of it: Karen living childless in a semi with an insensitive boor, spending her time chatting with girlfriends of scandals in the street: Ray -- as he was --

She loved her son.

"You know," she said as if nothing had happened, although her voice was shaking, "Your Bodie. I like him a lot. You always needed someone to look after you, and he seems a capable sort."

There was silence of several moments while he took it in. Then, "Bodie? Can't boil an egg," he said absently; and then he smiled at her, a wide smile of relief. On impulse he reached out and hugged her; for the first time in years.

Then he let her go. "I think I'll turn in now," she said, suddenly awkward.

He checked his watch. "It's only ten."

"I'm tired. All right, love? See you in the morning."

He listened as she went up the stairs, thinking that yes, she would need time to think. She'd been generous; met him halfway, or more than halfway; and he felt better, somehow; more at ease. He could hear laughter coming from the living room, Karen's brassy giggles, Stan's barks and hoots, and winced inwardly. He badly needed to be alone with Bodie, just quiet and at peace; he ached for it. Where the hell was he? Not sulking, he pleaded inwardly; he just couldn't deal with it.

He went quietly up the stairs. His mother's bedroom door was shut, a thread of light shining beneath it. He went to the landing window and looked out, his professional instincts momentarily taking over: no access, that way, no footholds beneath and nothing to overlook it. He heard a door opening behind him and a key turning, and he glanced over his shoulder.

"Got a sleeping pill down her anyway," said Bodie succinctly, "and I left a bucket in there. I reckon we can forget about her till the morning." It would be Christmas Day. He came and stood beside Doyle, looking out with him, his face closed and tight.

Doyle slipped an arm around his waist, leaned his head on Bodie's shoulder.

Bodie was tense. He wasn't even quite sure what he'd done wrong. "Sorry," he muttered, anyway.

"Wasn't you, was it? Listen mate, if I do anything like that again, you just fetch me one, OK?" He was quite serious.

"Hit you?" said Bodie, looking away unseeingly, "Nah, I couldn't."

Doyle grinned at him. "Yeah, you could. You'd just love to thump me sometime; I can see it in your eyes."

Bodie only shook his head, staring out at the night. A little twinge of alertness stirred in Doyle; maybe...? He pushed at Bodie, gently, making Bodie look at him. "Wish you would, sometimes. Be fun..."

He felt Bodie's resistance, in every line of his rigidly tensed body; saw it in his set face, his flared nostrils as he sucked in a breath. Now we're getting there...

"You're not into those games, Doyle," muttered Bodie, looking away again, out at the silent dark street.

They were keeping their voices very low. "Nah," said Doyle easily, "S&M, no way, I'm not talking about that. But I'm a big strong boy now, Bodie; I'm not a girl an' I'm not frightened of you. And I just think it would be exciting --" He paused.

"What would." Bodie, truculent.

Doyle leant very near him, his lips close to Bodie's ear. "If you got rough with me."

He meant, as well, "If you fucked me," but it didn't seem the right time or place to say it; and besides, he knew Bodie would see exactly what he was getting at.

Bodie turned away, letting out a long sigh of angry frustration, tension. "I can't."

It was so quiet, his partner only just caught it. "Why not? You said right at the beginning, you said --"

"Leave it out Doyle, will you!" Bodie snarled at him, finally snapping. He wanted to get away; go anywhere so long as Doyle and his blasted questions weren't there; but Doyle's hand shot out and kept him there, with a grip of steel.

"OK," he said quietly, eyes gleaming in the darkness, "Don't go off the deep end. I'm not forcing you into it. Couldn't, could I?" he said, with a flash of humour. "Come with me a minute."

He tugged Bodie along with him. "Where --"

"SSssh," Doyle admonished him, and pulled him into the bathroom, shutting the door.

"What are you doing?"

Doyle gave him an angelic smile. "Need to pee."

"And you need me along?" growled Bodie. He perched himself on the edge of the bath and watched Doyle.

Doyle rearranged his clothing, came over and hauled Bodie to his feet, hands under his armpits, looking into his face. Then he brought his mouth down on Bodie's warm lips, closing his eyes.

It was a long, gentle kiss; Doyle making no attempt to force any sexual response. He simply needed this, and this was the only safe place in the house. He kept his hands under his partner's arms, even when they rose to hold him. When the pressure of Bodie's mouth became harder, more urgent, he opened his eyes, and pulled back a little. He took a deep breath. "I needed that..."

"Me too," said Bodie shortly.

Doyle squeezed him once and let him go, with regret. "Let's go get that beer."

Bodie's eyes were suddenly gentle. "Been a tough day for you, eh sunshine?"

"Not over yet," came Doyle's cryptic reply as he went down the stairs.

"Where've you two been? You've been ages, you've missed the start of the film." Karen twisted round from where she was sitting on the floor, against Stan's knees, and gave them a hard stare.

"Takes time, love," said Doyle, settling himself beside Bodie on the settee. "Didn't hear you offering to help." He snapped open a beer, passed it to Bodie and rolled a can along the floor in Stan's direction. "Beer, Stan." Karen was drinking wine, and didn't reply as he'd known she wouldn't. Lazy little piece his sister, always had been. His sister. Sometimes he found it hard to believe.

The film was a Hammer horror; dark misty streets, gas lights, strange robed figures with big teeth slinking about graveyards, brooding. Bodie and Doyle found it hilarious, and showed it. Karen and Stan, however, were the types who took their late-night thrills seriously, and resented heartily the snorts of laughter, the howls of mock agony, the audible shivers of fear coming from the settee.

"Just knock it off, Ray," said Karen irritably, at last. "You're ruining it. Might as well turn it off, the way you two are carrying on."

"Oh, sorry," said Doyle with a pseudo-scared look at Bodie; then he rolled against his partner and shut his eyes.

After a while, Bodie knew from the relaxed, heavy warmth of his partner that he had genuinely fallen into a doze. He made him more comfortable, sliding down so Doyle's head rested on his shoulder where he could support him easily, staring out over the disordered head to the flickering images on the TV screen, half concentrating on the film, whose plot he had long since lost, half soaking up the pleasurable feeling of Doyle, trustful in sleep, close against him.

"Ray?" Karen's quiet voice filtered through; she had turned to look at them.

"He's asleep," answered Bodie shortly. He met her eyes with cold equanimity; he wasn't playing. In fact, he hoped he'd been making it clear all evening he wasn't playing; but apparently not.

"So's Stan. Boring, isn't it."

Bodie wasn't bored. He liked it; Ray Doyle asleep, nestling close to him. It was sentimental and ridiculous; and he'd sell his soul for it.

She rose, moving lightly as a cat, and came to sit on the floor near his feet, looking up. "Shall we wake them up? Play cards or something."

"No," he said. He didn't want Doyle disturbed; he badly needed to relax. Unfortunately, she arrived at a rather less innocuous conclusion concerning his rebuttal; and threw one arm up, across his knees.

It was quite a casual gesture; you could just about get away with it after an evening of free-

flowing drink and Christmas camaraderie. She tipped her head back and looked up at him, appraising. Bodie began to think maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to rouse Doyle after all.

"Cards?" he said, as if suddenly waking up to the idea, "What sort of cards?"

She seemed to have gone off the idea, herself. She was looking at her brother, sprawled across the big dark man's body, kept close with an arm around him. "Look at him. He'll give you a cramp. Bet he's not your idea of the greatest thing to cuddle up to this time of night." She giggled, softly; and dancing brown eyes met his.

"He's all right," muttered Bodie.

"Look, I've got a good idea --"

She let her fingers walk up his leg, over his knee.

He was getting decidedly uneasy, though he knew he was being ridiculous. All right, she was flirting, enjoying a bit of fun: he'd met her type before, the type who liked this game, an inconsequential flutter of excitement. The moment you started taking them seriously, played back, and harder, they turned tail and retreated, casting reproachful glances over their shoulders at you for having spoilt the fun.

"Yeah," he said deliberately, "Yeah, I just bet you have."

She looked into his hard dark eyes and felt a shiver of excitement. He was a beauty. "Let's go for a walk."

"A walk? It's nearly midnight." He knew it must, because the late mass had started on the television; angelic rows of white-frilled choirboys pacing down the aisle, their mouths identical O's as they sang the old, old story.

She tossed her head, looking mysterious. For a moment, he caught a flash of Ray about her, in the curve of the lips, the provocative slant of her eyes. "Couldn't be better. I love midnight; it's the best hour."

What a conquest, he thought with grim amusement; the brother on one arm the sister across his lap.

"Oh yeah love, and how am I gonna explain it to him?" He glanced over at the burly man asleep in front of the fire. Wake up, mate, your wife's trying to seduce me...

She leaned in closer, dropped her chin onto his knee, ran her tongue around her parted lips. "He won't know. All that beer in him; sleeps like a log, our Stan does."

He began to wonder, after all, if she was merely playing. In any case, he felt it had gone quite far enough. Doyle murmured something on his shoulder, restless, and Bodie shook him, leaning

forward to dislodge Karen at the same time. "Wakin' up are you, sunshine?" he said, loudly and pointedly.

Doyle came awake fast, eyes snapping open, limbs tense, his hand snaking inside his jacket as he looked around.

"Christ, you're jumpy, Ray," said Karen, getting her breath back. "Having an exciting dream, were you? Bet you were back with the police puttin' the heavies on some poor member of the public." She got to her feet, not displeased with what had passed. There was plenty of time yet for a little amusement when the circumstances were right. She winked at Bodie and moved off. "Let's play cards."

Doyle was smiling at him, stretching. "Must've been tired."

"It's getting late," murmured Bodie, casting a glance at the Howards. "What time --"

"Won't be a minute, boys, just popping upstairs. We can play whist when I get back," Karen called, and left the room.

Doyle grinned, and answered Bodie's unfinished question. "Not a hope, mate. They won't turn in before the telly ends; no chance."

Bodie checked that Stan was still asleep. "Look, your sister --"

Doyle understood in a moment, and chuckled. "Try it on, did she?" He didn't seem surprised. "She 'asn't changed."

Bodie stared. "Bit blatant though, isn't it mate? Husband only ten feet away. Mind you --" he cast a disdainful eye over the snoring, open-mouthed form, "You can see why she fancies a change of scenery every now and then."

Doyle snorted. "If she were married to Clint Eastwood she'd still be lookin' around."

"Yeah? Brazen," decided Bodie; and his arm closed tight around Doyle suddenly. "Both of you. Utterly brazen."

"She used to try it on with me."

Bodie looked down at him with disbelief. "You?"

Doyle nodded. He appeared quite unconcerned. "Wouldn't leave me alone when she was sixteen, seventeen."

"You're puttin' me on?" demanded Bodie.

"Nope."

"And -- ?" prodded Bodie cautiously.

Doyle snorted. "Oh c'mon mate, I was never that desperate."

Bodie shook his head, and gave up. Jesus, families. He'd never missed being part of one, at least not since he was very small; but he'd never guessed, either, just what it could be like. Doyle's interesting revelations made him resolve to be very careful, very careful indeed of Karen Howard.

Doyle was feeling refreshed, relaxed and lively after his doze. He jumped to his feet, roaring "Come on Stan!" and thumped him on the shoulder.

Personally, Bodie would have been quite happy to leave him asleep.

"Karen wants to play cards," Doyle said breezily, staring relentlessly down into the screwed-up, drowsy face of his brother-in-law. "And you don't want to disappoint her, do you? I'll bet she's hell when she's disappointed. Get the cards, Bodie; they're in the kitchen, left hand drawer."

Bodie found them and made a quick check on the outside doors.

He turned from an inspection of the front door panelling to see Karen there; she had shut the kitchen door behind her and they were alone and shut off in the narrow passage-way. She was advancing on him, self-assured and inquisitive.

He threw caution to the winds, and growled at her, "Don't be so bloody nosy."

"Oh, forceful," she said in a way which reminded him of her brother; the ensuing glance from heavy-lidded brown eyes, too. There was no doubt about it. The Doyle children had been handed out more than their fair share of voracious sensuality. The difference was, Ray Doyle's strong sexual appeal was softened by a dreamy side to it, that called forth gentleness, and an intense desire to protect him. Looking at Karen's gleaming, wordly eyes, Bodie imagined that no-one could ever feel anything for her but lust. Or hatred.

She was standing right underneath the mistletoe, under the light, and it picked out mellow glints in her shining dark hair, the pink flush of her cheeks; and he could see the aureoles of her nipples clearly through her thin, silky blouse. He was beginning to feel hot, and trapped.

"Come on, kiss me, then," she said softly, and it was Ray's voice only lighter; he felt sickened and lustful at the same time. She was a gypsy; dark-eyed, wanton and abandoned.

"Don't be shy," she said, beginning to be amused. "Mistletoe's magic; everyone forgets what they've done under it after, and no harm done."

"Stan keepin' you short by any chance, love?" he asked, not even trying to keep the vicious edge off his voice. She came closer; he could smell her pleasant, light scent; the warm sweet wine on

her breath. Her bright, sensual eyes peered into his face. "You're scared," she accused, softly.

Exasperated beyond good sense he grabbed her; and she relaxed against him straight away, staring curiously up at his aggressive chin, not hurrying. "That's more like it." He could feel the warmth of her small breasts, pushing into his chest. A smile curved across her full lips, suddenly. "Bet you wouldn't be slow if it was our Ray standin' here, would you? I'm not daft, I've seen the way you look at him. Cuddlin' him." Then a thought occurred to her, and her eyes widened with certainty as she stared at him. "I bet you do, don't you? You make it with Ray."

"Are you drunk, love?" he parried, hard-eyed. "You were tipping it back like water out there."

She smiled again, knowing she was right; it all added up. She shook her head gently, so all her dark hair flew about. "Well, well. You make it -- with my brother. What -- a -- lovely -- thought," she said, spacing the words out, dreamily; tip0igg her head back, considering. "He's a beautiful creature, isn't he? You an' him: now there's something I'd like to see."

All of a sudden, he was in command again; she had tipped him over the edge. With one hard, swift movement he twisted her arms behind her back, staring down at the flushed face below him, his own face cynical, cruel. "You're a bitch," he told her, dispassionately. "A whoring bitch. Don't play with me, poppet. It wouldn't be a pretty game."

He was hurting her but she forced a smile, her tongue between her lips. "I'd like it. Any time."

He stared down, his eyes jet-black, and hard; his mouth twisting. "No, sunshine," he said with black humour, "You wouldn't like it all."

And beneath the mistletoe, he brought his mouth down on hers in a savage travesty of a kiss.

Doyle was lying on the settee, arms behind his head, feet up, when he heard his sister scream.

"What the --" began Stan, and he was just on his feet as Doyle disappeared through the door.

Karen was breathing hard, the back of her hand pressed against her cheek; Bodie stood some way apart in the narrow passageway. "What the hell?" demanded Doyle, and Bodie shrugged, meeting his eyes with a faint humorous twist of his mouth. Doyle took everything in; the fact that Bodie looked hard, self-contained, well in control -- nothing serious, he decided instantly, not the bloody terrorists this time -- and that his sister's lips looked bruised, her expression defiant, but scared. Definitely scared. That was odd; Karen was many things, and most of them objectionable, but she wasn't a coward. And if she'd been playing around with Bodie, well, she might have got her fingers burned, but Bodie wasn't a rapist. He raised a puzzled eyebrow at his partner, but Bodie only shrugged again.

Stan was there now, grabbing his wife, glaring around at everyone else. "What is it, lover?"

She shook herself impatiently free, staring coldly and accusingly at Bodie.

"Did he touch you?" demanded Stan furiously, glowering in rising fury at the smooth dark bastard who'd been trying it on with his wife. Incensed into red heat, he swung back his arm, ready to land one right in the centre of the arrogant features. Karen caught it, just as Doyle was about to step in, Bodie about to move smoothly out of the way to let Stan's fist thump harmlessly into the wall. Harmlessly for Bodie, that was.

"Don't be a bloody idiot, Stan," she said irritably, an edge of fine tension in her voice. "It's nothing like that... He's got a gun."

Stan stared. "A gun?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? He's wearing a fucking gun." It had terrified her, the heavy cool metal her exploring fingers had unexpectedly come across, beneath the arm of the exciting man who was kissing her with cold, unloving violence.

The situation defused somewhat, at least for Stan. "Of course he's not," he said bracingly. Karen was a strange girl; it was why he had married her.

Karen's voice was like chilled ice; again, unnervingly, it reminded Bodie of Doyle at his worst. "Ask him. He won't deny it." Her eyes met Bodie's, cool and resigned.

Stan turned to him, bewildered. "This a joke?"

"No," said Bodie, tight-lipped, cold-eyed.

"You've really got a gun?" Stan had never seen a gun. He knew one thing -- the people who carried them were usually criminals, and never afraid to use them. He cleared his throat, cautiously, eyeing Bodie warily. "Er -- you got a license for it, son?"

Karen turned her head away, in absolute disgust at his ignorance. "Of course he hasn't. And he's a bloody maniac too; I'll tell you that. Don't go near him!" she yelled as Stan moved.

Doyle began to feel it was time he took a hand in all this. He stepped away from the wall, uncrossing his arms. "All right," he said coolly, "Panic over --"

His sister turned on him, wild and furious. "It's bloody well not over! You an' him -- you're in this together, aren't you, you've kidnapped that girl upstairs and gone into hiding with her here, in my mother's house, and you'll shoot any of us without a second thought, won't you, if we try to get on the phone or get help --"

Doyle began to laugh. He couldn't help it; Karen's angry, fatalistic conclusions, her utter distrust of himself; Stan's open-mouthed, dawning comprehension; Bodie's cold dignity as he watched the little scene with a faintly bored expression -- it all struck his perverse sense of humour as decidedly funny. Watching his partner, Bodie too gave a quick grin, and relaxed.

"Oh yeah, it's bloody funny," said Stan, goaded into a bona fide swear word at long last. "It's

bloody funny, isn't it." He stared at each of them suspiciously, not fancying tackling either.

"Yeah," said Doyle with a final chuckle. "I suppose it is. You heard of CI5?"

"Of course I floodin' well have --"

"And you?" Bodie interposed, giving Karen a hard stare. She didn't deign to answer. "Yeah, believe it or not --" he extracted his ID, tossed it to her -- "me and him, we're the good guys."

And they played cards, all four of them in the small hours, drinking beer and at first carried along by a kind of mad euphoria, fuelled by the release from tension, and the mercurial, quirky humour of three of them.

They were playing whist, and Radio two was droning Christmas records and soft small talk in the background and Doyle had been aware for about the last three hands that tensions were building up again, between his partner and Karen's husband. Bodie was very good at cards, way out of the class of the other three but a one-and-a-half dimensional game like whist left little room for skilled manoeuvre if the cards ran against you. And the cards were going against them. Doyle was sick of staring at hands of twos and threes, fattened out with a lone suit of valueless non-trumps, one reasonable trump he'd be forced into wasting on a thrown trick; and a line of kings someone else usually trumped in on. They were losing nearly every hand; and it was just as well, Doyle decided, the way Stan was going on.

The older man was playing this game like his reputation depended on it, his head bowed and furiously concentrating; whining in a tone that was less and less humorous as the game went on at Karen after each hand about the wrong leads she'd supposedly made. It was obvious to Doyle that Bodie and Karen had been fooling around out there before she took fright and yelled; it was probably obvious to Stan, too, now he'd had the time to think about it; and getting back at Bodie, now revealed to be a top-shot in a kind of glamorous secret service, which was how Karen would probably see it, seemed to be desperately important to him, even if it was only in this shallow medium. And he was cheating. Doyle was sure of it; and he willed Bodie silently to let it go.

Some chance of that. Bodie had nothing against cheating, if it was properly done, and if you could get away with it unobserved; it just ranked as another skill, like good bidding, in Bodie's mind. But this was probably the most amateurish attempt at it he'd ever seen, and it rankled at his pride. He'd scarcely been able to believe it when Stan made the first heavy-handed hint to his partner over which suit to lead -- "Take heart, love" -- and it was followed by others, thick and fast: "girl's best friend"; digging references, of course, for spades. Bodie had contented himself with a single, cutting comment addressed to Karen, and a dark look from narrowed eyes at Stan: "Your partner seems to be trying to hint to you that he's out of hearts. I should try leading the king, love; then you're covered both ways."

The comments dropped off after that but a little later Stan dropped his box of matches, bent to pick them up -- and got in a quick eyeful of Doyle's fanned out hand.

But it was when Stan, talking loudly, made some obvious fumbles while shuffling that Bodie

decided enough was enough. It was the silliest, most feeble piece of cheating he'd ever set eyes on; it would insure nothing more than that the top card was poor, the bottommost one good and Bodie was exasperated into infuriation. Stan was about to deal.

"I'll cut those, sunshine," Bodie growled, and removed the pack with a smooth flick of his wrist.

"Whaddya mean by that," said Stan, looking up.

"Exactly what I said." Bodie ran the cards together with expert thumbs.

Stan got heavily to his feet. "Are you saying there was somethin' not right with the way I shuffled? Well, are you?" He leaned over and glared at the smooth dark man who'd been kissing his wife.

Bodie looked up, suddenly deadly. He said nothing. He simply stared at Stan until the other man, uncomfortable, moved back. Then Bodie slapped the pack down on the table and waited grimly for the deal, his eyes on Stan's hands all the time, flipping back and forth, watching every card.

It made Stan nervous; and he was rather drunk. They played the hand out in silence. It was half past one. "Shall we call it a day, go up now?" said Karen.

"My deal," said Bodie, very deep in his throat, ignoring her; and he drew the cards together.

It had taken him months of practice to perfect this manoeuvre; but then he'd had months; periods of stultifying, steamy boredom out in Africa -- interspersed with brief bursts of terrifyingly bloody action, when there was not time to think, just shoot, and move, and shoot again until there was silence at last but for the pounding of your own heart, and you stood in the wreck of your thoughts, and realised you were soaked to the skin with the sweat of fear, and it was time to count the dead --

But the nights were long, and he'd had an ex-GI mate who was the biggest cardsharp in Texas, or so he'd assured Bodie as he riffled through the pack, the other hand on Bodie's thigh. Bodie had been a quick learner, and he had it all down perfect in his mind and his fingers; how to gather the tricks up from the previous hand, how to rearrange them, not too slowly, and so it looked just as if you were making a flashy, but innocuous shuffle; and then he began to deal.

"You should have passed them to Karen to cut," put in Stan, nastily. "Since we're playing by the book."

"Why, don't you trust me?" challenged Bodie, without pausing in his swift deal.

Doyle knew his partner was up to something, but not what, exactly, and his cards provided little clue. His hand was rather better than most of previous, certainly; he had three high trumps and one other, but the rest of his cards were mostly clubs. He could see only three, possibly four, certain tricks in it; no whitewash coming up here... If this was Bodie's idea of sleight of hand,

he'd have done better to stay honest...

Karen's lead: a low diamond. That probably meant she had the king and was hoping to flush out the ace; like himself she was a straightforward, guileless player. He only had one diamond, the eight, and played it. Stan risked a queen; then Bodie swiftly took the trick with the ace. He hadn't looked at Doyle at all, his head bent frowning over his cards. Not for Bodie the obvious message; the heavy-handed clue.

Bodie swiftly led a trump -- the five; still without looking up.

Unusual to lead trumps at this early stage; it unnerved Karen, who preferred them neatly left to the end. She played the three, disowning any challenge. Doyle's heart was beginning to race, for some reason, He played the ace of trumps, and the trick was his.

No obvious message, no. But Bodie had meant something, that was for sure, with that unusual opening-game lead. Doyle stared at his cards, his two remaining high trumps, his long run of clubs -- and suddenly it all fell into place; he could see the pattern as clearly and inevitable as if it were marked out.

He had a completely unbeatable hand. He could take nearly every remaining trick, if he played it right, now he had the lead. And he knew how to play it right, because Bodie had showed him the way to go. He led again, with the king of spades. Then the queen. Twelve trumps down then; and he had the last of them, the lowly seven. He began to trot out his long suit of clubs, and even the two was a winning card, his fellow players having long run out, jettisoning thrown cards onto the suit that had looked so unpromising until he had cleaned out the trumps, and were now as good as trumps themselves. The last but one trick he took with his seven of spades. The last, his sole heart, an unhopeful ten; but he knew what would happen and didn't even doubt it when Stan threw down the king he'd saved on top of it with a wheeze of frustrated temper; because Bodie, looking up at last, let the ace flutter down on it from above, and met Ray Doyle's eyes with a flicker of amused, cynical triumph, sweeping thirteen tricks to his side of the table.

Karen was the first to speak. Like her brother, she a good, ungrudging loser. "What a weird hand. Thought mine was quite good at first, lots of pictures. Funny the way things go, isn't it."

Stan had risen to his feet. He had drunk a fair bit that evening, and been sorely provoked; his face was flushed dark red as he glared at Bodie. "Funny?" he said. "Funny? This floodin' son of bitch dealt that hand --"

Karen began to laugh, suddenly getting the idea. "You mean he set it up? That really is too much. God, Ray --" she shook her head -- "Unstable; you were too bloody right. He's a right nutter..." She darted an amused, not unappreciative glance at the moody dark man who made it with her brother, and put a hand out to Stan, getting to her feet. "I'm off, then."

"He cheated," said Stan in a low voice. He looked down at an arrogantly sprawled Bodie, who didn't even bother to look up.

"Well, so did you. Come on for godsake. It's nearly morning as it is. Night you two. Oh and -- have fun --"

Stan's parting shot at Bodie was a level look. "I'll be watchin' out for you."

The door shut; they heard the low voices getting fainter as they went up the stairs and doors up there opening and shutting. Doyle chuckled, shaking his head as he got up, thumping Bodie between the shoulderblades. "Nice trick, mate."

It had been cheap and flashy, Bodie thought, the humiliation of the other man; but he didn't care. "He asked for it."

"Yeah." Doyle wandered to the sideboard, looked at the bottles. "You want another drink? Nightcap." Without waiting for an answer he poured two shots of whisky, brought one to his mate.

Bodie looked very uptight; dark and brooding. "What's the matter?" He rested his head on Bodie's lap, swung his legs up onto the settee, supporting his glass on his chest.

Bodie took a drink. The harsh liquid slid down his throat, and it matched his mood. "Your bloody sister..." He felt angry, tired yet too tense for sleep. He stared down into Doyle's upturned face and raised his free hand absently to trail in the soft, heavy curls.

"She gettin' to you? You'll get used to it."

"Rather not, thanks." Bodie, very bleak.

Doyle thought back. "What happened? Before she screamed?"

"She practically ate me alive," said Bodie without a trace of humour. He felt used, and unclean; not because he had kissed her, that was nothing, but because she had roused in him a sick response because of the perverse resemblance he had seen in her to Doyle. Doyle who was apparently dissatisfied with his performance in bed.

"I did warn you," said Doyle, breaking into Bodie's sombre thoughts.

Bodie didn't reply.

"Bodie -- ?" said Doyle, beginning to be puzzled, and worried.

Bodie moved his head to one side, restless. "She knows about us."

Doyle took it in, not surprised: Karen was sharp. "Well, so what? If she thinks you're gay, she won't waste her time on you, will she?"

"You must be joking," muttered Bodie glumly, "She's got a bloody threesome in mind."

Doyle was thoughtful. He twisted away from Bodie and sat up. "Come on, Bodie," he said harshly, "I don't give shit what she's got in mind, and nor do you. You can't seriously be expecting me to believe you're worried about Karen. You've met her type before and you know perfectly well how to handle 'em."

The scathing, down-to-earth tones relaxed Bodie a little. Doyle was right, he was overreacting. But the tension didn't all leave him, and his spirits refused to rise. Doyle was continuing. "Or if you want, we can just leave any time. Now, if you're tearin' yourself up about it. I'm not exactly havin' the biggest charge of my life either, you know."

"I know," muttered Bodie. "We'll stick it out. Just don't expect me to remember my manners if she tries it on again, will you?"

"I won't leave you alone for a moment," promised Doyle facetiously. "And if she wants to have her wicked way with you, she'll have to fight me for you, OK?"

Bodie thought of something. "Look mate, I'm not knocking her, you know? But it strikes me she's the malicious type. I wouldn't put it past her to land it on your mother."

"How did she find out? Did you tell her?" Doyle asked, idly. "Of course not," said Bodie, affronted. The he remembered, adding sheepishly, "Not exactly. You went to sleep all over me, and she said I looked at you --"

Doyle chuckled affectionately. "I just bet you did. You're a sloppy thing, you are."

He finished his drink, checked his watch. After two. He and Bodie; they never needed much sleep. Tensed up and alert for most of the day, they favoured a long unwind in the evening, drinking to relax them but seldom hard; music, talk, love; until they settled down for five or six hours oblivion.

"Your mother," reminded Bodie, who was getting edgy; they were all alone now and he could imagine the turn Doyle's thoughts would be taking soon. Before, he had only ever been pleased that Doyle's sexual drive was as strong as his own; but tonight the idea was somehow threatening, making all his insides curl up in a scared knot; it was funny, really, he thought viciously; a predatory lustful ex-para like himself incapable and anxious -- "Your charming sister is going to break the news to her over the cornflakes that her son is a raving queer."

"Yeah, probably," agreed Doyle. "First rule of self-defence though; get in the first move yourself. She already knows."

Bodie glanced across at him, startled. "You told her?"

Bodie frowned, suspicious. Doyle elucidated: "In the kitchen, earlier. She had been going on about the loneliness of my life, and I told her I had someone now, and she was just about to ask who when you came in right on cue and fussed over me like a mother hen --"

It was all clear now to Bodie, why Doyle had thrown him off. "Sorry, mate."

"Nah, it's best she knows."

"How'd she take it?" said Bodie cautiously.

"Well, I don't imagine she's exactly overjoyed," Doyle said dryly. "She'll have to get used to it, won't she?"

The room was very dark; just one standard lamp casting a yellow glow and the coloured kaleidoscope of the Christmas tree lights. Doyle looked over at Bodie, saw his dark eyes gleaming under down-cast lashes; Bodie was a bit subdued tonight. He'd done well today. "All right, mate?" he said quietly. He got up for another drink.

"Yeah." Bodie didn't sound convinced.

"Been a bit hairy at times, hasn't it. I'm sorry --"

"Sorry what?"

"Sorry you had to come, really. We could have been at home; that's how I planned it."

Bodie tipped back his head, drinking. "S'all right." He contemplated his glass, and admitted, moodily, "I'm so far gone I'd follow you if you took it into your head to spend Christmas on the moon."

Doyle laughed a little, but Bodie was in a reflective mood, watching him all the time. Every time he turned his head, or sniffed, or lifted his glass, he felt Bodie's brooding eyes on him. "What're you thinking," he asked, softly. He wanted to talk.

"That you're beautiful," responded Bodie instantly; he looked very enigmatic, almost melancholy.

"You really mean it, don't you," said Doyle, shaking his head.

"Yeah," said Bodie, twisting his glass between his palms.

"Know how you feel." Doyle let his gaze dwell lovingly on the dark hair, the smooth hard face; but Bodie didn't look up.

"Do you? No, sunshine; you don't know at all. And you want to know something else? If twenty bloody terrorists came through that door now looking for her, it wouldn't be her I was protecting. She could get shot to pieces; long as you were safe."

It was out; he'd said it. They were useless to CI5 as a team forever more, because he'd fallen out

of line, abandoned all objectives save one.

Doyle's face twisted into a grimace as he took a sip of his drink. "Yeah, I know, it's a problem."

Bodie took a cautious glance at him. "Look, Ray, I'll try --"

"You'll try," repeated Doyle, faintly, wryly bitter.

Bodie didn't understand. "You still haven't taken it in, have you, you crazy bastard. What will it take, want me to write you a poem or something?" said Doyle sarkily, exasperated. "You keep on and on as if all this is just on your side; well, it isn't. And I think you're right -- we might have a bit of problem with the job. It's a fair bet that if you send out romantically involved teams into do-or-die situations, you're on a dead wicket. Heroism doesn't look so objective all of sudden when you're faced with a choice between your life-mate and some johnny you're under contract to save at all costs. We'll 'ave to see how it goes. May be different when we're actually faced with it. I'll tell you something, though."

"What?"

"We'll only get one chance."

That was true all right. If Cowley knew they were even having these thoughts, ever got one whiff of this particular discussion, they'd be split without another thought. Or worse, Bodie thought. But was there ever a time, even before they'd become lovers, when he'd have sacrificed Doyle to successfully complete the job he was paid to do, if it had come to it? He didn't know; stashed it away for future consideration. Doyle touched him unexpectedly, and he flinched, violently.

"Hey," said Doyle softly, puzzled. "What's up?"

Bodie had been startled himself by his instinctive reaction, and it made him even more uneasy. Pulling back -- from Doyle? What the hell was the matter with him? "Look, don't start anything mate," he growled, looking away. "We can't do anything here so just don't get me all worked up, OK?"

Doyle was half amused, half concerned. "Can't? Why not?"

"Use your head, Doyle!" He waved a hand upwards, angrily. "S'gonna look good if her friends turn up and her bloody bodyguards are locked in a sweaty clinch, now isn't it."

"Aah. Well, I can see we can't get into anything heavy. But we could still have a little fun --"

He rolled against Bodie, experimentally, slipping one arm beneath him and the other over his stomach. Bodie shut his eyes, beginning to be aroused despite himself, by Doyle's nearness, the warm smell of him. Maybe this was what he needed, to relax him, to purge the restless anxiety...

Encouraged by the lack of opposition, Doyle parted Bodie's trousers and took Bodie in one gentle hand. "That's more like it," he murmured, smiling as Bodie's warm body began to swell and harden in his curled fingers.

Bodie forced himself to calm down, to concentrate on the gentle pleasure Doyle's slow, sure touch was giving him. Nothing threatening, nothing demanding; just a warm hand unhurriedly soothing him, squeezing him on towards a growing, insistent pleasure

"This more your style?" came an amused whisper near his ear. "Nice and gentle and slow; Bodie the big softie --"

He had only meant to be teasing and affectionate; to let Bodie know everything was all right. What came next, therefore, was totally unexpected.

Bodie threw Doyle off, hard, wrenching his hand away and leaping to his feet, adjusting his clothing with hurried, shaking fingers his back to the settee.

"You bastard," he said between clenched teeth. "You're determined to make me feel like a -- a bloody failure, aren't you?" He whirled round, staring angrily down at a startled Doyle. "Well, congratulations," he said, bitterly. "You've succeeded."

"Bodie --" said Doyle, his face screwed up with astonishment; but Bodie had gone, leaping up the stairs to the bathroom like a tornado.

When he came down, several minutes later, Doyle had laid out the sleeping bags on the floor and was already inside one, his face turned away. The house was very quiet; and the fire was dying.

"Should we take it in watches?" he said brusquely.

"If you think that's necessary," came Doyle's cool voice. "Just wake me up when you've had enough, then."

Bodie hesitated, decided it wasn't worth it, took off his shoes and slid into his bag. He could feel the hard floor beneath him, see the curly head of his partner a few feet away. He felt drained, and numb. "Doyle..."

"Yeah."

"I think we ought to finish it." Was that what he'd meant to say? There was no visible reaction from his partner. He went on, struggling. "We've given it a try. I reckon it's time to call it a day. Before we end up hating each other, or something... We could stay partners --"

"OK. If that's what you want."

Bodie supposed it was. He wasn't sure about anything any more; he felt heavy and defeated and

Doyle was a million years away from him. He sat up. "I'd better go back to the flat. Take her with me --"

"Not tonight, you won't," said Doyle's voice. He still wouldn't turn. "You're way over the limit an' I won't have you smashin' my car up. Besides, it'll look good, won't it -- CI5 agent gets done for drunken driving."

He wasn't that drunk, although Doyle was right, he'd certainly fail a breathalyser. It was more the prospect of pulling his weary body up again, loading Sleeping Beauty upstairs into the car and finding his way home that put him off.

"Tomorrow, then."

"Whatever you want."

All the same, it was a long time before Bodie dropped off to sleep. He woke after only a few hours to find the grey light filtering in through the drawn curtains, and checked his watch drowsily -- 7 AM. He was stiff and uncomfortable -- and cold. He looked over at the other sleeping bag, the curly head, the closed eyes, one had curled over the edge of the cover -- and it was then the sadness came, because he remembered; they'd agreed to finish it, it was over.

Why? he asked himself; he still loved Doyle, and Doyle, he thought, did love him. How could it be over when it had never really had a chance to begin? But Doyle had given him plenty of chances, and it was no good, he just couldn't match up. Best to finish it now, before Doyle grew to hate him. He supposed he'd been a bit hasty last night; OK, so Doyle had panicked him, made him feel ashamed and inadequate and a row was about to ensue; it had been in the cards anyway, !f}er the day they'd had. But sex wasn't everything, only one part of all the things that made them good together; surely they could have worked out something?

Funny, the way things went; he'd never had any trouble dealing with any of the relationships he'd had before, even the heavier ones; whereas this one which meant more to him than any of them, kept slipping like sand through his fingers.

He eased himself out of his sleeping bag, very quietly so as not to wake Doyle. The fire had burned itself out now; ashes in the grate wafting as he passed. Doyle was hell in the mornings; he'd at least make him some coffee before he left.

Before that he went quietly up the stairs to check on the girl; she was still fast asleep, fair head pillowed on one hand. Probably still knocked out by the pills he'd given her. Christ, but she was a nervous wreck. He wondered what her dreams were like.

Then he went down, and into the kitchen. He stopped short in surprise. Rita Doyle was there, fully dressed in sweater and skirt, busy doing something with a loaf of bread. He didn't know why he'd assumed he must be the only one awake; it was a reasonable hour, after all. And it was Christmas morning.

He looked down at his rumpled, sweaty shirt, his creased jeans and bare feet. No, he probably wasn't a very pretty sight; unshaven and unwashed to boot. "Sorry," he muttered, wondering if this was how mothers behaved. "I'd've changed if I'd known I was going to run into anyone."

"Don't worry," she said, and gave him a quick, awkward smile. It was then he remembered that he hadn't seen her since Doyle had admitted that Bodie was his lover. He needn't have bothered, whispered a bleak, ironic voice.

"What happened? Did you forget to bring pyjamas?" she was continuing.

"No," he muttered, "never wear 'em." He had slept in his clothes, as Doyle had, because they were technically on the job, and didn't fancy taking on any opposition bollocks-naked; but he didn't think it politic to mention the fact.

"You mean you always sleep in your clothes?" she asked, amazed at the habits of bachelors.

"No, I --" It was a daft conversation to be trapped in. He decided to get away from it. "I thought I'd make Ray some coffee, would I be in your way?"

"Course not love, help yourself. Is he still like a bear with a sore head in the morning?" She tipped decrusted cubes of bread into the liquidiser.

Well, that was clear enough. She was being quite calm about the whole thing, he decided, surprised; and another twinge of sadness touched him, it would have been all right, but it was over. He forced a smile.

"Yeah, he's not too full of sunshine at this hour. Coffee usually does the trick."

"I'd get it for you, but Christmas Day, we eat around 12 and we don't usually bother with breakfast. There's some fruit juice in the fridge, too."

He was thirsty, he realised, his mouth dry, and so he availed himself of the offer -- the tangy sourness of the grapefruit refreshing him somewhat. She was explaining the early dinner time to him as he spooned coffee powder into two mugs. " -- we never let them open their presents until after the dinner so it had to be early. Or we'd have gone mad; little devils they were, the pair of them --"

"I can imagine," said Bodie with feeling, picturing Ray and Karen as children.

"And the custom's just stuck. Time for the turkey to go in in another few minutes. I hope you're good at carving; Stan makes such thick slices and Ray with a knife in his hand is more than I can take, somehow, on Christmas Day."

He'd been accepted; more than that, she was trying to make him feel welcome. It was hard to take it in; he'd expected off-handedness at the very least. It was tempting to smile, and agree, and live out the nice fantasy for a little longer --

He said, "Actually, love, I'll have to get back to London sometime this morning. Sorry if it puts you out." He noticed, on the table, five gold-rimmed plates set out ready to be carried in for dinner; one had been intended for him.

"This morning?" She was staring at him. "I thought you were staying the weekend."

"Yeah, I thought so too. But as it turns out, I have to get back."

"I see," she said, coming to god knew what conclusion. "How will you get there?"

"I'll take Ray's car. Pick him up tomorrow, or send someone."

"You've been called back on the job, have you?"

Dammit. It would be much easier to lie. The kettle was boiling; he poured water onto the powder, adding milk and sugar for Doyle who didn't have to watch his weight.

"No," he heard himself say.

"Bodie --"

"Yeah?"

"I expect you've a family of your own to go to, is that it? Only, from the way Ray was talking, I thought --"

"It's not that." He decided, angrily, to be honest. Doyle had got him into this, and it wasn't her fault. He didn't want her thinking he didn't like it here, didn't like her. "Ray and I had a bit of a row last night and it'd be better if I went."

She digested it, thinking. "Look love --"

"Yeah?"

"I don't mean to interfere. But if you're planning on living with my son, you'd better resign yourself to a lot of rows. I know. I've lived with him for more years than you've been a grown man." She didn't know quite why she was doing this; part of her would have been glad to see the back of him, that particular door closed forever. She hardly knew him, and wasn't at all sure that she didn't hate him for what he had done to her son. But last night, lying alone in the big bed, even as words like 'Unnatural', 'Queer', 'Pansy' were floating through her head, one thing had stood steadfast: the remembrance of Ray, his certainty, his honesty, his self-possession as he had said 'I'm not alone any more'...

She went on: "Stay for dinner, eh love? If Ray's in one of his tempers, he'll get over it. You can go afterwards, if you're still of a mind to. But stay for dinner. It's Christmas."

He stared at her, totally nonplussed, not knowing what to say. It was all so different to what he'd expected. She was giving him a quick smile, a flash of humour from hazel eyes, his indecision telling her she was winning. "And if you don't stay, then who am I cooking all this lot for? Stan, he doesn't care what he eats so long as it's hot and plenty of it; and Ray now; however hard I work I get the feeling he'd be just as happy with a cheese sandwich --"

Bodie grinned, at that. He liked this woman; Ray's mother. "I'd like to stay. Thanks, love. But Doyle --" he realised the ridiculousness of using the surname to this woman who shared it -- "Ray, he's There was his partner, leaning on the doorjamb, arms folded, as unwashed, unshaven and barefooted as himself; he was wearing his shoulder holster and his eyes looked grey and hard.

"Happy Christmas, love," said his mother, unperturbed. "Bodie's not going anywhere till he's had dinner; that's settled." There was faint hint of challenge as she looked at him.

Doyle shrugged. "Fine by me. It was his idea to go."

Their eyes met; Bodie could read nothing Doyle's cool face at all, and wondered if he looked just as hard, just as unreachable to Doyle.

Then Doyle reached out a hand, closed it on Bodie's arm. His fingers bit. "Bring the coffee in the other room. I expect mum wants to get on."

Bodie brought the two mugs of coffee into the darkened room.

"Look," began Doyle without preamble, "I know what you said last night, but we were -- tired, a bit wrought-up. You couldn't have meant it." He took his coffee from Bodie's hand, stared at him over the rim of the mug as he sipped it.

A load fell away from Bodie's heart. "No."

"Well, why say it then!" Doyle snapped; then repented. "Look mate. You can't keep on making dramatic declarations about finishin' it every time we have a fight."

Bodie was abashed. "No, you're right. Sorry mate."

Doyle shot him a cool look from seagreen eyes. "That's why when all this started I was on about commitment. As much as married couples have. You an' me, we're always flyin' off the handle and I can't see us changin', and we'll have to learn to deal with it, not take off into the night every time we have a cross word."

"No," agreed Bodie. He drained the last of his coffee, set it down, and stepped towards Doyle, but Doyle fended him off, watching him hard.

"Yeah, well, look. I can see you're havin' some sort of problem with the sex thing, and I'm

obviously not handlin' it right -- "

"It's not your fault," muttered Bodie, looking away.

"What the hell's it matter whose fault it is? I just think we ought to stop trying for a bit. Just cool it down. Till we can work out what's wrong."

Bodie saw the logic in this; but it made him perversely sad. "I still want you. That hasn't changed." he muttered, very low.

"Oh well, that's nice to know," Doyle snorted, hands on hips. "I was beginning to think you'd turned straight."

Bodie took it up, relieved at the lighter tone. He gave Doyle a curly leer. "Not me, sunshine. Benter than ever."

Bodie used the phone to call up control, but there were no messages, no news. He tidied up their sleeping bags, draping them back over the suitcase in the hall -- the locked suitcase that contained enough armoury to fend off an army. He could hear splashing from within the bathroom, and knocked.

"That you?"

"Yeah."

"C'mon in, it's not locked."

He went in, locking the door behind him. His partner was in the bath, lying on his stomach; his crossed feet idly kicking together.

"Brave of you," commented Bodie. "Not locking it. I'm surprised your sister's not in here getting an eyeful." He deposited his pile of clean clothes on the laundry chest.

Doyle grinned. "I think she's transferred her interest. After your macho performance last night. Bodie the card-slinger."

Bodie looked disdainful. "Maybe I'll camp it up today in that case." He looked down at the naked, wet curve of his partner's back; came to perch on the edge of the bath. "No rubber duck, Doyle?"

"I had swans, sweetie." Doyle came back fast.

"Wash your back?" Bodie offered, tempted, and began to roll up his sleeves.

Doyle buried the heels of his palms into his eyes as Bodie's soaped hands began to move over him. "Any minute, are you going to rush out of the room yelling at me? I'd just like to know..."

"At this time of day, I'm entirely platonic," assured Bodie, with less than total honesty. He like the feel of Doyle's wet, firm-muscled body, the way his damp soapy skin moved over bone under the sweeps of his hands; liked the view the long tapering line of him, pale gold everywhere except for the whiteness of the lower back.

He said, frowning, "I'm sorry about last night --"

"Yeah, me too."

"You want me to try and explain?"

"Not right now."

Neither of them was particularly keen to continue that line of conversation; the hurt was still too close.

Bodie ran a slippery finger over the knobs of Doyle's spine; from the peachy nape of his neck where damp curls lay, right down to where it ended. The water closed and unclosed over Doyle's shining flesh; it was all curves and reflections, and beautiful skin: Doyle was smooth and firm and sweet all over.

Without knowing quite why he did it, Bodie continued the downward trail of his single-line exploration; over the hump of the aborted tail, remnant of a prehistoric ancestry, to where it disappeared between the rounded flesh of the buttocks; daringly he touched Doyle there.

He did no more; but it would be easy to go on, he knew how easy it would be, Doyle so soft, and easy, everything damp, slippery... He realised, suddenly, he was fiercely, strangely aroused.

"S'nice," murmured Doyle from behind closed eyes, his cheek pillowed in his hands. He was never shy to speak his reactions aloud; it was something that endeared him to Bodie and yet frightened him at the same time, because he could not do the same, not yet.

"Go on," said Doyle quietly, adding: "Please..."

The gentle, grave appeal moved him like nothing else could have done; his hand splayed out around Doyle's rounded white ass, and he slid one finger gently inside him, acknowledging the urgent thrust of uplifting need in his own groin with surprise; christ, he had to cool down or he'd --

Doyle's body closed tightly on the intruding finger and he shivered, the water suddenly cool on the flushed heat crowding his skin.

Bodie pulled out of the hot encasement but slowly, making it a sliding caress; he stroked Doyle there, between the cramping flesh, with gentle swirling rubbings of wet, soapy fingers, using the other hand to part him, tenderly; watching with bemusement his partner's body quiver, opening

for him; he invaded him again, this time with two fingers. Easy, still. Doyle moved gently, rocking in the water, hands pressed into his eyes, lost. "That's beautiful," he whispered, "Don't stop..."

Bodie grinned, crookedly, over his own thundering heartbeats, the uneven tenor of his own hurried breathing; with one final swirl of his fingers, he withdrew them.

Doyle froze, abruptly spiralling down from the pleasure; and then he rolled over, making no attempt to hide the hard erection rising over his belly, line-taut. He stared at Bodie through half-closed eyes. "Jesus, Bodie," he whispered harshly, "I was nearly there..."

Bodie grinned at him, smug, happy. "You said -- no sex. Seemed to me it was getting a bit sexual."

Doyle looked as if he wanted to kill him. He was slightly disadvantaged in the matter, being flat on his back and very obviously naked. So he took a few deep breaths and forced himself to relax, scooping up handfuls of cooling water and letting it run over his eyes and face, letting it calm him.

"Told you I'd like it," he said, muffled. "Think how much better I'd like it, then, if --"

"All in good time, sunshine," Bodie assured him. He felt strangely triumphant. "It's not easy in a bathtub, you know."

"Yeah?" Bodie chuckled, fondly.

"Yeah. But it's not the kind of thing you can ask women to do --"

"Isn't it?" Bodie stared at him. He'd known one or two who hadn't waited to be asked.

"Well, not if you don't want them thinking you're queer, or something," said Doyle, and he grinned at his lover, showing sharp, uneven white teeth.

Clean, shaven and dashing in an air force-grey shirt and dark trousers, Bodie went downstairs to offer Rita Doyle help in the kitchen. It was his own idea. For one thing, he thought it might keep him out of the way of the Howards. He was quite happy pottering about doing small chores, and as he did so he regaled Mrs. Doyle with anything amusing he could pick out in the mainly murder-and-mayhem tale of his life with Ray in CI5; editing out the nasties, gently building Ray up as a kind of nice, friendly super-hero type.

"-- I had these cuffs on, so the fuzz take one look and march me off with the bad boys; Doyle was just standing there laughing like a drain, it really killed Doyle, that did. He'd come out of it all just fine; he'd got one over this inspector who'd been on his back all week, and seeing me arrested really was the icing on the cake --"

She was amused by him, but not fooled. "Doesn't it ever get dangerous?"

"Uh?" He was halted, in the action of slicing through the sprouts.

"You wear guns." He was wearing one now; like an extra article of clothing it banded his chest. "You must use them, sometimes."

He was guarded now. "Yeah, well, we try not to have to. Am I doing these right?" He held up a gutted sprout for her inspection.

"Fine. It's nice to have some help, I must say."

"What about your daughter?" he asked. "Doesn't she -- ?"

"They like to lie in. We'll be lucky if we see them much before it's time to eat."

Luckier if we don't, thought Bodie.

They could hear Doyle bounding down the stairs; he was whistling. When he appeared, he was dressed in his white T-shirt with the three horizontal bands, the sleeves pushed up; Bodie thought he must have first fallen for Ray Doyle in that shirt. He snorted when he saw Bodie, his arms up to the elbows in water, dealing with sprouts. "Suits you, mate. You ring Cowley yet?"

"Yeah, nothing."

Seeing that her pal of the morning was going to be spoken for from now on, Rita Doyle packed them off to the living room with orders to have sherry and relax; she could manage. The smell of roasting bird wafted through the house; soon the Howards arrived, passed Happy Christmases around, switched on the TV and made inroads into the Tio Pepe. From the first it was clear that Karen, hard and bright and pretty in cream wool, was going all out to needle her brother, now she'd had time to think about his unconventional liaison; but it was equally clear that Doyle was not going to be taken.

"Funny thing, Ray," she said thoughtfully at one stage, her legs tucked up under her on the settee, a glass of sherry in her hand, "is that you always used to be such a one for the girls. It was a different girl every week. Always girls..."

Doyle came back fast. "Yeah, funny that, must have been going through a phase --"

"And I've just remembered something else," she said, eyes alight with sudden recollection, "our dad, you remember, he always used to say you'd turn out queer --"

Doyle stared at her, without expression. "Yeah; well, I suppose you might say he wasn't wrong then, was he?" And, recognising the signs of impending murder building up at his side, he turned to thump Bodie on the knee. "Leave it out mate, she'll wear herself down in a while."

The day passed surprisingly quickly. After the long ritual of dinner the Howards and Mrs. Doyle

went out for a breath of fresh air; it was a bright, sunny afternoon. Bodie and Doyle had some time to themselves. After a while, Doyle threw down the cards they'd half-heartedly been playing, lay back with his hands behind his head, watching his partner. "Bodie --"

"Yeah? I'm not cheating," averred Bodie, mock-affronted. "You're just losing because I'm better than you are."

Not listening to the rubbish, Doyle looked at him lazily, his eyes travelling over the ruffled short dark hair, the deep blue gaze and tender curved lips. Sunlight shafted through half-drawn curtains; a rainbow of dust trapped, twinkling, in it. "Love you," he said aloud.

Bodie's quirky eyebrows moved in a pattern of surprise. "You've never said that before."

"I'm always sayin' it." He couldn't remember whether he had or not. It did not seem important.

Bodie's quizzical gaze softened; "Why now?"

"Because it's true. And because everything's going to be all right..."

"Well, you've said that often enough before, that's for sure," drawled Bodie.

"I was right then, wasn't I?" said Doyle, and he gave Bodie a dazzling smile.

"Tomorrow, we go home," announced Bodie.

It was all over, one o'clock in the morning. Boxing Day. In less than 12 hours they'd be leaving.

Ray Doyle smiled rakishly at him, bringing him a drink. "We survived."

"Never had a better Christmas," said Bodie expansively. It really had gone remarkably well; although he'd been under a fineedge of tension all day, nothing had happened. Karen had been vivacious, almost pleasant; Stan, who appeared to have been poleaxed by the realisation that his brother-in-law and the tough CIA agent were lovers, had ignored the conversation; Mrs. Doyle had been friendly -- and Ray had been relaxed, cheerful, and affectionate. Undeniably, open, affectionate.

Doyle perched on the arm of the settee, ran a finger down his arm. "Yeah, this time tomorrow night we'll be home."

"Your place or mine?" said Bodie, echoing a long ago discussion.

And -- "Yours," Doyle decided, again.

"You can invade me any time you like." Doyle was sitting up at last, and running a hand unhelpfully through his hair, when a noise shattered the silence of the dark house.

It was the telephone. Doyle stared at Bodie for one second of disbelieving consternation, their minds jumping together to the same conclusion; then Doyle leapt to his feet and ran for the hall, wrenching the door back so it banged into the sideboard with a sickening thud, and grabbing the phone from the hall table.

Bodie stayed where he was, hoping against hope it was Auntie Doyle ringing from a different time zone to wish them a happy New Year --

Doyle was back in less than a minute, his face grim. "Trouble," he said tersely, his voice sharp with urgency as he shrugged into his holster. They ran together for the hall, unlocking the suitcase there with slick professional calm that belied the emotions racing beneath. Doyle filled him in concisely, as he worked -- "All calls for the local police were being relayed to CI5, a gunman in a big VW camper, heading this way -- and a policeman was shot half an hour ago investigating a suspicious-looking van --" Doyle was furiously digging smg's and rifles out of the case -- "You checked all these? Good, we're gonna need them. Goddamn Cowley!" he exploded, viciously. "There's two of us against a bloody terrorist army!"

"How long till reinforcements arrive, d'you reckon?" said Bodie through gritted teeth. He was rapidly sorting through magazines and cartridges, splitting them into two lots.

Doyle calculated, swiftly. "Took us an hour in traffic. Maybe forty minutes if they're really skating. An' they better be..."

Bodie had a vision of a bloody shoot-out; Doyle's family all dead for the life of one girl with the blood of nine people on her hands... "Try going to ground with her?"

"No time. They're close. Better to take 'em where we've got cover."

Doyle was running up the stairs with the two heavy long-barrelled guns; he burst in through the door of his mother's room, which was at present occupied by the Howards; dropped the guns by the window and raced out again, yelling at the bed. "We got trouble. Keep that bloody light off!" No time to lose, not one moment to waste; have to hope they'd obey the harsh authority in his voice.

Bodie was setting up position by the front room window; with him here and Doyle above they'd be covered front and back. He'd shifted half the ammunition with him, left the other in the hall for Doyle; they had fallen without difficulty into the smooth working of the good team they were, the effortless division of labour. Doyle grabbed the suitcase and pelted up the stairs with it. Karen was up at the top of the landing struggling into a dressing gown, her head outlined against the window panel. "What --"

Doyle seized hold of her, a furious wrench of his arm that brought her to her knees. "Keep your head down. I mean it," he said with forceful intensity. "Below window height. All the time, you and him. No lights, keep quiet, and you don't do a damn thing, d'you hear me?" Quickly assessing, he decided the best place for them; pushed Karen into an alcove on the landing well away from any window. He dashed into the bedroom next and manhandled Stan from the bed

where he was struggling into slippers. "What the hell's going on...?"

"If you want to live, stay here, shut up, and keep still. Or I'll lay you out cold." Recognising the chill, almost insane purpose running through the other man's eyes, Stan sank weakly down beside his wife as he was released, and didn't move.

In a tearing desperate hurry, Doyle checked briefly on his mother; in the spare room. He was sure this was just about the safest place in the house, just one small window Bodie had reinforced with bullet-proof glass, and it was overlooked only by a blank wall of the neighbouring semi. It would be the last safe place in the house, if it came to it. She was peacefully asleep despite all the commotion; he knew her habits of old, she'd take two sleeping pills and never stir till dawn. He spared a quick prayer that her sleep would remain undisturbed this night; and that it was a sleep she'd wake from.

So little time...

He met Bodie, running. "Motor," explained his partner briefly, thrusting an R/T at him, then he was gone, flying down the stairs not in three strides but two, running hard for the firing point in the living room. Neither of them had spared a thought for the girl they were here to protect; they'd done all they could there, she was locked in a room as secure as they could make it, one they could prevent entry into until the last bullet ran out, or until they were both dead.

Doyle ran past the huddled figures of his sister and brother-in-law, who were dazed into silent inaction by the terrible wrongness of things, expecting, perhaps, bullets to start whining their way through the air TV-style at any second; on into the bedroom, past the rumpled bed, throwing himself down by the window. His R/T bleeped. He fitted a magazine into the smg before he replied, automatically: "4.5." Already they were back in their CI5 persona.

"That last -- just a car. What's the strategy? Bluff it for a while? Buy time." Bodie, tinny and concise, knowing as he did exactly what the options were in this particular scenario.

"No. Can't risk 'em getting too close, this isn't Fort Knox by a long way. Just keep 'em off, far away as possible till Cowley gets here." A split second decision, might be right, might be wrong; they'd never know. Doyle scanned through the window, the dark yard undisturbed. Nothing. He reached again for his R/T. They were close. They had to be. Just time for this...

Bodie stared at the handset, hearing the gentle wry lilt of Ray Doyle's voice, saying: "Pity this had to happen. Just when we were gettin' it right..."

Tactically, Doyle had the better position, he'd be the last to go. The cowardly part of himself was gladdened by that; he didn't want to live even for a second with the knowledge that Ray Doyle was forever gone, wiped out. They had to face it; it could happen, here tonight. These maniacs were here to kill. Not them, not himself and Doyle and the blameless family trapped in their midst; that was the irony of it. But they were paid to do a job; and that job required that they stand steadfast in the firing line between victim and executioner, laying down their lives before she should be forced to surrender hers.

He made his own voice soft, affectionate. "Understood, sunshine. Understood."

Through the window, he saw nothing in the dark street, noiseless and lamp-lit; soon to be considerably livened up. He eyed the little mound of armoury with almost amused irony; toys, a few sparkling toys to set off a big bang. He heard --

His ears pricked at a noise; tyres squealing to a halt a few hundred yards off; the jerk of a handbrake. He took up the handset, told it quietly, "They're here."

It was going to be all action, from now on. He tossed the R/T aside, took up the big gun, peering through the window. Now he could see dark shapes, moving fast, checking along the line of houses, four, six, eight, Christ there were a lot of them...all approaching in an unerring line. How close should he let them get? Every second of delay might count in their favour. Now there was one nearly at the gate; logically the next step had to be the thump on the door. But Doyle, whose mother and sister were upstairs, had called off the idea of bluffing for more time. It had to be now, before they got inside the gate. His heart was thudding, and his mouth dry, but he was quite steady. He had a job to do.

Mouth set in a brutal pout of aggression, he thrust the butt of the smg through the shattering window, reversed it quickly, and sent a warning arc of fire chattering high through the night. Without any chance of misinterpretation, he had announced that they were here.

Iron filings, drawn to a magnet. The black figures formed and unformed, riding wide around the house they now knew to be the one they sought, ringing it. Answering fire burst towards it. All along the street lights were snapping on, drowsiness and deep sleep alike shocked into alertness. Stay inside, you bastards, Bodie thought grimly, you're no part of this. He could imagine the phone lines buzzing, the raised, scared voices.

There was one slipping over the gate, taking cover behind a bush; he watched, fired as it dared, watched it knocked back in an outspread motion, and fall. Instantly, there was another, to the right; he missed, but forced it to retreat. Above him and behind he heard the staccato stuttering of Doyle's gun; yes, they'd be taking the back simultaneously. Astounded, he saw five, six of them converging ahead, behind the hedge, and the window exploded around him. He ducked around the shards of glass, and grim-faced, let rip an ear-shattering blast of fire that pushed them back, scurrying for cover, keeping it up until the gun fell silent on him. Where the hell was Cowley... Or had all this been going on a mere matter of minutes? He had lost all track of time. He changed the magazine with speedy efficiency while they were still recovering, chucking the used one behind him. He was shivering, not just from the tension; the cold December air was rushing in through the destroyed window and he was only in shirtsleeves. Doyle had made the right decision; they'd rushed them, won a small advantage of surprise.

Doyle was crouched in the same pose above, picking them off like flies running helpless beneath the tread of a giant. He'd got two; he was sure of that, had almost been able to feel the solid backswinging crunch of high-velocity bullet meeting slow flesh. Carnage in the back yard... Christ, but there were too many. So many there was no time to think, just fire, and rearm, and

fire, ducking erratically behind the window ledge. There was a noise, he risked an eye over his shoulder; it was his brother-in-law. "Keep down!" he yelled as another wave of bullets pounded into the abused window-frame. "You fuckin' idiot, I haven't time --"

"We ought to call the police," said Stan, white-faced, sick with fear, but persistent. Doyle, in position again, made a harsh sound that might even had been a bark of cynical laughter. "You must be joking, there's no way they'd come within a mile of this place. If they're anything like efficient they'll already have it cordoned off..."

Stan didn't get it. The police, he knew, were solid bastions of comfort who could cope with anything. The world had turned crazy, a noisy whine of chaos. Something hit the ceiling and Stan dropped to the floor, wanting only to get away.

One of the shadows detached itself and ran for the lower windows. Doyle took him and was narrowly missed by the covering fire of a colleague. Christ, it was like trying to fend off a creeping wall of water with a broom; sooner or later some would get through. There were just too many... Where the hell was Cowley? He could hear the lower-pitched rattle of Bodie's rifle; Jesus if Bodie was out of ammo for the smg it must have been heavy down there... The heavy gun kicked back into his braced shoulder again and again, and he held on, grimly firing. The night rang with noise; he could hear screams among the wreckage of silence, and he hoped no innocent passers-by had got mixed up with this lot -- no, hell, they'd stay in and lock the doors, wouldn't they? He was on the last magazine for the smg himself now; one final burst and he ducked below the ledge, chucking the useless gun aside and reaching for the other. Bless Bodie, for setting them up... There was a pause from outside too; they must be rearming for the final assault, he could hear shouting. Doyle reckoned, grimly, they could last maybe ten minutes more. He hoisted the rifle to his shoulder, screwed up his eyes and went into battle once more.

Bodie could see less of what was going on outside. He knew so far they'd been successful keeping them at bay; they were lucky in that it was a reasonably defensible house with natural security on either side, the garage and the wall of the attached house. As long as he and Doyle stayed in touch, kept that cover going front and back, they could keep off even this small army. The moment one or the other of them exhausted their fire, it was curtains time and quick too, because nothing would stand in the way of their opposition taking the lower window, either his own or the one at Bodie's back that Doyle was defending above. He was crouched in a mess of spent cartridges and broken glass. Cowley's men couldn't be far off now. Had to be enough time...

Christ, it must be the bloodiest night this street would ever see, past or future. He had a bloody cheek from a splinter of flying glass; they'd be lucky to escape with nothing worse. Jesus but these fellows were determined -- no wonder she'd been scared out of her wits --

There was a puzzling silence outside. He took a deep breath, drew in to recharge the gun, working with speedy fingers. He heard a shout from the front, and looked cautiously out. There was a man standing there, near the front gate, hands raised in the classic position of surrender; he was calling "Hey you! With the gun!"

"We want the girl!" shouted the man, in a thick foreign accent. "You can't hold out much longer, you see that. Give us the girl and we go. We've no fight with you."

Love to, Bodie thought viciously. But not our job, mate. As if in reply, he fired a warning burst to either side of the man, and he scattered, pelting for the shrubbery.

It was true, they couldn't hold out much longer. Ten minutes, if they were lucky. There was some sort of commotion above, but no time to consider it, they were firing again. Come on, George. Come on...

It seemed only a few seconds later when he heard, unbelievably, the door to the living room open. He whirled, ready to draw his Magnum and fire, but it was only Karen Howard, her face stark white, her hair loose over her shoulders.

She said, in a voice that shook, "Ray's been shot."

It had never been so busy at Priory Street Police station. Lights were flashing constantly over the switchboard, and nearly every call was answered with the same stock reassuring reply, to the effect that the police knew all about it, the matter was being taken in hand, and that no actions should be taken other than locking all doors and staying inside. Policemen went about in varying states of excitement; young men who'd seen no more action than a pub brawl involving knives were sent off in squad cars to patrol the cordoned-off area of a nondescript residential street in a backwater of London, there to hear the sound of real bullets flying where the two hot-shot heroes from that powerful and mysterious organisation known as CI5 were fighting an all-out gun battle with desperadoes. Some wished they were in their place; some were glad they were not, happier to deal with ghoulish excited queries of those members of the public who had gathered on the outskirts of the fray.

Those higher up the ranking had different concerns. "Major Cowley's on his way with a dozen men. Also a gun squad from Special Branch, but Cowley reckons to be here first. No interference, he said."

The Chief Superintendent sniffed. "He didn't need to. We haven't the artillery to cope with that." He waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the noise. "There'll be questions asked after this little affair. Cowley refused to give the smallest details of just what whoever it is that whoever they are are trying to get is doing virtually loose among the civilian population. With just a couple of whiz-kid marksmen to fend off the total loss of law and order."

The other knew that questions had been asked about CI5's doings before. And that the contortionist, eel-like twistings of that department's evading of anything it wished to evade was well known. He knew the Chief Super knew it too, and so he didn't say it. Instead, they both watched quietly as the desperate rat and tat of a distant battle in which they had no part went on.

"Ray's been shot."

Bodie closed his eyes against the chilling dread that threatened to overwhelm him. His mind

protested, no, it couldn't be true. Not Ray... But there were things to do.

He opened his eyes and said harshly, "Where?"

"His arm -- there's blood everywhere --"

She was near tears, though not hysteria; he could see that, even over the pounding relief that was as weakening as the earlier panic.

"Can he shoot?" he said with brutal conciseness.

She stared at him, disbelieving. "He's hurt. He needs a doctor. He's been shot, I tell you."

"If he can't shoot," Bodie said with bitter harshness, "If we lose his cover from that window, sweetheart, very shortly none of us will ever need a doctor again. So get up there. Is he unconscious?"

A wave of bullets suddenly hit wood and stone. He spun on his knees and replied with a vicious, explosive blast. They were slowing too, thank christ. "I asked you, is he out?" he snarled over his shoulder. "If he is, you'd bloody well better get him awake. Shake him, hit him, do anything but get him covering that bloody window fast, d'you hear?" He was yelling, by now.

She hated him, hated his callousness, his brutality. But the urgency got through. "I'm going."

"He's got a medical kit up there. And keep your fucking head down!"

Doyle felt sick, violently so, his stomach heaving. Gasping for breath, his skin cold and clammy, he knew he was going into shock. There was a sickening fiery pain spiralling up his arm to his neck and shoulder; his fingers were numb and dangling limply, and his mind was numb too as he stared at the jerking fountain of blood, the slick-edged hole in his forearm where the slug had passed seconds before. But seconds counted, in this game. Gotta keep shooting -- Bodie'd be gone -- got to fire... He knew what he had to do and struggled to do it.

It was difficult. His arm was slow to obey him. Concentrating furiously, trying to ignore the dizziness and the sickening pain that threatened to push its blessed relief, he began the long climb up to rationality, focusing his mind on the picture of Bodie alone and vulnerable with the window beneath Doyle exposed; forcing himself to concentrate on little things, easing the rifle up, using the elbow of his injured arm to prop it against, and began to fire again. There was one, ducking and weaving for the window. He shot and missed, shot again with more success as he brought his shaking muscles under control, and watched the retreat with relief. It was a weary effort, but the spray of bullets had to be respected, had to be...

He became aware that someone was at his side.

Karen was horrified at the way her brother looked; there was blood everywhere, bright red rivulets of it running down the sleeve of his shirt to the floor, spattered on his drained face; there

was a line of white pain around his mouth and his eyes were hazy. "Ray. You'd better come and lie down --"

"Can't," he muttered, "Got to -- keep shooting -- you don't unnerstand, but got to --"

"That's what he says."

"He's right." He realised what she held, sluggishly took it in, even as he used his abused arm to steady the rifle once more, send another round out towards the ground, in a desperate attempt to show their strength unimpaired. A spasm of agony shot through him, and he quivered, cold.

"Ray." She was shaking him, gently. "You all right?"

"Bandage," he whispered between clenched teeth. "Stop the blood... Make it tight. Good and tight. And quick --"

She took the coil of linen in shaking fingers wrapped it round his forearm. "Tighter," he urged, jaw gritted. "Tight as you can, yeah, that's it kid..."

She knotted it, firm and quick. The blood showed through straight away, a sprawled red flower on stark white, but it felt better, number. He had lost a lot of blood; this would help. He lifted the arm, tested its strength. "Keep away, sweetheart. Soon be over. Well back, nice and clear --"

It had worked; he was able to fire, steady and accurate. He'd last. If he didn't pass out... He could barely see clearly, a dizzying lightness in his head from the loss of blood and shock; but the support of the tourniquet steadied his arm, kept it there. A confident arc of fire sprayed from his gun once more.

The rapid staccato above he had thankfully begun again. I love you, Doyle. And Doyle, sweet-faced, answering, 'I love you'... The thought rang on and on in Bodie's mind as he reacted with speed, running on pure instinct alone. Hold on. Hold on, mate. Cowley must be nearly here. He must be. Bodie felt as if he'd been in this mad defensive crouch forever, performing the same repetitive actions over and over. But they'd survived. Cowley must be just about to drive up and save them.

It was on this note of frail optimism that he heard the rifle above go dead, and fail to start up again. His R/T beeped but he knew what its message would be. He grabbed up the last remaining cartridges and ran for the stairs. His first priority was the girl. He spared a glance though at the room where Doyle was, saw his crouching form and Karen with him; yelling at her to "get him into the back bedroom --"

The girl was crouched behind the bed which she'd dragged against a wall, one white-knuckled fist pressed into her mouth; he dragged her to her feet and set off with her to the last retreat. Rita Doyle was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed in a dressing gown, begging to be told what was going on as Bodie slammed the door shut. Stan was just sitting helplessly in a chair with his face in his hands. Doyle was dragging furniture, with Karen's help. Bodie threw the girl down beside

the bed and went to his mate, who was wrestling with a heavy wardrobe. Doyle's face was drained of blood and he was swaying; he could clearly barely manage the strength to stay on his feet, let alone do what he was attempting to do, his left arm limp and bloody. But from somewhere he found a little smile, for Bodie. Carefully, seriously, Bodie drew his handgun for him, placed it into the cold hand, closing his fingers around it. "Cover the door, sunshine."

Doyle nodded and fought to concentrate, frowning. Everyone else was in little better shape; Karen was the only one who looked even halfway steady. "Help," said Bodie to her tersely, and together they pushed the heavy oak wardrobe against the door, the bed on end in front of that; a makeshift barricade that might hold for just a few minutes more -- he could hear feet pounding up the stairs.

"Stay behind," he ordered everyone, and he dropped beside Doyle, in a ready-to-fire crouch. There was thudding on the door; shots. Then the pounding again; they were trying to burst through. And then, a shout.

"Give us the girl. You've lost. You'll all die. One chance. Send her out."

Bodie uttered a vicious 'fuck off' under his breath, risking a glance behind him. The girl had stiffened, a light of pure terror in her eyes. Turning again, he met Doyle's eyes; amazingly, there was a flash of wry humour there. "No problem -- after all --" Doyle wheezed.

Bodie understood; and was totally surprised. When it had come down to it, he hadn't even considered it; even when the chance had been offered him, he had turned it down without consideration. He was proud of them, for that. They were pounding on the door again, with rifle-butts; he could hear wood splintering. It couldn't be long now... He was sorry, in an abstract kind of way, for the innocent people behind him who were here to celebrate a birth, and were now trusting him and Doyle to keep away a bloody death. He felt nothing for the girl, not blaming her, for it was his choice as well that he was here, his and Doyle's. He felt only a moment of sorrow for the tomorrows they would never have, but he wasn't afraid. He and Doyle: they could face anything, so long as they were together.

In the ridiculous absence of time for gestures, he reached out one hand and tousled Ray Doyle's hair, his eyes gentle, a spark of affectionate humour in them "You were good, sunshine," he told him, soft. "All the way, you were good."

Their eyes met. They were ready.

"What's happening?" The inspector craned to see. The cars, five of them, had crashed through the wooden police barriers, splintering them. There had been no shots since, nor in fact for some minutes before.

"Dunno. We're to move in on their signal, that's the plan," said the Chief Super, impressed despite himself by the eerie cavalcade of fast motors that had streamed past them in a dead line for the action. "There's ambulances standing by -- if anyone's left alive to need 'em --"

In the cool of the night, everyone waited. And then the shots began again, with renewed force.

It was over. Fifteen CI5 agents had overwhelmed the five remaining terrorists with a disregard for life and limb that would have shocked the Inspector, unarmed and far out of it. The final count was five injured, two in custody, one dead and one likely to be before he reached the hospital; the girl was in the safe hand of 6.2 and 3.5; and one silent terrified family in the wreck of their home. Police were everywhere now it was too late, swarming over the place.

Cowley picked his precise way through the chaos of the living-room, avoiding the lurching Christmas tree, to where his brooding dark agent stood, one hand on the window frame, his face smeared with blood and dirt.

"Made a mess of the place," Bodie said, without turning.

"It'll be cleared up before they know it." Cowley cast a professional eye around: new glass, the woodwork repaired, a few items of new furniture and a little redecoration; it could be done in a day, well before they returned.

"Yeah," agreed Bodie bitterly. "As good as new. They'll hardly know we were here..."

Cowley understood. "How's Doyle?"

"He'll be all right. Day or two in hospital, nothing."

Cowley said, "You did well. Both of you."

"Yeah, didn't we? Doyle's family are never gonna talk to him again, he nearly died, but what's that? We did our jobs." The bitterness this time was very marked.

"You did your jobs," agreed Cowley, refusing to be drawn. "And did them well. Where are the Doyle family now?"

Bodie stirred, restless. "Been taken to hospital. They're all right, no injuries. Mild shock, be discharged tonight, or rather this morning." He'd checked just before Doyle was taken away, knowing that Doyle would need to know.

"We'll have them taken to a good hotel until we can restore the house for them. It should be a pleasant break for them," decided Cowley breezily, though he did not feel breezy, not at all. He had nearly lost Bodie and Doyle; and it was strongly against all his principles that Doyle's relatives, innocent lives, could have been killed through his own underestimation of the resources of the opposition.

"Yeah, they'll like that," said Bodie with no visible sarcasm. "Who's collecting them from the hospital?"

Cowley hesitated.

Bodie was desperately tired, and shaken; and he badly wanted to be with Doyle to reassure himself that he was all right. He made a decision.

"I'll go."

"Man you've done enough --" Cowley began.

"I'll go. They've had enough upheaval. And they know me."

And Bodie squared his shoulders, reached for the car keys, remembered that Mrs. Doyle and the Howards would need overnight things, and headed for the stairs.

"3.7 --"

Bodie didn't turn; didn't check his stride.

"You and Doyle. Two weeks' leave, unconditional. As from January 1st."

"Happy New Year to you too, sir," said Bodie.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Hyperion to a Satyr *Part One*

Unusual story from me: in this one, it's Bodie who calls the shots. About time, some said.

=====|||=====

The man was a predator, keen-eyed: he moved through the jungles of city or tropic with equal sureness, taking what he wanted. He always got away with it; born under an unblighted star he had beauty to match his cunning.

A new job brought with it a new challenge, one with greenwood eyes and a will very nearly as strong as his own; and he did not even guess that here lay the flaw in his destiny.

They were driving a souped-up Ford that week. Nippy, but battered. Doyle found it wryly amusing: the first encounter with George Cowley might extinguish the notion of CI5 as some kind of glamorous secret service, fast cars, fast guns, fast women; but the reality of day-to-day working rubbed it in with a vengeance.

The plastic interior of the car stank of sweat. Doyle wrinkled his nose, unaware that he was doing so, and thought yearningly of a hot shower, clean clothes. His armpits were damp.

"Could do with a bath."

He almost jumped in his seat; it wasn't the first time his partner of six weeks had thus surprised him with such an instance of seeming telepathy.

"Yeah, I noticed," he agreed with the casual back-biting that was their habit from the beginning.

The car moved on through familiar, unremarked streets: the ex- detec. had switched off for the

day. His partner was driving him home.

His partner, he mused, without needing to look at the hard smooth profile beside him; the image seemed inburnt on his eyeballs. *Tired*, he thought inconsequentially, and passed a hand over his face; his skin felt gritty.

Never wanted a partner--especially not this one.

He had disliked the man introduced to him as Bodie on sight: from the polished dark hair and the smug expression to the double-breasted blazer and shiny court shoes. Bodie had tried the needle on straight away, too, setting him up as hot-blooded and impetuous (true) with a few well-placed words, pointing out his own coolness as enviable contrast, but adding the simultaneous sop--respect for his skills. That was the instant pattern between them: the knife of rivalry, the balm of respect. It seemed to work pretty well, as far as their duty partnership went.

They had no other relationship. All fast sombre quips, steady support or uncompromising leadership during the day, Bodie vanished straight after and led his life in determined mystery.

Doyle did not know what to make of him.

He didn't want friendship. Doyle could and did live perfectly well without amity. If he needed company, he found a girl. He was a lone wolf who ran in a pack of two and hunted with others like himself; camaraderie, he didn't want.

Still, Bodie intrigued him, for that very impenetrability Doyle himself sported, like a badge of honour.

Bodie stopped the car. Doyle, startled out of his reverie, looked around. They were outside his flat. The sparse motions of parting sprang unprepared into action.

"Right. Thanks. See you tomorrow."

He made as if to snap back the doorcatch, but Bodie's hand was there, darting in front of him, shocking in its speed and intention.

"Ang on a moment."

"What?" he said, turning to find Bodie leaning towards him, blue eyes raised to assess, appraise.

"You doing anything tonight?"

"Not particularly," he said unwillingly, because now the invitation had finally come he was tired and not in the mood for a drinking bout and the effort required for the sharp interchange of competition they fed on during the day.

"Fancy coming round to my place for a drink?" Bodie suggested casually; and when Doyle

wavered, he pounced with the weapon he had been waiting all these weeks to use.

He smiled.

Subtle in its effect, it crossed his mouth, twisting it into beauty unlit before; travelled on to his eyes, slanting them with warmth.

Lost, Doyle capitulated.

"I'll pick you up around nine."

The car roared off, and it was only when he shut the door to his flat and kicked off his shoes that the sensation of enticement fled forgotten and he wondered why the hell he had agreed.

Still, he had never seen inside Bodie's flat, nor anything of what the man was like. It seemed like a good enough reason to take up the chance. Maybe Bodie, like himself, needed, wanted to know more; to build up more behind the solid working partnership they had created.

Unconvinced by this optimistic interpretation of Bodie's motives, Doyle sighed to himself and began to peel off his clothes.

Showered, clean-shaven and clean-shirted, Doyle had regained freshness and vigour by the time the horn tooted a jaunty summons outside. He snatched up his jacket and flew down the stairs, whistling.

Bodie was waiting for him at the wheel; he leaned over and opened the door for him.

"I could have driven over," said Doyle, struck for the first time by the ridiculousness of the set-up as Bodie let in the clutch smoothly and gunned off from the kerb like a fledgling from hell.

Bodie flicked a measuring glance his way from beneath dark shadowy lashes. Irish eyes, thought Doyle inconsequentially. "Don't want you driving back over the limit," he said, rather sweetly, but with the edge of inscrutable contention Doyle knew all too well.

Odd thing to say. Did that mean he expected Doyle to get drunk while he himself stayed smugly sober? Typical, bloody typical. Doesn't trust the cop to hold his pints. Or which way up to point the Uzi. Or how to track a killer in the night--

"You're not in the bloody Grand Prix," he announced with belligerence, going for the grabstrap as Bodie rounded a corner perhaps on two wheels.

To his astonishment, another of those smiles was turned his way, half-rueful this time.

"Always wanted to be. Fancied myself going round the track at 160, edging in between Mansell and Lauda--" he caught Doyle's scathing eye and added sheepishly, "I know, I know. Not half good enough--" which, being the first time Bodie had allowed himself to be anything less than

perfect, left Doyle speechless and edgy.

What the hell was wrong with Bodie tonight? What prompting this unusually open mood? Doyle was just deciding that if Bodie smiled at him once more he'd better scour his own medical records in case Bodie had gleaned terminally bad news there, when they arrived at Bodie's flat.

He went ahead of Bodie up the stairs, head whipping round with a snarl on his lips when he felt a hand cup his right buttock, propelling him upwards; but Bodie looked merely enigmatic and charming, one eyebrow uplifted in query.

"I thought someone--" said Doyle, and then stopped.

"Must have imagined it, Goldilocks," said Bodie with cheerful mendacity; and as Doyle turned his back again and continued to take the steps three at a time, now, unseen, Bodie smiled again.

The flat was a source of fascination to Doyle, who was still ruminating over 'Goldilocks'; it was Bodie unlocked, his casements thrown wide. Without waiting to be asked, he paced around it, taking everything in: the sporting trophies clearly on view but out of reach, the shelves of books lining one wall which revealed hitherto unsuspected facets to Bodie such as an apparent passion for 16th century history and literature, and marquetry- for-the-amateur. The furniture was modern; everything was spotlessly clean and neat. Army training; block-headed army conditioning, thought Doyle with a trace of disdain not entirely prompted by the guilty certainty that the cleanliness of his own flat would not stand up creditably to such inspection.

He was standing staring at a frieze of identical dancing girls when he heard Bodie enter behind him. It was not to that but an erotic carving in relief that he gestured as he said sarkily, "Oh, very tasteful."

"What did you expect? Socks over the bath and Mayfair centerfolds blu-tacked to the wall?"

He wasn't imagining it. Even Bodie's voice was different tonight. Not the sardonic, carping tone he used to offer advice watching Doyle at target practice, hands on his hips, that aggravating smooth-as-silk head tilted to one side, a sneer written inherent in his malicious, sharp blue eyes. Doyle had learnt to ignore it. At some cost to his love for human nature.

"Something like that," he agreed, turning.

Again, that sense of unreality.

Bodie was standing there, the light picking out mellow glints in his dark hair, his eyes compellingly unfathomable over the rim of a glass which he was holding to his mouth, in the act of taking a swallow from it; he held another glass which he was extending towards Doyle.

Doyle had only ever seen him dressed in army combat gear, or pseudo-smart blazer and tie style which always made Doyle's lip curl in a little, satisfying moment of certain one-upmanship.

Not tonight.

Tonight, Bodie was all in black which suited him; the faint air of devilish menace unchecked now by any misappropriate touches. It was direct, and devastatingly effective.

For the first time since he had met his partner, watching those dark-cast eyes, the elegant lines of Bodie's strong body, Doyle felt a chill of macho envy swoop in and take hold.

It made him feel shabby in his old jeans and scuffed boots; his own brand of puckish attraction overshadowed.

It was a shock. He had always before felt confident that between the two of them there was no contest, despite Bodie's assertions to the opposite. What if Bodie turned out to be right all along? He felt unsettled now; something about the evening making him ridiculously nervous.

"Come and sit down," said Bodie softly, making Doyle jump.

He berated himself for his daft edginess as he sat down in a chair with his drink; but his nerves were not helped when the chair turned out to be a rocker, giving way unexpectedly when he had been expecting solidity so that he tipped most of his drink down himself, yelping as the ice-studded scotch soaked through cotton onto warm skin.

Bodie was solicitous enough, but Doyle caught a flash of something like amusement in the eyes that were beginning to obsess him, which made him suspect that Bodie had almost been expecting such a thing to happen.

Stupid. Even Bodie was not so childish. And yet--

"Here," said Bodie, returning with a towel, "let's dry you off a bit." He looked seriously down at the dishevelled figure, taking in the stormy eyes huge in the almost-boyish face, the obstinate set of the round chin. Beautiful, no doubt about it, even in that nasty navy-checked bovver-boy's shirt.

"I can manage," snapped Doyle curtly as the towel was whisked around his throat; he snatched it from Bodie and glared up.

Quick amusement quirked Bodie's mouth. "No-one could accuse you," he murmured, "of having a sunny temper." He stayed where he was, on one knee beside Doyle's feet. He was wearing a strange expression which Doyle, already annoyed and now beginning to be apprehensive, shied off from classifying.

"How long we been partners?" Bodie was continuing.

"Six weeks," muttered Doyle; he pulled at his shirt and squinted down at damp-matted chest hair.

"We ought to get to know each other better," said Bodie musingly.

"Oh, great idea. Whaddyou suggest--? Little word games? Reminiscing about our childhood?" queried Doyle mockingly; but he was already sure he did not want to /wanted desperately to/ know the answer to that.

Bodie rested one hand on his knee, squeezed it. Neither of them watched it, Doyle staring down into lazy midnight eyes with dawning horror.

Knew I'd be set up. Knew I shouldn't have come.

But it was too late. It had begun.

"You're a very attractive man, Ray," murmured Bodie, eyes gleaming, inexorable, and instead of hitting him Doyle just watched, hypnotised, the discomforts of his clammy shirt forgotten as Bodie's hand travelled up his front leaving a caress in its wake to take hold of the open collar of his checked shirt, rubbing it between finger and thumb.

"This doesn't suit you," Bodie told him, and then his warm fingers slid into the drop of the silver rope chain lying on Doyle's throat.

"This does."

And he pulled Doyle close with a hand curving around the nape of his neck, fingers gripping tightly in the chain, staring with predatory amusement into Doyle's wide-startled eyes; then his mouth descended to the wilful pouting one that had made him determined to possess it the instant he had laid eyes on it.

I'm being kissed by a man, Doyle thought with fine detachment as the warm lips touched his own, a moist tongue flicking there, seeking to part his mouth; ought to do something here Ray.

But he did nothing at all, not even when Bodie's lips left him and kissed beside his mouth, moving on over heated skin to nuzzle his earlobe softly, rousing shivers in him. He felt weak, heavy- limbed, as if he had no control over what was happening; it was out of his hands.

Still kneeling beside his unstable chair, Bodie was slipping free the buttons of his shirt, laying bare his shoulders, parting it down to his navel.

"Don't suit you, check shirts don't," he murmured again, frowningly intent on the chest revealed to him, the geography of its planes and dips, the swirling of hair between the small brown nipples. "Make you look like an off-duty dustman, and you don't suit that style, no, you're more of a--a dirty little angel." He smiled to himself, pleased by the picture. "If you were mine, I'd dress you in--" His fingertips skated lightly, slowly over nipples that betrayed Doyle's arousal traitorously, rising excitedly to his touch, "T-shirts, maybe. To show these off--so sexy, that, getting a glimpse of these all hard under somethin' thin an' soft--oh, yeah... or maybe I'd dress you all in leather. Yeah, you look good in leather," Bodie's eyes crinkled with irresistible

humour, "tough and mean but innocent-- but you're not innocent, are you Ray? You're a flirt. I've met your type before. Big look-what-I-got eyes."

He lowered his head, touched a nipple with his tongue.

I just can't believe I'm hearing this, thought Doyle in disbelief, listening to the echoes of the rough purr of Bodie's matter-of-fact voice; his body ringing with little thrills of pleasure. His cock, as wanton as his nipples, was pulsing, straining at the opening to his jeans, but that was soon taken care of as Bodie ran a finger lightly down the zip of his fly, then pulled it down.

That brought him to his senses.

"Get off me," he snarled, panicking; but Bodie held him down with one arm across his chest, soothing as he undressed him swiftly--

"Ssh..."

And then his cock lay bare in Bodie's curled palm, Bodie's thumb stroking along its achingly hard length, and Doyle was lost. He looked down at himself and found even the humiliation erotic.

"Oh that's beautiful," Bodie whispered, his fair smooth skin flushed a little now. "Knew you'd turn on fast, you got that heated kind of look about you, like you're always ready for it, always ten seconds away from coming... so bloody beautiful--"

And with a gesture as graceful as it was careful, and more touching than Doyle could find last fast-slipping defences to fight, he laid his cheek on Doyle's cock as he held it, rubbing his face over it.

Oh christ I'm gonna come

Doyle's fingers dug into the arms of the chair, whitening with the strain. Shocked to realise himself so close to ejaculation, spurt it out on Bodie's cheek--"I want to go to bed with you," Bodie said, warm breath stirring through Doyle's dark body hair, and again it nearly finished him, "I want it so much Ray, don't say no."

Against that quiet appeal, even if his body hadn't decided for him already, Doyle had no argument.

Shivering a little at the strangeness of it all, he allowed Bodie to take him to the bedroom, Bodie's hand twining reassuringly with his, as if they were children exploring a mystery.

It was the sweetest, most passionately thrilling seduction he had ever known; he could not remember ever having been so excited, so much so that he would have agreed to anything, done anything. And Bodie led him into delight over and over, skilled sure fingers knowing just how to play on his sensitive body, to probe its darkest secrets, to make the pleasure surge up in waves;

Bodie the hard suave know-it-all gone, submerged into this clever, gentle lover who knew nevertheless when not to be gentle.

By morning, Ray Doyle was hopelessly in love.

And he had said it, for the first time in his life, let it burst out of the closely-guarded, secret place inside himself, told Bodie in the night--

"I love you."

but when he awoke, sticky, hot and rank in Bodie's arms, he could not remember how Bodie had replied.

Bodie was staring at him from very close, still half-awake only, looking at him as if he couldn't quite remember who he was.

Doyle smiled at him, a wide slow smile which lit up his so- often stormy face; he reached out to rumple the silky dark hair, looking into the wide blue eyes.

Immediately, Bodie resisted, turning his head away from Doyle's hand as if irritated.

A little of the well-being seeped away, imperceptibly; but he could see there was something wrong.

"What's the matter?"

Bodie evaded that with the ease of one chillingly long- practised at coping with the morning after. He swung his legs out of bed, walked naked to the window. "Time you went, mate. You'll be late for Cowley as it is."

"Was a great night," Doyle said, testing, but meaning it too. His eyes travelled over the strong clean lines of the body which had held and loved his own over and over, and whose gentleness had led him to believe--

"Yeah," Bodie agreed, but without his mind on it as he knotted his hands behind his head, stretching so that all the well- defined muscles bunched, and then, slowly, relaxed.

"One night stand, I take it?" Beginning to be conscious of anger, and bitter hurt, he nevertheless still could not believe it; but Bodie's next words sank him.

"Not bloody likely, I don't let anyone who fucks like you do get away in a hurry."

He was grinning; pure hunter.

Defeated, feeling sick, Doyle scrambled out of bed and hunted for his clothes, suddenly uncomfortable naked under that mocking blue stare awarding him ten out of ten for being a

terrific lay.

"And there was me thinking it was true love," he said, his head of dogged curls lowered as he dragged up the zip of his jeans in a hurry. He had intended to match Bodie for sarcasm and mockery, but it didn't come out that way.

"Oh, c'mon Ray," said Bodie impatiently, sharp ears picking up the tone, sharper eyes travelling over the disconsolate figure turned away from him, "don't let's make anything heavy of it. I wanted to get off with you, you agreed, and it was great. We'll do it again some time, but for chrissake don't let's get it out of proportion, like we were goin' for the big romance or something..." he stepped closer, unselfconsciously naked, heavy genitals swinging. "You *were* jokin', weren't you?"

"Yeah," agreed Doyle in a voice devoid of all emotion, folding back the cuffs of his shirt which smelled like a distillery rag, "I was jokin'. Christ, Bodie, I'm sore in places I didn't know I had--" he winced as he turned too quickly.

Bodie whispered in his ear, a wicked smile curving his lips, "Olive oil." He was pleased that Doyle was going to be reasonable; for a moment there he'd thought he might be tricky.

Doyle gave him a hard stare. "Do I drink it? Or rub it in?"

And was rewarded by Bodie's amusement.

Yes, he mused as he left, he could cry about it later; for now, all that mattered was that out of unexpected despair he had managed to salvage Bodie's respect.

His natural resilience was beginning to reassert itself by the time he had hitched a lift home; he was thinking with wry bitterness that he had lost his last innocence. Virgin nowhere, no longer; even his heart had been plundered now.

Well, we'll play your game, Bodie, since I failed to sweep you away the way you did me.

And we'll see, we'll see just how tough you are.

Part II

"This is boring, innit?"

After the long silence, Bodie pronounced this with measured judgement, but a hint of uncertainty, as if he had long been weighing up whether it was boring, or not--and even now might be convinced otherwise.

Doyle turned from his contemplation of the rows of cars amid which they were parked. He had one denim-clad knee up, leather-booted foot propped on the map-shelf, and his fingers were tapping idly on the dashboard to the rhythm of the song which had been haunting him all

morning.

"Nah," he said scathingly, "nah, it's not, is it?" He added, turning his head to gaze out of the window again at the gleaming silent hunks of metal, "Underground carparks, y'know, they got real tourist appeal."

"It's not underground," Bodie felt restrained to point out since they were actually on the fifth floor; he removed his elbow from its perch on the steering wheel and reached out to stroke the nape of his partner's neck, an appealing, unexpectedly tender spot adorned with floating curls.

"Feels like it is," came Doyle's morose reply, ending that line of discussion with finality. He leaned back into the caress, arching a little; his rump wriggled on the damp sheepskin. Doyle was an endearing sexual partner for the very reason of his intense responsiveness to such gentle stimulation. In fact, Bodie had learnt over the years of their liaison to go very slow with him: Doyle lit up like flashfire and had to be carefully handled if it wasn't all to be over too soon.

Yes, Bodie had devoted a lot of delightful time and care to pleasuring Doyle over the years. And, he bet privately to himself, no one else of Doyle's many affaires succeeded the way he did. Where Doyle was concerned, Bodie had flair.

Still fancy him just as much, he mused, cupping his hand over delicate skin, stroking the tip of his ear with two fingertips; did a good day's work here when I decided to make a play for you Raymond, didn't I.

Doyle shifted a little; the springs of the Capri creaked.

"You in the mood or something?" he queried with resignation, dropping his head back against the rest.

"Can't help it," Bodie owned with rare humility. "It's the way you sit. Incurable flirt, you are."

It was true: only the PM, being made of iron as she had recently informed the nation, could resist Doyle now, an open-legged sprawl in his faded blue jeans, tender manhood flaunted there: head tipped back, eyes closed, lashes dropping onto the round cheek, mouth just parted to show a glimpse of flawed white teeth--

"Thing about you is," Bodie said suddenly, "you always look like you've either just had it, or you're just about to."

--and then there was the adam's apple moving as he swallowed, the cream open-necked shirt with its poppers dragged open to show off the fine hair: that was his appeal, casual sensuality, intensely attractive, but laid-back about it.

Suddenly all the way there into sexual tension, Bodie pounced and nipped him on the ear, one hand sliding down his belly to settle over the warm contours of his groin.

Doyle jerked. "Bloody hell, Bodie--this is a fucking carpark," he said, turning his head restlessly to survey the unchanged scene.

"Multi," agreed Bodie, "storey." And the dark liting implication of that was emphasised as his thumb stroked down over the warm denim bulge, defining the genitalia with no difficulty of geography.

Doyle shivered, hand clenching on the grabstrap. "We're on stakeout. Can't--"

But then, it wouldn't be the first time. Early on, desperate so many times, they had turned to each other and grappled hungrily in the cramped confines of the car, striving for release, riding high on the sweet furious urgency of it, the snatched, risky secrecy--

"Gotta better idea," Doyle said, eyes closing again, taking a deep slow breath in as Bodie flicked open poppers with a swift finger and thumb, crept in to touch his nipples, graze them with fingernails. "Take a raincheck on it--" Bodie winced: Doyle was having a brief flirtation with American slang, which he delivered in the twang of the Bronx, lip curled-- "you doin' anything tonight?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Ah," Bodie said evenly. "Tonight could be awkward."

Doyle took this quietly; he had proved, Bodie reflected with satisfaction, to be far too sensitive to push in where he wasn't wanted. At the beginning he had had moments of doubt as to the wisdom of seducing Doyle, wantonly beautiful creature that he was, because he sensed there was a fiery streak of possessiveness beneath that casual air; it had made Bodie edgy because heavy scenes he did not want. Luckily, Doyle had turned out sensible, and had settled into a pattern of acceptance with only the occasional hiccup of resentment. Which, given Doyle's remarkably violent temper, was only to be expected.

"What about tomorrow then?" asked Doyle, and answered himself, "don't tell me, tomorrow you have your weekly heart-to-heart with Karen, I remember."

His tone, although acerbic, failed to sting.

"There's Saturday--" Bodie began, flicking through a mental list, and Doyle assented with a grunt.

"And for now--" Bodie said, pleased, and began to move in: but Doyle stopped him, pushing his hand aside, pressing shut a popper or two, disregarding Bodie's disappointed noise. "Look, mate, if you can't fit me in till Saturday owing to your heavy social commitment, you're not bloody well 'avin' me now for a quick bit on the side in the car."

He was grinning, a curiously engaging expression that, strangely, turned Bodie's hardened guts fluttery; it was so rare to see Ray smile that way, eyes under the heavy fringe of curls screwed up

a little so you could see his laughter lines, the warmth in them unconscious and unfeigned, cheek creased, mouth wide with those white teeth showing over his bottom lip--

"Playing hard to get?" Bodie said, zooming in with a leer; but he had already accepted the rejection because he deserved it and because Doyle had as strong a will as his own: yes, he stood up to Bodie, didn't let himself be pushed around, and Bodie liked that.

For some reason, the comment sobered Doyle; the smile remained but it had turned reflective, as he remembered.

"That doesn't work, with you," he said, looking away.

"Uh?"

"I tried it. Used to think, if I backed off you'd chase harder," and Bodie didn't want to hear any more, shut up Ray, don't, please don't, but Doyle continued, "Didn't work though--you didn't even seem to notice."

This was followed by a silence; Doyle abruptly snapped out of his past and thumped Bodie on the knee. "Sorry, mate, wasn't trying to lay anything heavy on you. 'Ave a polo."

The pink tip of his tongue appeared through the circumference of white mint, flickered provocatively, and was gone. He peeled back the wrapper, extracted another and hung it from the dashboard.

Bodie took it and crunched it up absentmindedly. He had half an eye on the job, but he was also thinking over what Doyle had revealed.

"Trust you," said Doyle disgustedly. "I make mine last, see how thin I can get 'em, see?" The polo appeared again, much reduced in depth, almost transparent--

Abruptly, Bodie leaned over and kissed his mint-sweet partner, swiping the small cirlet with a sweep of his tongue and swallowing as much of Doyle's saliva as he could steal away in that one devouring moment.

"I did notice," he told him against his ear.

"Oh yeah?" mocked Doyle gently; he as much as Bodie was wary of discussing their relationship, having learnt at cost that Bodie could hurt him without even meaning to, or seeming to know what he'd done.

"Yeah." Bodie wrapped an arm around his shoulders, gave him a squeeze. Had Doyle but known it, it was as close as Bodie ever came to committing himself; though it still fell very short of what Doyle had learnt he must want without hope. "But I thought you were just tired of playing queer, that's all. See--you were too subtle for me."

"Wouldn't have made any difference, any case," said Doyle; and that truth was accepted, by both; but it made the atmosphere a little wistful, an autumn day with summer lost and all the dying leaves yet to fall into mud.

Breaking it consciously, Doyle pulled free, drew his gun and began to check it over. "And not only do you keep resistin' my charms, you nicked my bloody peppermint." He glowered up at Bodie from beneath scowling brows. "Rejection, I can take. Theft is something else."

"Ave another," said Bodie, accepting the change of tempo with relief. He ruffled Doyle's curls, trying vaguely to communicate affection.

"Was the last one," Doyle muttered, but he didn't move away from the caress as he sometimes did.

"I'll buy you a whole new packet," Bodie promised rashly; and he kissed his partner's amazed, upturned face. Stupid, he was telling himself, to take this sort of risk with him out here, like this, but it was dark in the car and--

And, Doyle tasted sweet, mouth opening to drink from him.

Over Doyle's head he saw something move.

Doyle picked up instantly on the tiny change of atmosphere. His head whipped round, his gun up fast and steady, all softness wiped from his face.

"Over there," Bodie told him tightly, checking his Browning swiftly. They counted time silently, and burst out of the car simultaneously in a ready-to-fire stance, narrowed eyes checking, scanning, moving on.

Nothing.

Doyle relaxed, curly head ducking as he reached under his armpit to put the gun away. "Shopper, probably. I'll go that way, you cover." Casual heroism, peculiar to those unfamiliar with danger, or to whom it is routine.

Bodie moved fast to block his way. Surprised green eyes locked with hazed blue steel. "Together," was all Bodie said.

"Wha--?" Doyle only stared at him, astounded.

"Stick together," Bodie repeated, conscious of faint embarrassment but that was secondary to the immutable resolve. After all, it wasn't as if he were fussing over Doyle or being overly protective or anything like that; standard procedure, really, to keep close until--well, even if it wasn't standard procedure, who the hell said they had to follow rules? He was doing his job the best he knew and part of that job happened to include making sure his partner kept in one piece--

He shook the thoughts off, aware of over-justification.

"Be wasting time," Doyle warned, but he had already decided to go it Bodie's way; Bodie usually had good reason for what he decided.

The reason for this particular decision nearly stopped him some seconds later when it hit him.

"S'matter?" Bodie asked, loping along at his side, dodging cars.

"Nothing," Doyle said; and an odd, perverse little smile twisted his mouth: he had to look down to conceal the look in his eyes.

They'd come a long way.

Part III

"That's because you haven't met a girl like Ann--yet," said Doyle with heavy meaning, and Bodie chuckled.

"If it addles me the way it's done you, mate, believe me, I don't need it."

He ambled around the small living room, his manner easy and relaxed. He knew Doyle was embarrassed and it amused him--but not to the extent of being tempted to jeer. He was genuinely fond of Doyle: something about him had just eased its way into Bodie's life and fitted there. As he stood there, that realisation for once very clear in his mind, he experienced the strong urge to communicate it to Doyle; he hesitated, looking for the right words....

Doyle was checking his watch. "Look, Bodie--"

Bodie threw his hands up. "Okay, okay. I get the message. Not wanted." His lip acquired a droop. Hands on his hips, his unusually elegant partner merely regarded him, waiting for him to go; he looked good enough to eat. Or anything else you cared to name. Recklessly, Bodie stepped forward and swept him into a hug. Staring down into the odd, dear face, he murmured, in his best deep romantic-hero's voice:

"If you were a girl--"

"Yeah?" prompted Doyle; he nipped Bodie's chin with sharp teeth, his breath warm against Bodie's throat.

Unsure it was wise, Bodie said it anyway.

"I'd have married you."

After a frozen second Doyle snorted. He pushed Bodie away. "Piss off, Bodie. You're an idiot," he added, resignedly affectionate.

"But you love me anyway," Bodie carolled, immeasurably relieved. He shadow-boxed his way across the room to the door. "Cheers, curlytop. 'Ave a great night."

" 'Ang on a moment." Doyle glanced around, plucked a single red rose from the bunch waiting for Ann and presented him with it. "There, mate."

Bodie, overwhelmed, kissed Doyle just beside his mouth and exited, holding the rose dramatically to his chest.

Doyle looked after him, shaking his head; his smile soon faded and he forgot Bodie entirely because he was unaccountably nervous about the evening to come, a flicker in his guts as if he were an unkissed maiden faced by a starved cavalier. Stupid. Nothing to be afraid of. What's so different from taking out any bird--? and I usually do all right there....

But it *was* different, and he knew why. Why it was so important.

He was falling in love.

Bodie had been unworried about Doyle's latest fancy until Doyle's behaviour became erratic: his temper, always prone to turn vicious, ran freely these days and he seemed liable to long introspection, lapsing into silence often. They had completely lost the old double-act; Doyle simply wasn't playing. And he was as touchy as hell. Particularly if Bodie dared to mention Ann.

He'll get over it, Bodie reasoned; but he was a little bothered that Doyle had made no move to introduce him to the elusive Ann who was worthy of roses and a tie. Recalling that porcelain perfection he'd glimpsed just twice, he'd already resigned himself to the fact that this was not going to be one of the girlfriends they shared--not that he much fancied getting his end away there, anyway, from what he'd seen. Be more fun fucking a frozen chicken, Bodie reckoned. But he was used to a carefree regime, wherein he and Doyle moved in and out of each other's sexuality with freedom, introducing the more liberal of their girls to sex in company with each other; there had been some wild, wanton nights best not thought about in the light of day. Then there were a few girls, interestingly, who'd been so turned on by it all that he and Doyle had felt free enough to be open about their own strong sexual tie: he remembered several who'd loved to watch him going down on Ray or vice versa, oh yes, good nights those, riding high on sexual heat, a rich feast of decadence to feed every nerve, every sense; and then sometimes there were nights just for the two of them alone and they were in some ways the best of all, because--

Bodie didn't want to go into just why that should be so--and in any case, it was irrelevant because there were none of those nights now; Doyle spent all of his free time with Ann and seemed to need nothing more. Jealous? Bodie asked himself; and yes, of course he was jealous, if only because it seemed he had lost, with no warning, the source of the best sexual highs he'd ever experienced, and then he was jealous of Doyle's company, too; he missed him. From being something special to Ray, now there was just Ray, and Ann; Bodie had been backbenched, lumped into a general grey mass of 'outsiders' along with everyone else. That hurt. But never mind, he reasoned, Doyle'd soon get over it. Novelty worn off, he'd be back.

Having thus succeeded in reassuring himself, it was therefore something of a shock for Bodie to hear from Doyle that he was intending to marry her.

This was serious.

"--you'll be telling me next you're going to marry her--"

"--yeah, well I might just do that--"

He kept his reactions cool, careful; not showing by a flicker the internal turmoil set off in him like rocketflight by Doyle's backlashed statement.

It was time he met her.

But before he did, Bodie made a bad mistake.

Because the news was buzzing around in his head, and because in some strange way he needed to tell someone, he let it out to Cowley, thereby unleashing a Pandora's box of horrors set in motion by six flat words:

"You'll have to check her out."

"Sherry, Bodie?"

He would have liked to assume his best drunk-Irish accent and mumble "Yeah, but sh'not as hairy as me legs," because from the moment he had looked over that disdainful cool exterior he had had the urge to disrupt it. Clearly she thought Bodie was a bit of a slob anyway, a bit non-U...he played up to that quite happily.

"Not for me thanks; sherry's a drink for ladies and clergymen," he said, a bold blue-eyed stare unleashing itself onto her, "I'll 'ave a pint of Ray's home-brew, ta all the same." He smacked his lips and rubbed his belly in appreciative anticipation, and sauntered out to the fridge. Who the hell did she think she was--? Offering him a drink as if she owned the place, when it was his and Doyle's haunt; standing beside the bar like the Hostess...Bodie, shamelessly proprietary, always assumed he had a half-share in Doyle's flat and helped himself to alcohol, or anything else he fancied, without waiting to be asked.

Doyle was hard at work in oven gloves and an apron; he was leaning to peer into the oven. Bodie patted him on the rump as the curly head disappeared into the dark confines; and left his hand there in a lingering caress.

"Be'ave yourself," came a stern, slightly strained voice from inside the oven. Bodie grinned to himself. All not well with the casserole, eh?

"How'd you know it wasn't Ann?" he asked, perching on the corner of the breakfast bar.

Doyle came out of the oven backwards, shut the door quickly and uncurled to his full height. There was a smudge of what looked like tomato paste beside his mouth. "I *did* think it was A--" he began, grinning, but had the line stopped when Bodie pulled him close, and, very thoroughly, licked it off. Then he moved to his mouth, kissing him deeply. Doyle tasted of warm wine and onions. Been testing out the sauce, obviously.

"*Bodie*," hissed Doyle, and dragged himself free. "For chrissake." He wasn't amused any more. Bodie noted all this carefully, ignoring the small hurting pit that yawned open inside him.

"What you doin' out 'ere then?" Doyle asked, beginning to chop a tomato at machinegun speed. "Thought you were entertainin' Ann."

"I don't think she'd like my act," said Bodie with truth; but he took the point, got the beer he had come for out of the fridge and trailed back to join her.

"Does Ray need any help?" she asked. Probably be as glad as he was to escape to the kitchen: the atmosphere in here was about as heartening as inside Cowley's sock.

"Nah, the Master Chef's getting on just fine." Deciding at random to be perverse, Bodie sat down beside her, too close, and swooped in on her with his most seductive grin. "Well, it's nice to meet you at last. Raymond's been hiding you from me; very naughty of him."

Her move, now that Bodie had insinuated proprietorship of Ray; and she rose to the challenge with no trouble as she said sweetly: "Funny he's never mentioned you to me. First I heard of you was this morning, when I heard that this mysterious friend called Bodie was coming to dinner and I had to look my best." She smiled, ostensibly to soften this although it was a hard, brittle smile, and Bodie felt a flicker of respect: no milksop, this. It was war, and no weapons to be withheld.

"So you work with Ray, do you?" she was continuing, taking a tiny noiseless sip of pale sherry. Without answering Bodie bounced to his feet before her startled gaze and smoothly refilled her glass, right to the brim, with a flourish.

"Thanks, but actually I didn't want any more," she said directly, her eyes hard and unflinching beneath her unappealing fringe.

"Sorry," apologised Bodie, and taking it from her, took a healthy swallow from the delicate-stemmed glass. Then he handed it back: waiting, like a keen-eyed professor with a rat in a maze, to see which way she would turn next.

This, he could see, had scored.

Already she had left it too late, either to comment or to reject it; the best she would do now would be to abandon it, a feeble gesture which would earn her no points in the needle game that Bodie, an expert, was thoroughly enjoying by now.

Doyle popped his head round the door at that moment, quizzical. "Bit quiet in 'ere innit? You two getting on all right?"

"Yeah, just fine," avowed Bodie. "You get back to your cuisine, Escoffier and leave to me the task of persuadin' Ann she's made the wrong choice."

Doyle nodded and disappeared once more, giving Ann a wink and a curiously warm look before he left.

It curled Bodie's guts.

For he know quite well what that look had meant: okay, I know he's being difficult, but bear with it; making a conspiracy between them that both excluded Bodie and relegated him to his place.

Bodie found he had lost all his taste for the needle game.

Conscious of victory, Ann graciously investigated again the question of his working life with Ray, and from somewhere he found the vigour to answer.

He was very thoughtful. He watched Ann now through professional eyes since he was supposed to be checking her out--oh christ Ray was going to hate that, let's hope nothing comes of it and then he'll never have to know; and he watched her with Doyle, because up till now he had not quite believed, not deep down inside, that Doyle could carry this through, not once the first madness was over.

Now he saw them together, he was--frightened.

There was something, about Ray, that spoke of sincerity; his eyes followed her wherever she was, he was gentle with her as if she were fragile; he was entranced in a way Bodie had never seen him before. He remembered the roses, with sick dread.

Because Doyle might well think himself in love, clearly had kidded himself into believing he was anyway, but Bodie was quite certain Ann Holly worked out love on a calculator. Fragile--? No way.

He disliked her intensely. Everything about her irritated him, her brittle manner, her Cindy-doll looks and grooming, but worse than any of that, he could not conceive of a woman less suited to Ray, whose weaknesses and strengths Bodie knew better than anyone in the world.

In their natures, their attitudes, their social class and style of behaviour they were totally apart. And she had a hard look to her, an unyielding inflexibility--

No, oh no, she wasn't right for Ray. Bodie knew Doyle to be a loving creature, oh yes, loving, once his loyalty was won over; deeply affectionate without being sentimental, he needed and

deserved warmth in return. The thought of all Doyle's love being dashed on the cool rocks of Ann's passionless reserve was hard to bear. Bodie's only hope, which he clung to grittily all through the awkward and desultory conversation at dinner, was that surely Ann would not want to tie herself to Doyle permanently. In Bodie's opinion she wasn't fit to wash his socks; but in Ann's, now, almost certainly Doyle would not be good enough for her, not by a long way.

The optimism of that wavered when Bodie's flatly realistic nature prevailed--why not? Marriages were made and unmade in moments these days. Doyle earned good money, had a nice flat; he was brave, dashing and courteous to his ladies; probably just about scraped a pass in literary taste and table manners; and he was undeniably attractive. Even a cool bitch of the Ann Holly type couldn't miss that.

And if he'd slept with her yet--and Bodie was certain that he had, there was that unmistakable air of casual physical intimacy between them--she must surely have rated him a pass plus in bed, because Bodie knew all too well, Doyle was beautiful, in bed as everywhere; he had the kind of delicacy that robbed even the most intimate of sexual acts of crudity. Had a good way with women too, Ray did; liked to take his time, give them pleasure.

Not that you could imagine Ann feeling much of that.

Bodie could see it all with drenching clarity: the wedding, Doyle alight, excited, dancing past Bodie and out of his reach forever; disillusionment dawning too gradually to shock. The kids nannied; Ann giving dinner parties for Sloane Rangers (she would hire caterers), the perfect hostess, good with the chat. Doyle brought out and displayed to her lilyflower friends like some kind of untamed, exotic pet; only Doyle would not like that, nor the cool kiss at bedtime and the laden reminder that they had to be up early--and so, finally, the split: nice settlement on Ann while she was freed to hunt around for a new catch--

Ray, can't you see how it would be--?

Doyle was too idealistic over such things--idealistic, or just not looking far enough ahead. Look at them now, Bodie mused, playing idly with the glass of VSOP balanced on one knee; Ann with Doyle's arm around her there on the settee, and even in the low light not relaxed enough to rest close against him; still maintaining the poise of a lady, and the artificial social conversation that Doyle was, for her sake, responding to in kind while Bodie, less motivated, had long since ceased to pretend attention....

"You're quiet," Doyle said in a slightly raised voice, to inform Bodie the comment had been intended for him.

Bodie knew he had let Doyle down tonight; the hostility between himself and Ann had been instant, mutual, and probably inevitable, but that was no excuse for his poor performance since. Apart from a dogged dinnertable social effort, in the course of which he had been able to drop in a few questions about her family, for Cowley, he had made little contribution to the evening.

"Sorry, sunshine," he responded; he met Doyle's eyes and for an instant Ann Holly had gone as

if she had never existed, for there was no way Bodie was going to conceal the warmth he felt for Doyle in that moment. "Tired, that's all."

And as he said it, the thought flashed into his head, she's going to hurt him. Oh christ I hope to god she doesn't hurt him--

"Have you two got to be at work in the morning?" Ann's unmellow tones crashed in, offering, perhaps, a conciliation; but like Bodie's own sense of failure, far too late to do any good.

"Yeah. Up bright and early." Bodie rose with the comment; set down his glass, still a third full. "Must be off."

Everyone was perfectly, self-consciously aware that the evening had been a disaster; but, now it was over, anxious to prove it had not been. The lovers rose too, there was a flurried exchange of awkward chat, given life by everyone's relief that it was over.

With some sensitivity, Ann stayed where she was while Doyle saw Bodie to the door.

"All right, mate?" Doyle asked, a little quiet, a little worried; he was on edge wondering if Bodie, not known for his delicate sensibilities, might bluntly put into words what he did not want to hear.

In answer, Bodie's fist flew out and caught Doyle in the belly--but gently, so that his instinctive wince and recoil was unnecessary. "Yeah. Great meal, mate. Thanks--see you in the morning." His eyes, gleaming dark in the low light, lifted sharply to Doyle's; and he gave him a brief smile.

"Okay," said Doyle, and Bodie could feel the eyes on him until he turned the corner and heard, a long way off, the door shut firmly with a click.

Okay.

No, everything wasn't okay, and Bodie was no longer sure he knew why not, although puzzlingly, he thought it had all seemed quite clear earlier. Fighting down the images of that closed door, and what would now be going on behind it--

Thank god that's over

Sorry, I'm sorry he was difficult, sorry it was awkward for you

--and the warm compensation Doyle would now be laying on her as if she, sinless, had come through a terrible ordeal fighting off the wolf. Bodie moved to his car as if through deep water.

The tyres squealed in protest as he exacted every rev of acceleration from the Capri and shot off into the night.

He didn't take the roads home but simply drove on and on, making split-second decisions at

junctions, until he came to open country. It was here that he spotted twin blazing headlights in the rearview mirror. Oh, fuck it.

Fuck the whole bloody world.

He pulled in to the side of the road, wound down the window.

A traffic cop, malicious with delight at having made a catch in the long watches of the night, stuck his head in. "Mind showing me your licence, sir?"

A slow buildup; he was winding up to much much more, easing off the layers of courtesy like snakeskin.

Instead Bodie had his ID ready in his hand. He stared up. Thoroughly thwarted, and having trailed miles down this deserted route for his prey, the cop was about to enquire nastily whether this was official business.

Something in the man's eyes stopped him.

Muttering an apology, he went back to his car and the reassuring company of Ches, who had bad breath but was otherwise okay--

"Whassup, Sambo?" said his partner, intent on rolling another cigarette. "Wife in labour on the back seat was it then?"

The traffic cop wasn't listening.

"CI5. You 'eard of CI5, Ches?"

"Them the ones what crawl out to do the dirty work and then vanish back underground?"

"Screwballs," muttered his partner, "they're screwballs. You can tell by the look in their eyes." And with a sudden rush of impatience he thumped the dashboard. "Get this fuckin' wagon back to town, we've wasted enough bloody time."

Bodie stayed where he was, the car pulled into the side of the road, in the middle of nowhere. He killed the lights.

He know now what was wrong with him.

Jealousy--that was to be expected. Anyone'd be sick at the thought of losing such a sexual prize as Doyle, especially to someone who wouldn't appreciate him. But Bodie was resigned to such things; eventually the games stopped, as one by one they peeled themselves off the carefree sexual rotas and settled down. If you were yourself unsuited or unwilling to do the same, you had to accept the changing faces.

But this--this was more than that.

He couldn't hide from it any longer.

Jealousy--oh yes, he was sick with it, Doyle even now lying at peace, trusting, naked in the warmth of his bed, Ann, privileged Ann to whom Doyle had given not just his body but his love, beside him; and Bodie out here in this dark unknown world, alone. Bodie had been used for so long to being first for Doyle then no wonder it hurt his pride and his sense of order in his world to find it was no longer so.

If only that was all.

But that cosy little notion had been destroyed at one pass with the damning, too-revealing thought--

Oh christ I hope she doesn't hurt him.

It was quite clear.

Rather than bear Doyle's hurt if Ann should leave him, Bodie would beg her on his knees to stay and be kind; and that, oh that was not jealousy. Chilled, stricken, Bodie wound up the open window in a hurry and leaned his head on his forearm.

Too late, too late; it had happened.

Part IV

Ann had gone.

Only Bodie was left for him, sharing the pain.

"I wanted her to love me. I thought she did. But no one ever does, I'd forgotten that." He whirled, fist raised, and punched the wall in a blow that must have bruised, aimless. "You know, that's what kills me, Bodie. However hard I try, however much I love someone, I never--get there for them. Never gonna try again, Bodie," he said with a kind of fierce courage. "Never again."

He paced around, frenzied, barely leashed. Bodie had never seen him like this before. Doyle, turbulently emotional, occasionally worked himself up to be melodramatic, but this--

It was real.

The pain of it whipped Bodie through to the bone; his stomach was aching with it. His throat was choked; it wouldn't be long before he was in tears. Crying, he thought distractedly; so this is what it does to you to love someone. I should be jealous because he's so sad he's lost her; I should be triumphant because now he's all mine. And instead all I can fuckin' well feel is this terrible tearing inside because he's sick with hurt, and so help me if I could get her back for him

I'd do it and shut the door on them and walk away--

But he couldn't do that, Ann was gone, reneged on shallow promises; now the time to face up to it. Moving on slow feet, as if he was wading through sludge, he went over to where Doyle stood leaning on the mantelpiece with his cheek on his arm, knuckles pressed to his mouth; and slid his arms around the tense figure, pushing his face onto Doyle's shirtclad shoulder.

"I love you," he said, very quietly.

He knew--oh he knew so well it was the wrong time, the bittersweetness of that singing defeat through his blood, but he had to say it. For a moment they were close, Doyle stilled within the circle of his arms; Bodie shut his eyes, cheek rubbing gently on the hardboned upthrust of Doyle's shoulder, offering useless comfort. And as he had expected, Doyle pulled away from him, running a hand through his hair; he walked to the window and leaned against the wall, his back to Bodie. He had the back of his wrist pressed to his mouth, to try and stop the quiver that would keep threatening; his voice was very low.

"Don't give me that, Bodie."

Bodie stayed silent in his own pain, accepting the failure.

"I know you 'ad to say it. Thanks for that. But--that's enough. I just--I just can't take any more, tonight." Quietly spoken, no emphasis.

Yes, of course that's what Doyle would think. All that pain he just could not hide; 'no one loves me'; what more natural than to step in unthinking and contradict it with a lie?

No, Ray, he wanted to cry out, it's not like that, would I lie about it for chrissake?--but then Doyle turned blindly to face him, taking a deep, tearing breath, and all thoughts of any kind fled him because he could see that Doyle had spoken the perfect truth; oh yes, he'd had enough, all right.

He got to him just in time, supporting him while the violence of misery, frustration and grief ripped through him, just holding him, his own skin wet as he stared grimly, silently over Doyle's ravaged face and called forth every curse he could think of to settle on Ann Holly and the entire female sex and anyone else who had hurt Ray, ever. Including himself.

Doyle had been quiet for some time now, the thin chest still heaving hugely, expanding, shuddering from time to time. Bodie thought he might have fallen, exhausted, into a doze where he knelt, head cradled close to Bodie's shoulder; he could feel cramp setting in from the awkwardness of the crouching position he had been forced to hold. Cautiously he uncurled stiff wet fingers from the side of Doyle's cheek and regretted it instantly--

"I want you to go now, Bodie."

He couldn't see Doyle's face. "If you think I'd leave you tonight then you're off your head,"

returned Bodie shortly; he let Doyle go and rose to his feet.

Doyle followed suit, knees cracking as he did so, brushing his sleeve over his face. "I said, I want you to go." His voice was still strange, hoarse with crying; a catch in it making his words jerky.

"I'm not goin', Ray."

Doyle looked terrible, red-eyed; unshaven face smeared with tears and worse. He concentrated on Bodie when he did not want to, when he wanted to have his own misery out, and spoke with low intensity: "I wanna be on my own Bodie, don't you understand that?"

"Yeah, just like Garbo. The answer's still no."

"Bodie--" Doyle was beginning to be angry--"Can't you get it into your bloody head--?" His voice dropped, as he surveyed the stooping, palefaced figure before him; something about Bodie's bleakness got through and made him soften what he had been going to slam into him, intending to hurt. "I don't want you, I don't want *it* I mean, tonight, don't you see that?" He tried to be kind, tried for a moment to see Bodie's problems past his own. "Look, I'm not sayin' it's over with us, with you and me, but tonight--" His voice caught again, but he didn't heed it, battled on, "It's her I want, I know I can't have her but that's how it is tonight, and I'd be better alone, honest, Bodie." He tried to smile, to make it all better. "I'm not in the mood, mate. Go out and pick up some bird from the pub, eh, you can tell me all about it in the morning?"

The knife slid under skin and twisted.

"You make me so angry sometimes," said Bodie in a low voice; and he crossed the room and pulled Doyle into a fierce, desperate hug, his voice raw. "I'm not in the mood either, *mate*, it may surprise you to know; I doubt I'll ever bloody be in the mood again the way I feel tonight. I'm as sick as you are over all this you dumbheaded little idiot, in case you hadn't noticed, and there's no way I'm leaving you alone--you don't 'ave to see me, dunnave to talk to me, but I'm *staying*, and if I 'ave to lay you out cold to prove it I will so just shuddup."

Whether Doyle took it in or not he didn't know, but he seemed to concede to the vigour of it at least. Bodie let him drink, then, and when the inflow of whisky had relaxed him enough to make him drowsy he took him to bed; got in beside him, draped an arm over him and, eventually, slept.

When Bodie awoke, jolted out of dreamless sleep by something unknown, as his eyes came open his guts twisted straight away in a knot of depression and dread to face the day; not one, not even one blessed minute of lying there in the awakening half-doze, bathed with oblivion. He reached out, to share his sudden misery, but Doyle was not there. He was in the bathroom when Bodie pushed open the door, seated, his head in his hands.

"Whassa time?" Bodie asked, wandering to the mirror and looking, wincing at his own blurry expression, his chin shaded with stubble, his hair going all different ways.

Doyle's fingers were steepled, threaded through curls beside his ears, pressing the throbbing nerve there that was making his head pound. He didn't look up. "About seven or something."

"Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, I slept okay."

Clearly Doyle was not in the mood to appreciate idle chat. Watching himself in the mirror, Bodie saw his mouth twist in humourless irony; oh yes, ironic all this, more love in him than ever before in his life, and, what was more, for someone who for years had hoped for just that: only it was too late, too bloody late, Bodie's day was gone, never even sampled, vanished like a dream the day Ann Holly came into Ray's life and fucked it up....

If only, if only. If only he'd taken more notice of his own feelings rather than shoving them under the carpet the way he usually did, then maybe that day when Conroy died, when Benny died, it would have been Bodie he turned to, not that wheyfaced bitch--

Pointless.

And yet--

Suddenly desperate, he glanced down at the downcast figure beside him. Oh christ, however could he have missed it? He knew every inch of that body there, he could pick Doyle out blindfold in a crowd by the creases behind his knees, as Doyle could him; they were very close, as close, perhaps as two people ever could be. Take now, this very moment: it was so usual, so accepted a thing for them to be together that Doyle hardly knew Bodie was there, would not disturb his own morning routine by a fraction to accommodate Bodie's presence. And that was the truest test: hold that up, against the presence of guests, friends, in the house. They belonged. It was so much more than friendship Bodie could not define it as other than love. How many years had he had to think about this, and shrugged away the chance as if it hardly mattered? He had been blind; and a fool.

On impulse he dropped to crouch in front of Doyle, elbows perching on Doyle's bare thighs, hands flying to grip Doyle's skinny upper arms, knotted with fine muscle; gazing intently into wide-open seasprite eyes that had flashed up to meet him.

"We'll make it, sunshine," he promised, tightly, grittily. "We'll be okay."

Serious, forced out of his innerfocussed detachment, Doyle studied his face for a moment as if curious to know what had prompted all this; it was as if he was swiftly checking, backtracking on Bodie's line of thought to disinter the original idea. After a minute he said:

"Yeah." And Bodie knew then that in a way the worst was over, that Doyle would not close him off again. False prophecy, the depression of waking. He rose to his feet, even managed a little chuckle. Doyle's bathroom needed a clean; dropped talcum powder flew in grey clouds wherever one laid a foot, there was a greasy ring around the washbasin and, given what Doyle was in there

for, anyway, it seemed all in all an odd place for a revelation.

"What you laughin' at?" Doyle said at last, raising his head and watching as Bodie, with firm brisk strokes, swivelled the shower taps so that water splattered down into the bath. His eyes looked brighter; more sharp.

"Just thinkin'," Bodie answered, "after all these years you'd think I could have picked a better place to propose." He slid a speedy finger along the cistern, collecting powdery dust; this he dabbed on Doyle's nose, swooping in before Doyle could turn his head away.

"Bastard," said Doyle without heat, dignified even positioned as he was, nose delicately flared. He added: "What you proposin', anyway?" He watched as Bodie put one leg over the side of the bath, his eyes automatically dwelling on the parting of Bodie's buttocks in unconscious erotic pursuit. "Marriage?" with gentle derision. Bodie's head flew round at that; his eyes were warm, gentled with promise: Doyle stared. "Somethin' like that." And before Doyle could respond, Bodie leaned down, one hand on his shoulder, and kissed him on the mouth, very gentle, a sweet touch of delicate lips on velvet skin; taking his time.

Then he vaulted the side of the bath and doused himself beneath the cascading water.

"I wouldn't kiss everyone before they cleaned their teeth in the morning," he shouted over the rush of the downpour.

"No," agreed Doyle. Bodie was exuberant this morning. He wondered why; and why he should be feeling a little that way himself; for when he had awoken less than an hour before, he had seriously wondered if the day was worth making the effort for.

"You got gut trouble, Doyle, you bin on there so long?" Bodie began to lather himself with brisk efficiency. "Only takes me two minutes. That's army trainin', that is."

Disregarding the insufferable smugness, Doyle made a face. "Too much booze," he explained and shivered, his face twisting as another twinge cramped his belly.

"You better get on with it, mate, or I'll be throwing you off in a second."

"I'll make room for you, don't worry," Doyle shot back at him.

He'd never have said that to Ann, Bodie thought, and threw his head back under the cleansing needles of spray.

The long silence of locked-in misery broken, in the car Doyle talked about her, fingers fiddling with an odd piece of string, head down. Bodie listened, let him get it all out, though he hated to hear it; didn't want to know one more thing about her.

"--I never thought, just didn't believe she'd do that to me."

He lifted his head, stared out of the side window. "That's what's so 'ard to take."

"You don't really get to know someone," Bodie said distantly. "Not in a few days."

If that stung, it was nevertheless the truth and although Doyle winced he didn't try to deny it. "Well, *you* certainly didn't know her," he said with a little edge of heat. "You only met her once, for chrissake."

"I saw enough," said Bodie grimly. When Doyle didn't reply to that, he flared, his face screwed up in pent anger, "Oh for godsake, Ray, if you'd married her I'd have sat bloody hard on what I felt about her for *your* sake, and that alone, but now she's run out on you there's no fuckin' way in the world I'll pretend anything. She was a bitch. A cold bitch, and if you can't see that now believe me you soon will." His lips stretched in a savage smile as his hand swung the wheel; the car flashed out to overtake a lorry.

Doyle's brow creased; absently he put one hand to his belly, pressing slightly. "I know you didn't like her. You made that very clear. But do you know why? You were jealous, that's all. Jealous as hell. But I bet you're not going to admit that, are you?"

It was out. He'd never meant to say it, but there it was. And he knew it didn't matter: for all they were quarrelling now, they were in some odd way very close today. They would not hurt each other, not today, perhaps never again.

"Yeah, I'll admit that," said Bodie tightly. "No sweat, sunshine. Of course I was bloody jealous. I wanted to put up a fight for you but I could see it was too late. But that's not why I hated her. I-" He stopped, aghast at the rank sentimentality of the words that had flashed into his mind ready to use.

Doyle was looking at him, the haunting slant of his troubled eyes attentive, his fists clenched up tight as if to fend off physically the knowledge he didn't want.

Bodie said it anyway.

"You were loving her and I knew, so help me I *knew*, sooner or later she was going to throw all that love back in your face like so much shit. That's why I hated her, Ray. I'm not makin' any apology for that."

For a moment there was intense silence in the car; stillness before the storm? Without knowing it Bodie was strung up on tension waiting for Doyle's reply.

Then Doyle expelled a long breath, slowly. His eyes dropped to the piece of string he still held; he had knotted and unknotted it already countless times, thin fingers working ceaselessly. Now they were stilled. "Was it that obvious? That she didn't love me?"

Funny, he was thinking to himself numbly, how you can so deceive yourself; see what you want to see.

It was written all over his face.

For all the world it was as much as Bodie could do not to hurtle the car into a stop and wrap this bruised Doyle up in himself, hold him tight and safe and in a place where no one could get at him to hurt him ever again--

There was much to say today and they would have to be honest; this was one of the times when the brutal truth was not necessary.

"Maybe she did love you, in her way," he said roughly, looking straight at the road ahead. "How would I know--? Like you said, I only met her once. She probably did love you, I'm not saying she didn't. What I'm saying is, she wasn't right for you." He reached out, gave the thin knee a meant-to-be-reassuring squeeze; never to know that the unconscious, desperate grip of his fingers gave Doyle a deep black bruise: "Sunshine, believe me. You need a certain sort of-- toughness...to cope with a lady like Ann and not go under, and you just haven't got it, not the sort of toughness I'm talking about," he added, because in fact Doyle could be hard; so hard Ann would look Poppin'sish by comparison. Bodie had seen heavies twice his size unnerved into immobility by the chilling force of Doyle at his most dangerous. But on the other hand, a deep, close relationship with someone was necessary for him; he gave a lot to it and couldn't thrive without a lot being given to him in return. Ann would have trampled that kind of vulnerability into the ground.

He hardly dared look at Doyle to see how he was taking all this. But Doyle merely nodded, and put another question to him.

"So you were glad when she left then?"

So casual-sounding; but Bodie wasn't a fool. He hesitated, and this time snapped straight into the truth.

"Of course I bloody well was. She was poison for you and the quicker it ended the better."

"You really believe that, don't you."

Doyle still had his head down. Impossible to gauge his reaction.

"Yeah. And you'll make it a whole lot easier on yourself if you start believing it too," growled Bodie. He changed gear, savagely; wrenched the car out past two cyclists riding abreast. A horn blared; startled, he checked his wing mirror to see a motorcyclist dropping back too close behind; Jesus Christ, must have been overtaking and I pulled out in his path, stupid trying to drive and carry on this kind of conversation--

Doyle had not even noticed. Because he trusted Bodie he was feeling around it all; but the hurt was still all too close to him, his head was in a whirl. Let it rest. Maybe Bodie was right; and maybe, too, one day he'd be able to see it from afar. For now, he didn't want to think about it; it

was over.

He scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand and looked up, with a ragged little smile that tore at Bodie's heart. "Good job I've still got you," he said, and added automatically, qualifying it as he always did lest Bodie sense entrapment and back off, "Sometimes."

It was stuffy in the car. He wound his window down a fraction. Abruptly, Bodie pulled the car into a layby, jerked on the handbrake. "Ray--"

There was a strange sensation in his chest, a choking feeling of constriction.

Doyle turned his head to look at him; the wind danced in his hair. "What?"

"I've gotta tell you this, I know it's not a very good time," Bodie said all in a rush, staring straight ahead, one hand clenched whitely on the steering wheel; "I tried to tell you last night, but-- Listen, Ray. If you want it that way, it doesn't have to be--*sometimes* any more." He listened to his own heart pounding the beat of blood through tight veins. Thunderous.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," said Doyle after a minute. Risking a glance at him Bodie tried to smile. "It's okay, I know it's too soon after Ann. But--I wanted you to know, if nothing else I wanted you to know that you--that you got there for me," he said, wanting, needing to wipe out Doyle's words of the night before.

"When did you decide--this?" Doyle said.

Bodie shrugged, feeling both better and worse now it was out. "Didn't decide anything, mate; just realised it was true. Few days ago."

"When you thought I was going to drop you for Ann."

Doyle's voice had a hint of dangerous disquiet. "No," said Bodie, and he turned to face his partner, reaching for his hands, holding his wrists gently when Doyle did not return the grasp. "Not then. When I realised that if she ever let you down I'd run after her and drag her screaming all the way back to you. If that's what you needed."

Doyle was quiet then, sensing honesty; with his thumbs, he idly stroked Bodie's palms as he gazed out of the window and assimilated the shock.

"You gotta admit it," Bodie said to the silence, "Whoever's up there in charge of Fate really screwed this one up, didn't he?"

"I dunno," said Doyle reflectively, and his wide clear eyes scanned Bodie's face. "It helps."

Bodie took a deep breath. "Look, you don't have to feel I'm putting any pressure on you. I swear I'm not, Ray. I know it's all the wrong time and everything, what with Ann and all. I'm not so thick I can't see you'd trade me in for her right now if you got the chance." He gave a quick,

ironic smile: but, nervous, he didn't meet Doyle's eyes. "Talk about on the rebound. Or, second-best. But--"

"No," interrupted Doyle, "you're not that. Don't put yourself down, Bodie; you know perfectly well what you mean to me. I'm not 'aving any of this noble martyr stuff."

Bodie had to grin. "I'm not noble. Just out for my own good--and yours."

"It won't last," said Doyle with conviction. "Like a kid, you are. Toy in the cupboard you 'aven't looked at in months, all of a sudden someone comes to play, takes a fancy to it, that's it, they can't have it."

Bodie clenched his fists, his guts twisting. "Don't be hard. Don't be..."

"I'm not," said Doyle, suddenly repentant. He slid an arm around Bodie's shoulders, hugged the rigidity out of them. "But let's be realistic, mate. It'll all be over in a week--just as long as it takes for you to fall for that new blonde in computers." He grinned, to soften it.

"Christ, Doyle. It's not some bloody crush I've got on you, y'know. I've known you five years and been layin' you for all but a few days of 'em, so I think you can say I'm past the risk of infatuation."

"Well, what is it then? The grande passion of your life?" Doyle, mocking.

"Yes," said Bodie steadily, "that if you like." He wasn't meeting Doyle's eyes; unused to sentiment, he was finding all of this very embarrassing. His fingers, twitchy, tapped the wheel. Without warning, his hand dived for the keys dangling in the ignition, wrenched it around. The well-oiled engine sprang into life.

"Sod this Doyle, I've had enough. Let's go home."

0 - 60 in ten seconds.

Cowley'd kill them but he'd call them in sick. They weren't much use to anyone today in any case; Cowley, foreseeing that, had sent them off on a minus-points-priority job which could wait. Would have to.

"Grande passion, eh?" murmured Doyle at his side.

Bodie didn't take his eyes off the road. "Yeh. And also--"

"What?" Doyle prompted, when the silence stretched.

"I wanna be with you for all my life," said Bodie gritting his teeth to get it all out before his nerve failed, "It might be bloody illogical and I know it isn't possible but I wanna nail you down, right now. You dunnaved to say anything, I know that's not what you want at the moment. But

that's what *I* want; reckon it's best that you know."

Doyle was silent. Risking it, Bodie darted a sidelong glance at him. Catching the look and sensing its uncertainty--knowing Bodie as he did he was aware of how bloody awful all this must be for him; all the things he most hated in one go--Doyle said, answering something Bodie had not asked,

"I love you, you know that."

And the simplicity of it made Bodie catch his breath.

"We'll sort it out," Doyle only said; and the miles passed on by.

The balance had subtly changed; now it was Doyle in charge, Doyle the practical one offering comfort. He made coffee while Bodie rang them in sick; it was always safest to let Bodie deal with the Cow. As his partner emerged from the lounge Doyle handed him a steaming mug, one eyebrow uplifted in query.

"Said we'd fallen prey to the runs and didn't dare stray far from the bog," Bodie said with a sheepish grin at him.

Doyle nodded slowly and winced as his stomach protested the arrival of the coffee. "S only half a lie." He put down the mug; walked over to Bodie, took his away too, setting it on the side. Then he slipped his arms around Bodie, pulling his shirt out of his waistband, watching his face through slitted eyes.

"But you," he murmured, "you're okay, aren't you? Aren't you, Bodie?" His fingers slipped in to palm the warm mounds, stroking with his thumb.

When Bodie understood, his heart jolted. He nodded, holding Doyle's gaze all the while. "Yeah, sunshine," he said in a husky whisper, "Just fine," and Doyle began to push him backwards, guiding him until they were in the bedroom.

Hastily unclothed, Bodie threw himself down on the bed and Doyle stripped for him, making a sensuous game of it, bare limbs sliding free from cotton, posing briefly, yet casually, only a covert glance from beneath curled lashes giving any sign that he was aware of Bodie's attention. Naked, he padded over to the bed and stood looking down at Bodie. It was a very intense, curious look they exchanged; when at last it ended Bodie had the strange, almost breathless feeling that some contract had passed between them. That if all went well, now, with Doyle's return to him then there would be no doubt of the future for them.

Doyle's lean thighs were close beside him; Doyle was still sitting up, leaning against the headboard. Bodie turned his head to nuzzle the salt-sweetness there; he threw an arm over his thighs, his fingers pinching a fold of skin. With the other hand he found himself, closing his eyes as he touched his own excitement.

Doyle murmured, "Oh, yeah, do that: I like to watch you do that." And he dived over Bodie to lie propped up on one elbow, eyes absorbed, drifting from Bodie's face to his nipples to his fingers.

"Enough," he said into Bodie's ear, and Bodie desisted with a sigh, hungry. He brought his hand up to cup Doyle's chin without looking; Doyle turned his face, brushing new stubble over Bodie's fingers, kissing them briefly.

"I love you," Bodie said without opening his eyes, without moving; and felt Doyle's shift of response as he heard, and took it into his heart.

Then he was kneeling, between Bodie's legs, thumbs stroking the smooth inner thighs. It was all Doyle today, Bodie letting him do it all, do whatever he wanted, sharp eyes measuring, making decisions, holding the mastery of both of them; Bodie's only will engaged to accede to his. It suited him; imperiousness sat well on Doyle. It was not always like this. Sometimes it was Bodie in command, Doyle his to play with. Sometimes powergames didn't appeal; and they would rock together gently, mouths and bodies tender, flying unrushed to a sweet slow climax. At others they would battle sweatily, each trying to fight the other into submission. However it was, it was all the same anyway; in bed, they were equals and it had been that way right from the start.

But today, today it was Doyle's field; he held Bodie in his hands, poised above him, his desiredark eyes slitted gleamingly. A chill of sexual tension ran down Bodie's spine. He arched, presenting himself, needing to be touched there; but Doyle merely ran his thumbs up into the joint of thigh and groin, brushing in the crisp hair there, barely touching the sensitive skin beneath. Without needing to look Bodie knew how his cock would be, lifting and searching, desperate to find that touch and be melted beneath it.

"Don't tease," he said, but it was an appeal without hope; Doyle would keep him this way as long as it suited him, knowing how it heightened the feeling.

"Don't tease," Doyle repeated with an edge of amazement in his voice; he slipped his hands under Bodie and dug his nails into his buttocks. Bodie clenched against it; another urgent throb of arousal pierced him.

"Please," he begged, and Doyle leant nearer him, breath drifting across Bodie's chest as he blew coolly on a nipple, making his way leisurely to Bodie's ear. "You can't escape," he whispered there, and grazed his teeth lightly over the ultra-sensitive lobe of Bodie's ear. Bodie shivered in anguish and delight; so bloody erotic: Doyle his master here, as skilled a fighter as Bodie himself, and once he was on top there was no trick Bodie could play to turn things around. Yes, now it would be all the way to the end...

Testing, he bunched his muscles as if to throw him off, but Doyle was ready for him, flying at him, mouth fastening on a nipple, tweaking a twinge of pain through him as punishment, shooting sheer lust right to the centre of Bodie: and then his tongue, soft in its wake, soothing, rubbing the tiny hurt away. "Wicked," he murmured against Bodie's cheek, warning: "Don't do it again."

"Please," Bodie said again, tensed up with the pain/pleasure in his loins; Doyle could make him come, sometimes, without even touching him, erotic suggestion enough, and he was close, even now, but he wanted so badly to be touched--

The sweatstreaked forehead, desire-shivery skin, told their own story to Doyle; and so he ended that game and began another.

"All right. All right, lie still," he soothed, brushing a quick fingertip reassurance down Bodie's cheek. Eyes shut, Bodie felt velvetsoft lips nuzzle him from nipple to groin. It was sweet. He drifted, hazy with gentle pleasure.

And then, with no warning he was taken in, engulfed in a warm moist haven; it made him arch up. He moaned. And as Doyle's flicking tongue searched him out, exploring every line, every crease and fold, a terrible/wonderful surging began at his very centre, and he clenched his hands tight in Doyle's unseen curls, all thought fled as he concentrated on his coming.

It was snatched away from him.

Doyle dragged his head away, gasping: "Jesus Christ, Bodie!" And as Bodie's dazed blue eyes met his, explained, "Too fast," coming up to hold him, the lean warm weight of him friendly, his tone soft, appeasing: "Too fast, fella. We gotta slow down. So keen today, aren't you?" His eyes ran over Bodie with lazy affection. "I love you. Just gotta calm down a while, hold on--" He stroked the short fringe of hair, combing it through his fingers as he talked. Bodie had one arm flung up over his eyes, his breath was coming hard, and Doyle wondered just how far he could take him; he hadn't intended cruelty, nor to tease, but today was--special, he wanted it to mean more than a quick tumble, a fast release soon forgotten. "Okay now?" and after a moment Bodie nodded.

"Turn over," Doyle whispered; and when Bodie was there he stroked a finger down his spine right to its very tip. Bodie breathed carefully, forcing himself to stay calm. Gentle hands parted him; a warm damp tongue trailed over terribly, beautifully sensitive skin.

"Oh yes," he said, head turning to one side on the pillow, scarcely conscious of speaking at all, "Please do that Ray, please," and the tongue probed him with tender knowledge, making him melt outwards, his whole body lush with soft soft pleasure until there was no resistance in him anywhere; lapped luxuriously with Doyle's saliva he opened to the warm snub hardness of Doyle's cock, accepting it easily.

"I'll fuck you, lover," Doyle whispered into his ear, making a caress of the words, "lay you till we come--"

Deep inside Bodie, held snug and safe, he knew they were both very close. He moved slowly, sure and unhurried; he kissed Bodie's shoulder, nuzzling there openmouthed.

"I love you, Ray," Bodie whispered, the first thing he had said for a long time. "I love you.

Come in me."

Hands kneading Bodie's shoulders, Doyle arched up, his head dropping back; he thrust home all the way, the tip of himself reaching out to the very centre of Bodie. Beneath him Bodie cried out, but there was no pain as Doyle came inside him, shooting sweet streaming fire to explode Bodie's own: together, they tumbled into orgasm, mindless and beautiful, absorbing every sense, each nerve shrieking its own pleasure, too unbearable to last however they tried to hold on to it, stop it ebbing away.

That was on Doyle's mind as he rolled off Bodie at last, leaving one hand on his rump, patting him every now and then to remind him he was loved. Ann was gone, but Bodie was here. Bodie would always be here.

"Why is it over so fast," he muttered, looking down at himself. He sighed, let his head drop back. Shower. In a minute.

Bodie had to laugh. Looking him over, Doyle reached out a lazy hand to play with the white pearls adorning Bodie's belly, rubbing it softly into Bodie's skin. "Course, there is that religion that promises you eternity as one perpetual orgasm."

Bodie liked what Doyle was doing; he shut his eyes. "Sounds great, why haven't we signed on?"

"The snag is, you have to die first."

"Forget that then," Bodie said sleepily, and he reached out and took Doyle in his arms, pulling him comfortably close, "because I'm feeling like I've got a lot to fill life with, right now."

Doyle offered him his finger; Bodie sucked it clean and held onto it. "You fuck like a pro, sweetheart," he said into one ear.

Doyle winced, a grimace crossing his face. "Oh, tender words."

Bodie gripped him by the upper arms.

"Those if you want them," he said steadily; and gave them to him without stint, until Doyle was laughing at him, and crying, and loving him all at the same time.

Hungry for love, they rolled together and took it slow.

And that was the beginning.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

In the Grotto

Sebastian

*Well the world turns
And a hungry little boy with a runny nose
Plays in the street as the cold wind blows
In the ghetto*

=====|||=====

It was lunchtime in the Grotto, and Santa Claus and his helper elf were getting hungry.

"You could nip out to the canteen, Doyle," Bodie hopefully suggested, yanking in his big black Santa belt an inch and refastening the buckle in a pointedly starved sort of way. "Get us a bit of grub in."

Doyle looked at him, properly shocked. "If you mean the Food Hall...This is Harrods, Bodie," he pointed out. "Only commoners have *canteens*."

Bodie's eyes met his in a very level stare: "Well, I'm common as muck an' if I don't get so much as a mince pie in the next ten minutes I'm out of here."

Doyle perched on his toadstool and swung one leg back and forth. It was a slender, muscular leg indeed, but perhaps not entirely improved by the lime-green elven tights. Bodie frowned and pulled irritably at his long, curly white beard - it was intensely hot and itchy.

"Don't mess with that!" Doyle hissed. "There's kids passing all the time and looking in.. gonna destroy the mystery of Christmas once and for all, innit, if Santa's pulling off his beard and having a good old scratch?" It was true: even though the painted sign outside the Grotto had been turned to 'Santa's feeding his reindeer - No Peeking!' there was still a constant procession of little

faces passing by, pressing to the bottle-pane cottage window, steaming up the glass with heavy-breathing excitement.

Bodie let it snap back guiltily, but he glared at his partner. "This better be worth it, Doyle. If the Little Princess doesn't show up and it turns out we did all this for nothing, Cowley's going to get a surprise on Christmas Night all right and he *won't* be writing a thank-you letter."

Well, it had been a long morning. And really, Bodie had been an excellent Santa - gruff of voice, twinkly of eye, coaxing wide-eyed children onto his knee and charming a little smile and a whispered wish from even the shyest and smallest. He deserved his mince pie.. he really did. Doyle got off the toadstool, hands running down his thighs to smooth out the wrinkled tights.

"You should have had kids, Bodie.. you'd make a wonderful dad."

"Did my best, didn't I?" Bodie said, affronted, adding: "Anyway for all I know there could be fifty mini-mes running around out there, all putting spiders in the teacher's desk, looking up little girls' skirts.."

"And savin' the universe," Doyle said, amused. "Don't forget that, Superman."

Bodie was leaning back in his rocking-chair now, spread fingers cupping his red-covered paunch. Doyle stared at it meaningfully. "Starvin', are you? Looking quite well-padded to me, sunshine."

"This isn't all me, I'll have you know!" Bodie said, aggrieved - then his sharp eyes dropped below Doyle's belt and wandered caressingly, sensuous, flirtatious. "On the other hand... I've been thinkin' ... that that looks like all *you*."

Doyle tugged at the rim of his elf's cape and arranged it primly like a pair of firmly-drawn curtains over the ballet-dancer's bulge at his groin. Then he turned to leave.

"Oi!" Bodie's voice floated after him as Doyle ducked through the fairylight entrance to the Grotto, "Where you off to?"

"The Sushi Bar," Doyle said without turning, "Decided you do deserve feeding, after all," and he laughed to himself as he heard Bodie's exaggerated *Yuk!* noises behind. *Raw fish not much your thing, eh Bodie? And it's not like you need any help from oysters.*

His smile soon faded as he passed the deserted till station by the grotto entrance, the lifesize reindeer staring at him with their glassy black eyes, and set off through Harrods' crowded Toy Department, for he realised within moments that he was causing something of a stir. Mothers were glancing his way in silent, well-bred surprise, Nannies had hands to their mouths and giggled, small children were standing stockstill and staring big-eyed. The elf outfit was not inconspicuous. Not only that, but there were small bells attached to the ankle of each petalled flower boot which tinkled every time he set foot to floor, making him walk in a sort of wincing, tiptoe prance which, he feared, rather enhanced the fey effect of his costume. Glowering

inwardly, he kept his eyes firmly front - until he heard a repressed snort from his right and whipped his head round to see Murphy and Williams, much more in character as security guards in black by the lift door. Cowley had agents seeded throughout the store for this very important and rather dangerous visit, and every single one of them had been luckier than Doyle in the draw for their undercover disguise.

"One word about this tomorrow..." Doyle threatened fiercely *sotto voce* as he passed them, and it brought the sniggers to a halt, but did not stop a few innocently whistled bars of *The Sugarplum Fairy* following him across the shop-floor. *The Nutcracker, eh Murph?.. don't put ideas in me head...*

Being nearly Christmas the store was packed with shoppers, especially here in the Toy Department where more had come to gawp than buy, many of the toys being of a price-range for the nation's little lords and ladies rather than your average London urchin. There was, for example, a shild-size Aston Marton sports-car which Doyle paused to admire, both the man and the boy in him seduced by the gleaming chassis, the leather seats, the miniature, fully functional steering wheel and gears. It would be bought, no doubt, for some aristocrat's heir and driven round Daddy's acres once a month, possibly *by* daddy, for no child, even an aristocratic one, would get as much pleasure out of it as its five-zeros price tag warranted. Or maybe by some Eastern prince, rich on oil billions, for his little princeling - or princess.

A princess, maybe, like the very one whose proposed visit here today had prompted Cowley's over-enthusiastic security arrangements. Even little princesses needed and deserved some of the simple pleasures of childhood like visiting Santa's Grotto, though with two assassinated elder brothers in her heritage a whole nation's future rested on her small, unknowing shoulders. Doyle tore himself away from the car and tinkled past a display of battery-operated puppies tumbling and yapping on a table, small children jostling to operate the controls: "*MY* turn! Mum, Reggie snatched it offa me!" - past a puppet show with Mr Punch bashing Judy on the head with a hammer gripped in his cloth fists as ghoulishly entranced children's faces looked on, right to the lift door. When its archaic gates creaked open he saw to his dismay it was packed, and had to edge in and squash himself against other shoppers, feeling acutely every eye trained on him.

Slumped against the lift wall Doyle sighed. *The things you do for love*. And then bolted upright, glaring suspiciously around for the owner of the wandering hand which had, it seemed been unable to resist the temptations so snugly outlined in his tights. The closest suspect was a dear little old lady, smiling serenely into space. Surely not - ?

He was heartily glad when the lift door opened and spilled him and twenty other shoppers out onto the ground floor, and marched resolutely on, looking neither to right nor left as he followed signs to Harrods' Food Hall. A speedy recce, however, was enough to determine that not only did the upper classes play different, they ate different too: the exotic delights on offer would not be half so attractive to his ravenous partner as some pastry treat from a greasy spoon. And he happened to know of one, just up a little side street.

His mind recoiled in horror from the journey this would entail. There was no way Santa's Little Helper was going to prance along the Brompton Road *en costume*. Not. Even. For Bodie!

Minutes later, after the worst walk of his life, he was ducking back into Harrods with cold ears and a hot flush in his cheeks, clutching two warm paper bags. *You definitely owe me for this, Bodie.* But then again, set against the things Bodie would and had done for him... and he was already smiling inside to think of Bodie's delight.

A visit to the gentleman's facilities seemed a good idea for an elf a-skive from the Grotto, and he followed signs and finally came face to face with a large individual garbed in Harrods' uniform of green and gold, apparently guarding the door.

"Employee," Doyle snarled unwillingly, since some password seemed to be required, and the guard stepped aside to let him in, eyes raking Doyle from head to foot, clearly most entertained by the vision of a mean-eyed elf in lifesize, a stare Doyle returned full-on. "At least I get to take it off come Twelfth Night, mate. Bet you'll be zipped into the penguin suit for life, eh?" he commented, and tripped tinklingly into the huge, marbled room.

As he negotiated the very special difficulties of relieving himself via women's tights hooked over his underpanted manly tackle, the door swung open and a man entered, lined up next to Doyle, intent on the same purpose as himself. Doyle glowered straight ahead, only glancing down from time to time to check the tricky operation wasn't compromising the purity of the tights. *I wonder how Superman manages. Never see him with sprinkles round the hosepipe region, do you?*

He had laid his precious package down on the vanity shelf nearby. After a moment he became aware of a scrutiny from next door which raised all the hairs on the back of his neck. He finished the job in hand, tucked himself away, and whipped his head around, catching his companion's eye swiftly snapping back in front.

He was greatly relieved to get back to the safety of the Grotto, slamming the door behind him, thrusting the bags at Bodie, exhaling with an exaggerated 'phew!' of relief.

"You wouldn't believe what I 'ad to go through to get those.."

But he already had his reward in the way Bodie was eagerly tearing open the bag, and taking a huge bite out of the pastie, goggling at him questioningly with his mouth full.

"Had to run the gauntlet of every shopper in Knightsbridge in me elf-gear," Doyle said mournfully, judging his time right to add: *"And I met someone in the gents who 'ad designs on me meat pie."* Bodie choked on his mouthful but managed to swallow it anyway.

"Did you 'ave to pay?" Bodie said, somewhat muffled and losing crumbs.

"Everything in this world has a price, Bodie," Doyle intoned, in Shusai mode.

"Pay in the Gents. I 'ad this bird once," Bodie mumbled, "Brought her to Harrods shopping, and she went for a - comfort stop. Said they charged her a pound!"

"A pound! For a - Blimey, mate, when it costs a pound to spend a penny, that's inflation for you. Nope, all I paid was me dignity," he said, staring martyrishly into space.

"That's sexist, isn't it," Bodie marvelled. "It's a lot easier being a bloke, as she pointed out on more than one occasion, mostly when she had her legs up by her ears. Want a bite?"

"Think I've just lost me appetite," Doyle said waspishly, though actually it had made him shiver: Bodie's very male sexuality always such a turn-on, and he took what was left of the pastie which Bodie handed to him, bit into it and swallowed. Bodie got up to peer through the window and began on the mince pie from the other bag, demolishing it in two bites.

"You'd better hurry up, Doyle. How long does it take to Feed the Reindeer anyway? Santa's had time to peel a whole sack of carrots - in fact he's probably had time to cut 'em into flower shapes and hand-feed Rudolph one by one. I bet we'll be back in business any minute."

Doyle joined him at the window. The till was still empty and a queue had yet to form. However, they had spectators - a woman with a buggy and a small boy next to her were looking at the Grotto.

They were untypical Harrods shoppers, the woman dressed not in the latest Chloe but cotton leggings which did nothing to flatter her, and Doyle suspected another family member lurked beneath the baggy sweatshirt. Some animated conversation was going on between the small boy and his mum and Doyle pushed the door open a fraction to hear:

"No you bloody can't, Kyle. Look, it costs five bloody quid and I ain't got it. I said, didn't I, we was just comin' in to look? You *promised* you wouldn't start, so bloody don't, ok?"

She didn't even sound cross, just weary, tucking a straggling bit of fair hair escaped from her scraggy ponytail back behind her ears, pale face, overworked, hassled with too many kids and not enough money - just another member of Britain's invisible underclass come to gawp at pleasures the rich took for granted. A seedling of resentment took root in Doyle: it was so bloody unfair, really. For some, all Norland nannies, a nursery with rocking-horse and acres of daddy's land to roam; for others a life of making do with cheap and nasty crisps and plastic toys from Poundland which would break and three kids to a room. The divide was so huge, so seldom crossed. And this little lad didn't even know that yet: but he would, soon he would. This was just the first of many closed doors he would never get through...

"But mum," the boy pleaded, "I wanna see Santa."

"You can see him, look!" she gave him a none-too-gentle thump in the back, pointing through the window where Santa and his elf looked out.

"But I wanna go in. I wanna ask him summink," he whined.

Doyle's eye flicked sideways, saw that Bodie, too was taking all this in, seeing just as clearly as

he did. He was right there with Bodie when his mate opened the door wider and beckoned the little boy in.

"It's all right," Doyle said to Mum, "Santa's fed the reindeer and he was feelin' a bit lonely," and his eyelid dropped in a wink.

On mothering-autopilot her hand came up to swat the little boy's hand away from Rudolph's bulbous red nose where it was determinedly twiddling, trying to see how it was fixed on. "*Don't fiddle wiv that, Kyle! I told you not to touch nuffink, you'll get us froan out! You sure?*" she said to Doyle, suspicious, almost hostile: "A fiver's a bit much innit, one down the arcade's only a quid."

"Santa's treat," Doyle said and took hold of the little lad quickly before she could voice some indignant refusal of Charity, pulled him in through the door and closed it.

Once inside the little boy looked around awed at the twinkling lights, the mechanical toy-making gnomes pounding their hammers silently up and down, their mouths frozen open in a terrifying grin, the half-finished toys circling endlessly on the conveyer belt, the huge Christmas tree in the corner - and then at Santa, sitting in his rocker, a large and possibly scary presence to the small people he was supposed to delight. *And then he'll come into the house and creep into your room at night! Oh yes, he will! Oh don't be so silly! How could you be scared of Santa Claus?*

"Hello there, Kyle," Bodie rumbled in his kindly Santa's boom, and Doyle watched the little boy's eyes flicker, registering Santa's magical knowledge of his name. He was a rough little kid, no soft curves of babyhood lingering on his small, thin frame, shaven head, tiny denim jacket and mini tough-guy boots. A deliberate re-creation in miniature of the man who had fathered him, no doubt; but nothing could take away the vulnerability of being only five years old and small for your age and unlucky in life's apportionings.

"You're too big to sit on Santa's knee, aren't you?" Doyle said. "Come and stand here," and he brought the tiny boy close to Bodie gently, with respect.

"Me sister says there ain't no Santa Claus," the little boy challenged, not yet won round.

"Girls!" Santa scoffed gently, "What do they know?" and Kyle grinned fleetingly, the ice broken, and Bodie began his Santa's patter while Doyle watched, his heart tugged in a way it had not been throughout the whole long morning of precious perfumed Osh-Koshed infants streaming in and out.

"... on the Norf Road," Kyle said in answer to Bodie's question. "Opposite Leyton Semetry. Me gran's in there," he added matter-of-factly, "'an me grandad's goin' in there next to 'er," and Doyle's eyes met Bodie's in a glimmer of a smile.

"I'll be making a visit on Christmas Eve," Santa was promising. "I park my sleigh on the rooftops, you know."

"It's ..." the little boy searched about for the words, possibly 'it has an extreme pitch, maybe even 45 degrees' and settled for "really 'igh."

"Rudolph can park on anything," Santa assured him majestically. "So I'll be coming down your chimney - " he forestalled the next objection trembling on Kyle's small, sugar-flecked lips - "even if it's blocked up, Santa finds a magic way in - and I'll be filling your stocking, so don't forget to hang it up, will you? Have you been a good boy?" The little lad's eyes flickered shiftily. "Well, do your best," Bodie carried on hastily, not daring to look at Doyle, "and we'll see what we can do. Now, let's see what we can find you in Santa's sack, shall we?"

"What I want - " the little boy's eyes went big and he shuffled closer to Santa's red velveteen knee, till he was leaning on it, staring up urgently into Santa's face, all doubts gone, this was Santa all right and he wasn't going to miss out on his chance, "is one of them Tonka trucks. You know - them big yella ones - wiv a digga. Mum said I can't 'ave one cos they costs too much so I come to ask you, didn't I."

"Write that down," Bodie said loftily to Doyle, "WIV a digga, err - " he struggled for an impromptu elf-name - "Doyly-carte."

Doyle repressed a sigh as he pretended to scribble on the palm of his hand: he hoped Mum had the object of desire tucked away in the wardrobe, but who knew?

"You don't 'ave to bring one for me bruvva," Kyle reassured, leaning on Santa's knee easily. "Cos 'e got the fire engine, din't 'e and 'e won't never let me 'ave a turn wiv it!"

The assumption that Santa would know exactly what he meant, the disingenuous cunning of scuppering his brother's chances amused Doyle, painted a whole picture with those few words: the coveted fire-engine, the mean and taunting elder brother, small, resentful Kyle watching and burning and biding his time. He held open the sack for the little boy to rummage in - and the small hand withdraw a package which, Doyle knew, would contain a miniature Harrods' van in green and gold. Not the object of desire - but maybe some consolation in the bitter, scrapping world of sibling hierarchy. Kyle clutched it and stood wide-eyed, struck dumb by such good fortune. "Tell your bruv - brother, Santa said this was just for you, OK? Santa said no-one can even touch it unless you say so," and he took the boy's hand and led him to the door and took him out to Mum, waiting restlessly by the buggy:.

"I 'ope yer said fank you," she said, eyes darting suspiciously over her small son, hand reaching out automatically to tug his jacket down, fuss over him the way all mothers did, everywhere, even if you owned a mini-thug in the making.

"He was a very good boy," Doyle evaded diplomatically, and watched the little boy slip his hand into mum's as they walked off, still clutching his precious Santa's gift. Then Doyle went back into the Grotto and walked up to Bodie, who was in the middle of extracting a note from a wallet buried deep inside his layers - "Bet you looked just like that when you was a kid, Doyle. Give this to Miss Moneybags, will you? Don't want them to think we nicked a Dinky

Toy...Ummmph!" he was muffled in Doyle's arms and given a brief, bruising hug.

"Sometimes," Doyle whispered, "I just love you so, so much."

"Only sometimes," Bodie scoffed, but his eyes were bright and soft and lingered on Doyle's for a moment after his mate released him.

There was no time to talk more about the affecting little encounter, there was a flurry of activity outside, the cover was being whisked off the till. Doyle peered out, hands going to stuff themselves into his pockets to mask his fleeting embarrassment, finding only smooth and tighted thighs, falling away in disgust.

"Rudolph's nose's bin switched back on - yep, flashin' nicely - back in business, Santa me ol' mate..." and Santa settled back into his rocker to await his next visitor, the eyes that dwelt on his Helper Elf a little bright, a little soft.

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The line of customers seemed endless and it seemed as if hours passed before the crackle of the R/T alerted Doyle:

The Subject's on her way. No sign of an Object.

Bodie and Doyle stiffened. Doyle's hand crept automatically to his armpit under his elf-jacket to check his Browning was there, reassuring, warm to his touch. Bodie was armed too, he knew, though a Santa suit was hardly going to make for the fastest draw in - Antarctica. Not that he was expecting any trouble.. if an attempt was going to be made, it was more likely to take place outside and good old Murph was there wasn't he, alert and fast and still in possession of the balls he might lose tomorrow if he unwisely mimed the tinkly elven-tiptoe which had so entertained.

The door of the Grotto opened and in came the small Princess. Doyle was amused at himself for somehow expecting more of someone so rich and so unknowingly powerful, but she was just another child after all, though meltingly pretty with her long, lustrous dark hair and huge black eyes. Beside her glided a being clothed from head to foot in the *niqab* of her religion: mysterious, endowed with awe by the cloaking anonymity it conferred: an anonymity which made the work of security agents everywhere a nightmare, and Doyle found himself suspiciously scanning it up and down for signs that this might not be the female minder it was supposed to be - but he saw nothing untoward. The niqab that was supposed to preserve her from the lustful greedy stares of men raised, incongruously, its own fleeting speculation about what might be beneath, long lush olive-skinned bare limbs, perhaps? a paradox that both pleased him and then annoyed him with himself for living well down to their dolefully low expectations of Men, the species; he hovered respectfully to one side as Bodie did his Santa thing, while keeping one eye on the window, one ear alert for the first sign from his R/T that trouble might be on its way; but nothing happened, all was well.

The small Princess was either shy or spoke no English, for she said nothing in response to all Santa's best lines, not a word; but her huge, dark eyes dwelled on his face in wonder, and she scabbled in his sack when he held it open with delightfully unprincess-like eagerness and brought out a wrapped gift, her face lighting up in an intense smile of pleasure.

"Aww... kids," Bodie said when she left. "Get to you, don't they?"

Each in their different way.

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It was time to leave, job well done, credit won for Cowley for his department's security arrangements to diplomatically please a secret ally. In the small changing room allotted to them they stripped off the costumes with no regret whatever and donned their normal gear: Jeans, teeshirt, jacket, swift and decisive: finished first, Doyle glanced at Bodie, still pulling on his trousers.

"Rest of the afternoon off, I reckon. Leave Murph and Willy to tidy up the loose ends - *they* didn't get to wear the silly-suits."

"OK..." Bodie mused. "Got plans?"

Doyle hesitated. "Yeah.. I have, actually. Bit of shopping. Living alongside Santa for the day's put me well in the festive spirit. Can you amuse yourself for a bit, sunshine?"

"Oh, I should think so," Bodie said. "Got a bit of a mission meself, as it goes... meet you in an hour?"

Doyle finished stowing his gun under one armpit, pulled his jacket round it. "Yeah, should be enough. Meet me by Luigi's - "

"Gonna buy me supper?" Bodie said, excited. "At the greasiest spoon in London! There's no end to your generosity is there, Doyle?" and Doyle swatted him.

"Don't knock it, you were 'appy enough to stuff your face on 'is nosh earlier. He may not have a Michelin star, but - "

"More Michelin *Man* style of catering, innit?" Bodie blew out his stomach and waddled on the spot like a penguin.

" - but I gotta pay him for what we 'ad earlier. Wasn't room for a wallet in me tights."

Bodie's eyes dropped meaningfully. "Not surprised..." and, alone in the small room, struck through with love, Doyle grabbed him and kissed him hard and swiftly on the mouth.

"I'll see ya."

=====|||=====

Doyle was early at the rendezvous, paid Luigi what he owed, and stepped outside to see Bodie humping along the pavement towards him. Doyle's eyes opened wide at the sight of his mate, his arms wrapped round a huge parcel on which his chin rested, a bulky box irregular in shape. It did not need his CI5 skills to work out its contents, however, as from the top a big yellow digger-scoop stuck out and swung back and forth as Bodie walked.

He fell into step beside Bodie as they passed Harrods' Christmas window, frosted with snow and fairy-lights. It was dark now, wet pavements shining with the glow of streetlights, shoppers hurrying home just as they were, laden with parcels, to hot chocolate and cosy rooms and Christmas *Father Ted*.

"That for me, is it?" In his breast pocket he could feel the shape of the little box bumping and rubbing against his chest as he walked. A chunky white-gold bracelet for a man of action with champagne tastes, more than he could afford perhaps, but not more than Bodie was worth.

Bodie's eyes, darkened by dusklight, flashed sideways to his. "I got something better for you to play with, Doyle."

Doyle nodded at the parcel, the briefest acknowledgement of something profound. "How we gonna get it there?"

"Norf - I mean North - Road, Opposite Leyton Cemetery - name of Kyle - two crack CI5 agents - how hard can it be?"

Doyle sighed. "OK, OK...Tell you what though.. I am *not* putting on the bloody elf-suit to deliver it, got it?"

"Understood. Though, Doyle.... You looked quite cute in it." Bodie's mouth trembled, but reined in the taunt as he sensed the wave of menace building up. "Me, on the other hand... " His head bent round near Doyle's "You do realise that Santa's an anagram of*Satan*?" his eyes gleamed blackly, "Wanna come home with me and work some more on the Dark Side?"

Doyle shivered. "Ohhhhh.. *promises*."

And despite the erotic thrill, the exciting thought of the night to come in Bodie's arms, uppermost in his mind were only the words he had had engraved on Bodie's gift, words engraved on his own heart:

Till I loved, I never lived

End

Sebastian, December 2006

Zeroplanic

The Jungle Book

Sebastian

Well, it made me smile, coming to it afresh after twenty-odd years. A line or two in it needs editing, like many early stories: understatement is an art I didn't employ enough in the early days, but it's hard to resist the appeal of such an uncompromisingly happy Bodie and Doyle, even so...

=====|||=====

"Aah-eeah-eeah..."

The young explorer looked up from his butterfly net with some astonishment to see a large male crashing through the foliage, dressed only in a tigerskin loincloth and swinging towards him on a long creeper. He landed heavily right in front of him.

Raymond Doyle, gentleman, twenty-nine years old with a mop of tawny curls and a sunny equitable nature, looked his new companion over thoughtfully, seeing a dark serious-eyed creature with bare feet firmly planted apart, and long dark hair caught behind and tied with a thin strand of jungle grass. The tigerskin loincloth was perhaps a trifle eccentric, but it was indeed hot -- he himself was feeling limp and flushed under the weight of his tweed knickerbocker suit, and could well imagine that such an outfit would be comfortably cooler, even if it did not quite conceal that which it ought.

Averting his eyes from that area, he wiped his hand on a large kerchief, extended it, and said:

"Dr. Livingstone, I presume? My name's Raymond Doyle; I've come to join your expedition."

The other young man was looking him over with careful attention. He didn't reply. A little

uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny, Doyle tried a lopsided grin, running his hand through hot curls. He continued:

"I sent you a letter to inform you of my intended arrival. But they did say the service was pretty uncertain -- some problem with crocodiles, I believe -- the name's Doyle," he said again.

The other man spoke at last on a questioning note. "Doyle?" He had a deep voice which seemed to rumble up from the pit of his brown-skinned stomach.

Doyle nodded emphatically. The man had done some remarkable work; one had to make allowances for his unusual manner. "Yes. Doyle."

The powerfully-built jungle dweller threw his head back to expose the long taut tendons of his throat, his eyes half-shut. Then his chin slowly descended and he met the explorer's gaze once more. He jabbed a finger into his own chest. "Me -- Bodie," he said slowly, with heavy meaning; and then the finger prodded the other man. "You -- Doyle."

Doyle felt a twinge of unease, watching those dark eyes, like a midnight storm, travel over his face and body with passionate interest. Still, it was perfectly natural that a native should be interested in him, he reasoned to himself.

"I'm so sorry. Have I got hold of the wrong chap?" he said, with cheerful British phlegm. "Perhaps you could give me Dr. Livingstone's direction?"

"Me Bodie," interrupted the other man impatiently, as if this was all that mattered. "You Doyle."

"Quite right, but -- "

Then a sweet appealing smile lit the other's handsome face, and the midnight storm passed, melted into velvet night-sea peace.

"We go."

It was such a very sweet smile that Doyle, enchanted, quite lost his fears, even when Bodie swept him up under one strongly-muscled arm, hoisted them both up the creeper, and took off again through the trees.

"Novel way to travel," he observed, somewhat breathlessly as they swung over thick jungle vegetation at speed. Bodie was yelling again, a loud yodel of triumph and joyous celebration that made Doyle smile to hear it -- the man must surely have recently enjoyed some unexpected fortune while hunting, or something like that. Then, with a thud and a jolt, they landed, not as Doyle had expected on solid ground, but on the ledge of a wooden cabin high in the trees.

He stood where Bodie had gently set him down on his feet, still panting a little from having his ribs squeezed in that bonecrushing grip, and took stock of his surroundings. The cabin had three walls of wooden stakes, and a curtain of hanging vegetation at the front. As Doyle watched with

interest, Bodie neatly tied the creeper they had arrived on to one side; then he took Doyle's hand gently in one large paw and led him through the curtain of swinging vines.

Inside it was pleasantly cool, and surprisingly comfortable. There was a carpet of sorts over the floor of lashed wooden struts which looked like lionskin; then there was a heap of pressed rushes which obviously served as a bed. There was one, very dogeared book too, which seemed a little out of place. His new friend seemed concerned that he should admire the habitation, leading him around still with that hand gently entwined with his, pointing out this and that.

After he had been thoroughly shown around and had made many admiring noises, Doyle sat down crosslegged, mopped his face with his handkerchief yet again. "Well, this is all very nice," he said courteously. "Kind of you, to find the time to show it to me."

He thought wistfully of a cup of tea, but didn't quite like to ask. As if reading his mind, Bodie magically produced half a coconut shell filled with sweet milk which Doyle drank down thirstily, and he soon got used to the way Bodie insisted kindly on holding the makeshift vessel for him as he drank, one hand tenderly laced through the curls at the nape of his neck, those beautiful eyes gazing right into his the whole time. When it was finished, Bodie brought him some fruit, laid out carefully on large flat leaves, and, ignoring all attempts Doyle made to take it from him, popped sweet juicy chunks into Doyle's mouth, waiting patiently until he finished each before he slid the next between the parted lips. It was almost like some kind of ritual, thought Doyle amused; he would look it up in his book of native customs. Lord, but they were friendly. He'd heard different tales indeed of the fierce tribes that roamed this jungle; so to be confronted with this courteous man with the beautiful eyes attending to his every need with loving attention was something of a surprise... why, Bodie had even guessed his affliction with the heat and was undoing his boots, sliding them off -- that was better -- socks, too -- now his shirt -- wonderful --

When Bodie's hands reached for the trouser fastening, Doyle stalled it.

"If you don't mind, I think I'd rather leave those on."

The other man, squatting on his heels, paused and looked at him, clearly puzzled.

"Leave them on," Doyle explained, louder. "I come from England; we don't go in for loincloths, you see."

Bodie still didn't seem to understand. He stroked one hand down Doyle's bare arm, then his chest; holding one bare foot tenderly cupped in the other hand. He gesticulated at Doyle's cloth-clad legs with a little, questioning sound.

"Yes, I know it's ridiculous," agreed Doyle, smiling, touched by the native's easy, uninhibited behaviour -- there was certainly something to be said for the untrammelled Native way of life, Doyle himself as a child had been made to bath in a nightshirt lest he catch sight of his own naked body -- but there were some things one just could not do. "I'd really much rather be like you," he said with placatory charm, "you must be so delightfully cool -- oh, good heavens -- "

His eyes widened as Bodie wrenched away the concealing tigerskin and stood dramatically naked, proud and erect, his dark eyes flashing, breathing through arrogantly flared nostrils, the corded muscles in his powerful thighs standing out, clearly displaying himself for Doyle's admiration.

Doyle recovered a measure of poise quite quickly. "It's all been very nice, but I really must be on my way now," he said firmly. Bodie, coming down to earth, radiated non-comprehension. So Doyle pointed to the outside world and then to himself. "Me -- go."

"Go?" repeated the other man, and then shook his head. Seeing that Doyle in his turn did not understand, and frustrated by his inability to communicate, Bodie turned to the old book propped in one corner and hunted through it until he found what he sought, with a grunt of satisfaction.

He laid it carefully on Doyle's lap; it was opened at a page with an illustration.

Doyle stared down. The picture was of a man with his arms around a girl. It was a perfectly chaste picture, nothing like the ones his reprobate uncle had brought back from a visit to Paris and insisted that he look at them -- the very memory was enough to bring a hot flush to his cheeks even now -- and it brought Doyle no instant enlightenment. He looked up at Bodie, puzzled.

Bodie smiled down into his eyes, tender and content. He draped an arm around Doyle's naked shoulders, caressing the soft skin. "You," he purred deeply, pointing at the picture, "Me."

The penny dropped.

Doyle's jaw did, too.

"Ah. Yes. I see," he began, valiantly ignoring the faint tremor in his voice, running a hand through his hair, "Well, I think there's a little misunderstanding here -- "

Bodie had both strong arms around him now, cuddling him gently.

"The thing is -- "

Bodie nuzzled the side of his throat with velvet-soft lips, feeling immensely proud, and loving. Bodie had long been searching for a mate, ever since the heady sap of surging spring had risen singing in his veins one morning as he watched the playful antics of mating chimpanzees; and returned to the solitude of his lonely cabin in a thoughtful silence, to stare at the picture in his book with brooding eyes. Yes, he had known what he wanted; and the instant he had come across the curly-headed creature with the absurd coverings that did not quite conceal the lithe beauty of his form, and the eyes like the cool sparkling lilyflowers that adorned the surface of the lake Bodie knew that here at last was his mate.

Doyle moved restlessly within his grasp. How to deal with this was a definite omission in his manual of jungle survival; he resolved to write a letter to the editor on his return.

"Yes; yes I see what you mean," he began again, "but there is a small problem -- small, but insurmountable -- you see -- " His finger jabbed at the page with more desperation than he'd meant; Bodie's softly stroking lips and tongue were arousing the oddest sensations in him. "This is a girl. *Girl*," he said with emphasis, darting a quick look up at his affectionate companion to see if there were any signs of dawning comprehension -- none --

"I'm a man. You -- man. Me -- man," he said slowly and clearly.

Bodie just shook his head with tender amusement at this strange disposition of his new mate's to jabber incessantly away when there were far more interesting things to be done. He stroked a finger along the delicate curve of his cheek, glorying in the sweet feel of the damp skin, tracing the appealing line there that softened into a dimple when he grinned; slid a gentle hand behind his neck, rubbing fingers through soft curls. He smiled down into the hot, serious face with half-shy delight.

Doyle shivered. However could he get his point across? A little tremor of wistfulness ran through him as he studied that happy face, the pleasure-creased eyes: he really didn't want to be the cause of making that sweet smile disappear...

He hardened his heart. It just wasn't possible; Bodie would see that when he --

Inspiration struck; and, resigned to an unorthodox step, he rose to his knees, disengaging himself gently from the other man's warm hands. He fumbled with his unwieldy breeches, finally achieving his purpose.

"There!" he cried, and waited for the implication of similarity to sink in.

Bodie thought this was more like it. At last his precious new mate had seen fit to divest himself of the encumbering cloth, holding out his sex and uttering that cry of prideful invitation. Well, if Doyle wanted admiration, Bodie was only too ready with it. He took him gently by the bared hips, and gazed adoringly down at the rosy object Doyle held cradled in his own palm. Both hands being occupied, he bent his head to nuzzle the soft warmth with his mouth and nose, sent a gentle lick sliding over it with his flickering tongue. Doyle gasped, and swayed. Bodie too knelt up, slipping both arms around the identically positioned figure, and pressed his own hardness against Doyle's softness, nudging encouragingly until it began to stir and rise forth from the nest of soft dark hair to duel with his. It all felt dizzyingly wonderful to Bodie who had been a virgin for twenty-six years. With a groan he bore them both down, but careful to keep Doyle on top, lest his fair-skinned new love should find the rushes a discomfort.

Doyle, who had been a virgin for even longer despite the offer of the reprobate uncle to take him to a house of ill-repute as a birthday present, knew he was in deep trouble. He had known it ever since Bodie -- he shivered and grimaced to think of it -- had leant over in that engagingly uninhibited way and pressed his lips to Doyle's maleness in an act that seemed almost one of worship. However, the feelings those soft warm lips, that damp flicking tongue had aroused in him were far from holy.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said politely as he was pulled to lie on top of Bodie, firm hands pressing him down and close, "but I'm afraid you're going to find that this really isn't possible -- "

" -- you see," he managed after a long, searching kiss which had made it rather difficult to think, let alone talk; and Bodie's hands were running wild all over his back and buttocks, Bodie's damp breath panting rather touchingly into his collarbone, "I really would like to oblige you, I hope you believe that, because I think you're a very pleasant sort of chap, but -- "

The very pleasant chap was almost purring now, moving Doyle on him in a sweet, dark rhythm of slick slow pleasure.

" -- but you have to understand," Doyle continued with mounting desperation, "it -- "

" -- just -- "

" -- isn't -- "

"possible; can't be -- "

" -- done -- "

"Aaahhh...."

And Bodie, sharing ecstatically in his lover's panting, whimpering spurting delight, joined his own to it, and showed him that it was, and could, and had.

They loved and lazed and loved again far into the chattering, squeaking, hooting jungle night.

Doyle was awakened by a touch. He opened his eyes to see his new friend leaning over him, wearing nothing but a curvy, boyish grin. He put up his lips for a sleepy kiss, his insides slowly filling with melting happiness, and contentment, as he recalled the heady night of newborn love that had passed. He felt as if in some strange way they had known each other a lifetime, always belonged together. As he half- sat up, Bodie slipped an arm around him and he leaned into the wordless lifelong commitment without a second's hesitation.

Bodie smelt fresh, his skin faintly damp. Doyle felt as if he, too, would benefit from a dip. Time for everything. He turned his face into Bodie's broad shoulder, bit him lightly.

"I imagine Dr. Livingstone will manage well enough without me."

"Hmm?" Bodie enquired, puzzled. He licked Doyle's eyelashes delicately, moved across to the other.

And Raymond Doyle abandoned for the last time every trace of thoughts about taxable accounts, the pressures of being nine and twenty and still unwed, the tedious London living; set that other

life behind him as if it had all been a dream. All he needed was here in his arms. He kissed the top of the sleek, sunwarmed dark head; hugged him tight.

"Have to teach you to talk," he commented absently, eyes searching around the tiny cabin critically, "though I must say you do very well on touch alone; and organise a little order and comfort in here -- " their home --

Bodie was listening to every word of this, eyes devotedly wandering over the body of his lifelong mate, returning again to feast lovingly on the beautiful face and haunting green eyes of his love. Doyle succumbed, drowning in tender blue.

He snapped out of it suddenly. "Must go. Fetch my bag. Towels in there -- shaving things -- " He cast an interested eye over Bodie's smooth skin, wondering how it was done; hoped his bag was still where he'd left it, back at the spot where he'd been swept off his feet with such devastating, far-reaching results...

"Come on." He snapped his fingers, scrambled to his feet, but Bodie stopped him. And presented him, shyly, with one of the two gifts he'd been working on while Doyle slept, his attention frequently wandering from the skins on his lap to study the curled-up form with a kind of wonder.

Doyle took the loincloth from him, and donned it. He said nothing; but Bodie read his pleasure and his gratitude the more easily in his silence, in the look that crossed his face, suffused his eyes with warmth.

The other gift was outside. Now there hung two creepers tied there, one at each side of the platform. That visible affirmation of Doyle's permanence here pleased both men, and sheer exuberance was a good excuse for another cuddle.

"...mmm..." murmured Doyle at last, lips against Bodie's, "you're lovely and I can hardly bear to let you go for the barest second, but I want that bag." And, not without trepidation, he bravely took hold of his creeper, waiting for Bodie's signal. Together, they jumped.

" -- pleased to meet you, Stanley," drawled Livingstone in reply, briskly shaking his hand. "Pleasant trip?"

"Fine, fine."

"Funny thing is," remarked the venerable explorer in a languid tone, "I was expecting a chappie named Doyle. You didn't run into the fellow by any chance?"

"Fraid not."

"Probably been eaten by one of the blasted natives," chuckled Livingstone, and put Raymond Doyle out of his mind forever.

In another part of the jungle, twin figures crashed through the foliage on long creepers, dressed only in loincloths, having the time of their young lives; and emitting the time honoured cry in unison -- "Aah-eeah-eeah..... "

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Just a Kiss

Sebastian

As light and frothy as an Aero mousse. And as sweet.

=====|||=====

It was a very exclusive party. Exclusive in the sense of 'CI5 personnel only'. The mirrored room whirled with noise and effervescent party sparkle as fifty people met and mingled and passed on, laughing; high spirits, affection, camaraderie, a common bond and a release from tension: all those things were there in full measure and champagne flowed like Cowley's abuse after a bungled job.

Ray Doyle, pressed by a passing flow of people against a wall, where he reposed on a low cushioned couch, was having a particularly good time. He and Bodie had, with foresight, sandwiched themselves between two pretty girls, and he had been kissing the one beside him. Bodie, presumably, had been likewise engaged; at least, he had half-turned away from his partner, but the pressure of his thigh against Doyle's was reassuring of his continued presence. Doyle liked to have Bodie somewhere close on occasions such as these, when partnership seemed a rare and beautiful thing when he was overflowing with warm affection and champagne and love for the world. He squinted down at his girl, wanting to kiss her again. She was asleep, her pretty pouting mouth set in a droop, her head on his shoulder. She looked very appealing. He tugged on something he presumed was part of Bodie.

"Look."

Bodie didn't hear the word, but he felt the tug and turned obediently Doyle's way, waiting with what he hoped was an expression of devoted interest in whatever Doyle had to say. It wasn't too complicated. He was having trouble keeping his eyelids up.

Doyle looked up at him, owlishly. "Look a' this." Bodie leant over him. It made him rather dizzy so he rested his chin on Doyle's shoulder to steady his gaze.

"Sweet," rhapsodized Doyle, looking at the tousled blonde hair, the childlike curl of the fingers.

Bodie agreed. "Sweet ... like you," he added, looking up at his partner's chin with warmth.

Doyle tried to arrange his features into a reproving scowl. "M'not sweet. You're drunk," he added accusingly.

Bodie thought about it. "Yes." And another beatific smile appeared.

"I'm not," said Doyle, with indignation, and he looked around. "Need another drink."

As he sat up straighter, the girl fell off his shoulder to the couch, mumbled something and went back to sleep.

"Jus' grab a passing bottle," Bodie came out with carefully, after applying his mind seriously to the problem of Doyle's declared sobriety.

Doyle giggled, and hiccupped: "Bottles don't pass."

Bodie squinted up at him. He liked looking at Doyle from this position; it was totally new. "Don't they?"

"No legs," explained Doyle with profundity; as if unfolding the mystery of the universe.

"Just necks," retorted Bodie; as if discovering a new angle on it.

They laughed together, faces very close, breathing warm alcoholic fumes. Someone stopped for a passing chat. He was as drunk as they were, so it was hardly the most edifyingly meaningful conversation ever to have taken place beneath this particular roof; however, they all felt when it ended somehow deeply satisfied with the communication that had flowed between them. Doyle was getting sleepy. He was trying to keep his eyes open, but it wasn't easy. There was an arm around his shoulders and he leaned into it, wanting closeness and the acceptance of another warm responsive human being. He let his eyes shut.

"Doyle?"

"Mmmmph."

"You asleep?"

"Course not," said Doyle, affronted, and he forced his eyelids up to look into muzzy blue eyes. He knew those eyes. "Fancy meetin' you 'ere," he mumbled, and felt a surge of mirth at his own wit threaten to overcome him. More, he improved on it; "D'you c'm'ere often?"

Bodie was put out by the tremors of hiccupy laughter running through his partner. He shook him. "Doyle. M'serious."

"Oh. Yeah." Doyle wiped the smile off his face and scowled instead. Bodie stared down into his eyes with great solemnity. Somewhere, very close, there was a loud sing-song going on but he ignored it manfully. He had his mind on the high things in life.

"You're my partner - " Bodie began.

"Was's morning," Doyle agreed.

"An' partners should stick together. Forget the bloody SAS. Mers'naries can go fuck themselves. Partners are better. Is better."

Doyle was sure he fully agreed with this, whatever it was. So he nodded and the room began to spin. "Yourright. Wanna go to sleep now."

Bodie shook him again, annoyed. But Doyle was limp and touchingly relaxed against him, he smelt of aftershave and sweat, and Bodie was overwhelmed with maudlin affection. "Partners." He prodded Doyle hard, needing feedback for all this love running loose in him. "I said, partners."

"Mmmm."

"Wassup with you f'chrissake?" said Bodie, irritated that all his emotional outpouring was going so unheeded. He hooked a hand beneath Doyle's chin and tilted his head back. Doyle's heavy eyelids fell open, revealing big fuzzy pools of green. Bodie smiled at him, a big warm smile, absurdly charmed. It all fitted in with the way he was feeling. There was a lot of noise and movement in the room, but he and Doyle needed none of it. They had each other, and they were partners. Doyle's mouth moved, but Bodie didn't catch the words beneath the raucous strains of the Birdie Song - grown men were crowing and flapping about. Ridiculous, he thought with monumental disdain, and put his head closer to the only other sane man in the room. "What?"

"I said, what you smilin' for."

Bodie frowned. "M'not smiling."

"You were," Doyle accused. "Great big daft smile, it was."

"Can't remember."

"Oh. Thought you must have scored, or somethin'." That struck Doyle as funny, and he chuckled throatily, his eyes closing and unclosing at random.

Bodie fumbled for the threads of his thoughts. "We're partners - " he started off again.

Doyle groaned, and turned his face into Bodie's shoulder. "Don' keep saying that. I know what we are."

"M'jus' trying to say," said Bodie with great dignity, "if you didn't keep in'trupting - " and he gave Doyle another admonitory shake - "that I'm glad we are. Partners."

"Me too."

Bodie felt a warm wave of love washing over him again, coming and going like a great ebb tide of foaming affection on a champagne sea. He wanted to express it. He slid his arm more carefully around Doyle, noting with abstract pleasure how the thin shirt let through Doyle's own body warmth, and kissed his partner's head.

Doyle turned his face up. "What you doin'?"

"Kissing you," explained Bodie.

"Why?"

Bodie kissed him again, on the temple. The other man's skin was soft. "S'nice, s'why."

"Cowley wouldn't like it," said Doyle, after much struggling thought. Nevertheless, he withdrew his forgotten, numb arm from where it lay across the legs of his dormant girl, and put it around Bodie instead.

"C'n kiss my own partner, if I want to," said Bodie, aggrieved at his boss' putative displeasure. "No rule says I can't kiss him. Not even Cowley."

"You wouldn't want to." Doyle shook his head.

"Want to what?"

"Kiss Cowley."

"*You*," said Bodie, after putting some time into disentangling this and failing, "are drunk. Very drunk. So jus' shuttup." Holding him carefully, he kissed each long-lashed eye in turn, then the soft sculpted mouth, then round the cheek.

Doyle decided he liked it. With an 'mm' of pleasure he pressed himself up against Bodie and opened his mouth for Bodie's softly stroking tongue. It felt perfectly right, and natural, and exactly what he needed at this stage of the evening.

There was plenty going on in the centre of the room; dancing, singing, shouting, the clinking of glasses as the celebration reached its height. Plenty round the edges, too, where various couples, overcome by the quantities of free champagne cuddled, or slept, openmouthed. Most people were

quite merry enough to accept the most unusual happenings as not out of place; even when one of the unusual happenings was agents 3.7 and 4.5 draped around one another exchanging drowsy loving kisses at 2 am.

Most, but not all.

Bodie strode into the hallowed corridors of CI5 more through sheer willpower than innate energy. He had one hell of a hangover, which appeared to shoot down comprehensively the theory about champagne being a fast lift and a gentle let-down. Someone nudged him in the ribs by the door.

"Good party last night, eh?"

"You should know," growled Bodie, "you were there."

The man winked eloquently at him. "Nothing like champagne, is there. Jill - you know Jill? Well - " He made an all-male gesture, fist thrusting upwards.

"The lucky, lucky girl," said Bodie with heavy sarcasm, and made as if to walk on.

"Hear *you* got on all right last night," said the other, grabbing his arm to hold him back and winking slyly. "That right, son? Unconventional *tastes*, I hear?"

"Ey?" said Bodie, perplexed.

"Wey-hey-hey." Laughing, the man disappeared, which was just as well because Bodie had been beginning to find him an annoyance. Bloody idiot. Still drunk, probably. Bodie shrugged it off, and went on.

Everyone he met was the same. Sly glances, meaningful winks, the odd hint of what looked like disapproval seemed to be the order of the day. Bodie began to wonder exactly what he'd *done* at this party last night. Taken off all his clothes? Sung a very rude song about George? Got carried away with that girl who'd been cuddling up to him early in the evening?

He dismissed it all as unlikely. He'd been with Ray all the time - had woken up with Doyle on top of him - and his partner would have kept him out of trouble.

Or egged him on, maybe, if he'd been equally drunk.

He'd have to see what Doyle remembered. All Bodie hazily recalled was the whole lot of them being thrown out onto the streets at dawn, going home in a daze, and pitching into bed. He pushed open the door of the restroom and was met by a haze of smoke, noise, and whistles as his colleagues took note of who had entered.

Bodie pushed his way past everyone to find his partner. Doyle was sitting at a desk, head down, furiously going through a file. Bodie perched on a corner, ruffled his hair. "Lo, Goldilocks."

Doyle's reaction was impressive. He jerked away from Bodie's hand, scowled up with a face like thunder and yelled, "Don't you bloody start."

The response from the interested roomful was immediate.

"Lover's quarrel? And the honeymoon's hardly started."

"Claws in, tomcats."

"Don't be such a bitch to him, he's very sensitive..."

In answer, Doyle swept up his file and marched out of the room, not looking back.

"Bye bye, sweetie."

"Don't trip over the eyelashes."

"Give us a twirl?"

The door slammed shut. Bodie stared round at everyone, dumbfounded. "What the hell's got into everyone this morning?"

"We know what's got into your partner, anyway," commented McCabe snidely. "Or was it the other way round?"

Bodie finally twigged. Everyone was hooting or sniggering. Bodie put a stop to that by reaching out one long arm and jerking McCabe to his feet. "Take it back."

"Ah, c'mon Bodie, only a joke."

"I don't," snapped Bodie, "find it funny." He shook McCabe about a bit and then dropped him, glaring around. "Next one to make a fuckin' queer joke in my hearing or Doyle's is gonna regret it. You're all bloody round the twist. What they spike that champagne with - LSD?"

With that, he left the room to follow his partner. "No smoke without fire," muttered Lewis, pulling McCabe to his feet. But Bodie's outburst of temper had killed the humour, and they all went back to work with no further reference to the purported events of the night before.

Bodie ran Doyle to ground in one of the corridors, staring out of the window. "What's all this about?" he asked, without preamble.

Doyle shrugged. The whole line of his body, in jeans and thin shirt, spoke of fury. Bodie moved in, put his hands on his shoulders. "Come on, give. What's got into 'em all?"

Doyle shrugged again, but he didn't move away. "I dunno. Something you and I did at the

party."

"What, for chrissake?"

"I told you, I don't know. Can't remember much about it."

"Me neither," said Bodie with feeling. He had that crawly out-of-synch sensation this morning that spoke of dehydration, and the events of the previous evening were a haze. "I tell you who'll know," he said as a sudden thought struck him. "And who'll make sure *we* know."

With him, Doyle grimaced.

Bodie was right. At the end of their briefing concerning the new assignment, Cowley had a little addendum for them. He related, with icy precision, exactly what he had been told; and Bodie's sluggish memory stirred and began to supply foggy details to go along with Cowley's account.

Cowley did not seem to be best pleased. Bodie turned defensive, not daring to look at his partner.

"I was only kissing him, sir."

"Aye!" Cowley blazed. "Kissing him! You want to kiss him, 3.7, you take him to the privacy of your own home! You don't drool over him in full view of the entire ranks of CI5!"

"They were all drunk, sir. And I wasn't drooling." Bodie's mouth drooped in distaste.

Cowley glared at him. "From the sound of it, you were eating him up." He rounded on Doyle. "And *you* weren't protesting!" Doyle said nothing, just watched him with wary, cool eyes.

"I don't make a habit of it, sir. Just got carried away," said Bodie, anxious to get the point home. "Too much of the Auld Lang Syne spirit in the air, sir."

"Aye, well get carried away somewhere else next time. Or say goodbye to CI5, laddie," promised Cowley grimly, and the interview was at an end.

Outside the door, Bodie exhaled. "Jesus," he muttered, then shook his head. "'Next time'; christ."

"Well, so now we know."

"Yeah." Bodie darted him a quick glance. "I do remember it - vaguely." Impossible to believe, that this man striding out at his side, had last night been wrapped up in his arms, being kissed by him... he could remember, all overlaid by hazy noise and cloudy vision, the taste of his mouth, the feel of the soft skin beneath his lips and tongue, the hard body in his hands...

"Yeah, so do I." Then, in a sudden rush of irascibility: "Hell, Bodie! What you wanna do a crazy thing like that for!" He rubbed a hand through his hair slowly, on a little memory trip of his own.

"Now they're gonna be making bloody pansy jokes every time you and I walk through the door."

"I don't remember you putting up much a fight," said Bodie, roused in turn. They glared at each other; then Doyle turned away. "Oh, forget it."

"Doesn't matter if they *do* make cracks," said Bodie, losing his own anger and wanting somehow to make it up to him. "We know it's not true and that's what matters."

"That's what matters, is it?" Doyle glanced at him. "Nah, don't agree. Be better if it were true."

"What?" said Bodie, disbelieving his own ears.

"Wouldn't care what they said if it were true. It's the bloody injustice of it that gets to me. I mean, all we were doing was kissing, f'godsake, and they assume from that we must be havin' it off, the full Sodom-and-Gomorrah, I'm-as-camp-as-a-row-of-tents, bit."

"Well, but look at it from their point of view, mate," pointed out Bodie, continuing, perhaps unwisely: "Wasn't a normal thing to do, was it. They were plenty raving pissed last night but as far as I can make out you and I were the only two blokes who got into a heavy clinch."

"What are you sayin', Bodie? That we're sittin' on repressed desires or somethin'?" Doyle's voice had changed; he gave Bodie a wide, measuring stare, looking him up and down as if assessing the other man's potential desirability. Lack of appreciation visibly informed his every feature to Bodie's relief. At least, he supposed it was relief.

"Hell, I dunno. Maybe we are," he said belligerently. "Have to ask a psychologist I s'pose, if we wanted the low-down on it. Probably better not to find out," he added.

"No, I dunno. I want to find out. If I've got repressed desires towards you I want to be the first to know," said Doyle; he glanced around the corridor leading to the stationery store just to be sure. Bodie eyed him warily, wondering for a brief moment if Ray Doyle was about to experiment here and now - he was just about crazy enough - pull him close and kiss him, totally sober in the harsh light of day. The thought sent unclassified shivers running up and down his spine, and he tensed. But Doyle didn't touch him, just leaned against the wall, arms akimbo.

"What was going through your head? When you started kissing me?"

Bodie glowered at him. Sometimes his partner's obsessive desire for self-knowledge got a bit much, especially when it involved Bodie himself. On the other hand, knowing Doyle it would be better to go along with him. Once Doyle got an idea into his head he wouldn't let it go until he was satisfied. So he thought back, to the night before. Hazy memories filtered back - Doyle, soft and heavy and familiar to his every sense; sight, touch, smell. The usual inhibitions removed by the glow of champagne. The desire for closeness; it had seemed the most natural thing in the world to hold his best mate close. He had wanted to show him how much he - how much he liked him, so he had kissed him. Simple as that.

"Hell, Doyle," he said irritably, "I don't know. I just don't know. I wanted to be - close to you. That's all." He looked away, angry with himself for getting embarrassed. But Doyle wasn't jeering at him; not this time.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "I was feelin' the same way." He eyed Bodie again; and this time Bodie thought he saw a light of speculation leap into the wide green eyes.

"No way," he growled, and would have backed away had the corridor not been so narrow. "I dunno what you've got in mind, but no way." And then grudgingly, "Look mate, sometimes it doesn't do to think too much about these things, you know?"

Doyle shook his head. "You're wrong. I think we ought to think about it. It might happen again."

Bodie stared at him. "Probably will," continued Doyle. "There's been times I've thought you were going to do it before."

Bodie was absolutely dumbfounded. "Wha -?"

"Yeah. Just sometimes.. you get in really close and look at me in a sort of deep way.. and I've thought.. *Christ, he's going to kiss me.*"

Bodie turned on his heel, too angry to speak. Doyle caught his arm, faced him, put both hands on the bigger man's hips. He stared into Bodie's face. A little smile curled on his lips, revealing uneven teeth; his eyes looked big and appealing. "Hey, c'mon. Don't run away from me. You started it. Would it be so bad - ?"

"I don't want to find out," stated Bodie, but for some reason he didn't want to move away, either.

Doyle watched him, catching every flicker of expression; saw Bodie's wavering uncertainty. Then he grinned, and released him.

"Okay. Play it your way. In any case, I don't fancy doin' it standing up in this poky corridor with my back to the wall of Cowley's office."

Bodie had recovered himself by now. "Can be done though," he challenged, hoping to get a rise out of Doyle - a small return for the embarrassment he'd just been put through.

Doyle only grinned again. "I'll bet it can. You can show me sometime." Bodie caught a wicked flash of sensual provocation; and then Doyle motioned him out into the main corridor with exaggerated courtesy.

Stunned past the point of rational thought, it took Bodie some moments to realize that he was strongly sexually aroused.

Bodie's phone rang at 5:35 am. Groaning, he put out a hand and dragged the receiver into bed with him.

"Mornin'," came a cheery voice.

"Fuck off, Doyle."

"Pick you up in twenty minutes. Track suit and trainers."

"Not a bloody run!" moaned Bodie in disbelief.

"You got it."

The line went dead. Muttering evil things, Bodie dragged himself out of bed.

It was a beautiful morning. Sunny, with a hint of the warmth to come, the air was clear and bright. Bodie was lounging lazily on the wall when Doyle's car rolled into view dead on time, for all the world as if he'd been there an hour.

"What kept you?" he drawled.

Doyle turned his eyes up expressively and leaned over to open the passenger door. Bodie got in and they drove through the awakening streets for some moments in silence. Doyle turned the car onto the familiar road.

"Where we going?" asked Bodie pointlessly, since he knew.

"Guess."

His partner was wearing his loose grey tracksuit over a sage T-shirt; he looked fresh, unsmiling, and aloof. As Bodie watched him, hardly able to believe that he had actually dared to kiss such a remote being, Doyle pulled the car into the cemetery and jerked on the handbrake. He glanced over at Bodie, hands still on the steering wheel, and grinned.

Suddenly he didn't look untouchable any more. He looked like Ray Doyle, Bodie's rag-and-taggle urchin mate. Bodie reached out and thumped him on the knee. "How many?"

"At least five."

"*Five?*"

They ran, quite fast, five circuits of the spiked graveyard scenario; and then, without speaking, Doyle turned off the track into a field. Bodie followed, an appreciative eye on the lithe athletic grace of Doyle running. At the edge of the field, Doyle vaulted the barbed wire; and they were in a wood.

Doyle must have gone into a sprint; Bodie had lost him. But as he rounded a clump of fir trees he saw him, at the foot of a spreading Wellingtonia, leaning back against its immensely thick

trunk. He looked up at Bodie's approach; he was frowning slightly against the glare of the sun.

After a moment, Bodie sat down beside him, wordless.

"Good run," said Doyle; he seemed hardly out of breath.

"Yeah."

Doyle reached out a lazy hand, traced a finger down the back of Bodie's neck. The ex-mercenary tensed up, snapped his head round to meet smiling green eyes. "You weren't skivin' off the way you usually do," said Doyle softly, neither of them taking much notice of the spoken conversation, concentrating rather on unspoken signals, assessing each other, sensing acceptance. Then Doyle took his hand away, moved it to the cord tie of his tracksuit top, pulled it loose and dragged it over his head.

Bodie watched the struggling mass of grey fabric in silence. Then his partner reappeared, touselheaded, bare-armed, one narrow wrist adorned with a thin circlet of silver.

"Hot," he explained; and gave Bodie an unfathomable look from beneath his lashes. Then he stuffed the rolled-up top behind his head in a hollow between two gnarled roots and lay down, shutting his eyes.

Bodie watched him silently. His mate's moss-green T shirt was clinging to him; a sweat-dark line running centrally down to his midriff; the small points of his nipples, erect from the chill of cooling sweat were clearly visible. His face was a little flushed from the exertion, damp curls clustering over his forehead; his mouth was set in a full pout. He looked like some sensual dryad of the forest, sleeping in purity as he dreamed of wanton things; a fiery innocent waiting to be awakened.

Bodie's heart was thundering in his chest, and it was no longer the exertion of the run. He leant over him, and Doyle tensed a little, the whole lean strength of him reacting to the other man's movement; but he didn't open his eyes, the lashes lying on his cheek stirring only with the breeze.

Bodie experienced a shockingly sudden surge of pure lust. He wanted to seize him by the bare flesh of his upper arms and take him, make him his own, merge his heat in the cool sensuality that was Ray Doyle; urge forth the response of his own innate sexuality, know all of him and own him completely.

Instead, he reached out one hand, shakily touched the cool metal of Doyle's silver bangle; it was a poor alternative to warm flesh, but infinitely less dangerous. Doyle's eyes flicked open; he looked straight at him.

"Why - *do* you wear this?" Bodie asked. It was difficult to speak over the racing thoughts, the thunder of his own pulse.

Doyle didn't answer; he looked elusive, faintly mysterious, a subtle stranger. Bodie hesitated, unsure; and then Doyle grinned at him and it was once more the man he had been drawn to at the party, the man he was closest to in the world. Very carefully, he put one hand on Doyle's shoulder, caressing the curve of bone under bare skin; and leant over to touch his mouth to Doyle's soft, slightly parted lips, wide awake, totally sober, and in full light of day. Doyle shut his eyes.

The only sound was birdsong and the wind in the trees. They were, if not exactly exposed, hardly invisible to anyone who might be out walking the dog. Bodie said, against the corner of his mouth: "You think anyone will come?" in a voice that was low and urgent.

"Yeah..." Doyle said, soft and reflective; and Bodie took a moment to comprehend. When he understood, his breath caught in his throat, and he felt the other man's body press upwards into his, hands coming up to grip Bodie's shoulders. It had begun; there would be no turning back. Innocent as children, knowing as satyrs, they kissed for a long while, slow and gentle, making up for lost time as soft lip nuzzled soft lip, tasted gentle liquid fire. Don't know what I'm doing, thought Bodie dazedly, what to do next... Doyle's tongue rubbed against his, pushed inside his mouth; he held Doyle very carefully, one hand on the curve of his chest, the other behind his head to support him. It felt - good. Peaceful, natural and right; he felt as if he had done it a thousand times before. The warm sun was beginning to filter through onto Bodie's back; and he suddenly knew what he was doing, after all. Loving him. He was loving him. Flooded with sudden tenderness, his hand slid down Doyle's bare arm and took his hand. His befuddled senses two nights ago had given his love away, before he himself had recognised it.

Eventually, Doyle pulled away from Bodie's mouth with an inarticulate murmur; Bodie watched him. His partner's skin was flushed, his lips swollen and set in a sensual droop; without opening his eyes he took Bodie's head in gentle hands and eased him down, pulling up his own T shirt impatiently, wriggling his trousers free, desperate to have Bodie touch him.

For a moment, the sight of his very masculine nakedness startled Bodie; the soft dark hair curling on the sternum, the demanding curve of flesh over his flat belly; but Doyle's hands in his hair urged him on as he whispered, "Please. Bodie, please..." and Bodie lost his hesitation, all trace of reluctance gone. He found he knew exactly what to do, and it was easy. Doyle was touchingly vocal about the pleasure the warm wet haven of Bodie's mouth was giving him; he arched and sobbed and felt himself touch the sun as Bodie's searching tongue made him come, too much sweetness to bear...

"Love you," he murmured through the receding sunflower bursts of pleasure, "love you, love you, love you." And heard Bodie answer, pressing suddenly close against his calf; he felt the leap and pulse of the other man's body and knew the union was complete.

He felt himself slip from Bodie's parted mouth, and Bodie, sighing, moved his head up to rest on his chest. He held Bodie close, not speaking.

"Don't go to sleep on me."

He must have been drifting off. He opened his eyes and looked into smiling blue, deeper than the sky. He hugged him again, and planted an emphatic kiss on Bodie's hair. "Didn't mean to do that," he muttered, abashed. "At least - at least, I didn't mean for you to have to - "

"S'all right. Was - nice - "

They were perfectly attuned right now, understanding every half-spoken truth. "I'll do it for you," Doyle murmured fiercely into salty hair. "I'll do anything you want."

"Yeah." They lay for a little longer, quiet. Bodie felt tired, and a little melancholy, a little awkward now it was all over. He said, suddenly breaking the silence, "We gotta be at work in an hour."

"Yeah, I know." But Doyle didn't want to move, and when Bodie made as if to, he held him back needing something more. "Bodie -?" He searched the hard, unreadable face of his partner; and did not see what he was looking for. So he let him go - stupid bastard. Not worth tears, mate, he told himself roughly - and turned his attention to rearranging his clothing.

Bodie was stickily uncomfortable inside his. He stared at Doyle's back; the T-shirt was covered with dust and bits of twig. Suddenly remorseful Bodie dusted him off; then he slid his hands up to hold Doyle's shoulder and kissed the nape of his neck. "Sorry."

"S'all right." But Doyle still wouldn't turn. Bodie slipped his arms around him, pulled him back against his chest and murmured into tumbled sun-warmed curls: "I love you."

Doyle relaxed, a little bit. He twisted to look into Bodie's face. "Do you?"

"Yeah."

"And - ?"

Bodie was mock-affronted. "And, what more do you want? I don't say that to everyone, you know."

Doyle suddenly began to feel that everything might, after all, be wonderfully right with the strange new world they had created from the old one; he laughed up at him. Then with a quick movement, he freed himself and was on his feet, hands on hips, looking down. For a moment, he looked youthful, pagan; very appealing. Bodie made a grab for him.

"Catch me," said Doyle, poised; and then he was gone.

Bodie caught him before he had gone fifteen yards; dragging him to a halt enfolding him close for a bruising kiss, asserting his possession. And Doyle kissed him back, his whole body pressing close in a wild writhing of abandoned caution, lost independence.

Their union was sealed, as it had begun, with a kiss.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

No Unicorns by HG (Bodie) and Sebastian (Doyle)

=====

[Typist's note: The original text is written in a font that includes a "strike-out" mode that looks as if a single line has been drawn through the text, leaving it readable. I've simulated this as follows: --c-r-o-s-s-e-d--o-u-t--t-e-x-t--. Sorry, it's the best I could come up with!]

=====

Dear 3.7,

Feels bloody daft writing to you. Nothing else to do, mate. Thing is, they propped me up and shoved me into the Day Room and told me to write a letter, or something. Weight training's out for a bit, it seems, and I've read all the Good Housekeepings and Autocars around, so a letter to you it is. Bring me a Mayfair next time you come, will you?

You'll see from this that they finally unhooked me from some of the apparatus. I even get to pee straight down -- but only twice a day. Can't say I mind too much at the moment even if those bloody bottles are obscene; feel kind of dizzy when I struggle to me feet, like I've had a day alone with Towser. The policy is, you get up regularly even if you're 90, had every major organ removed and a false leg fitted on top. Suits me anyway, the sooner I start getting back into shape the better, though sometimes I wonder --i-f--I-- -- I don't want to go into that. Trouble is, you get too much time to think in here.

What are you up to then, Butch? Prating around in the Capri saving the world and screwing air hostesses, I bet. Save one for me. Not that I'd appreciate it at the moment -- You'd think I'd been shot in the balls. Never thought the time would come I'd have sexy uniformed females handling me intimately and not have to worry about frightening 'em off. Bet the thought gets *you* going though... Yeah, well, it did me before all this. Everyone's fantasy, isn't it?

Life's fucking dull here. Better than the alternative -- I suppose. Just gets a bit depressing at times. You out there, doing our job, and me stuck in here for god knows how many weeks. And that's optimistic.

Now I'm getting sentimental. You'll be laughing yourself sick. Must be time for the weak tea and digestives. Better go. Don't play Cowley up -- much.

Saturday. Feel lousy today. Felt better yesterday than I do today.

Can't seem to let this letter go. Must be a bad sign. It's visiting hour again. Space is tight, so they shove all of us without them into the Day Room. Not that I mind. Better than being in there with the fond families bearing gifts.

Expect the old man's keeping you busy, is he? You look after yourself, sunshine. Set the bloody locks for chrissake. You don't want this, believe me.

Pathetic, isn't it. Me with nothing better to do than lie here scribbling this. And you'll throw it away before you get to the end, I know you. You *can* read, can't you?

Four, bloody, five.

* *

*Dear four, bloody, five,

Be fair, more like patchwork quilt now. Quite pretty if you like that sort of thing. Prefer the hairy version myself, without all those black threads. Still, the sewing's good.

Sorry I couldn't stop long yesterday. Wanted to. Bloody Cowley. The way he's got us leaping around the countryside you'd think he'd got shares in the Tourist Board.

Am writing this in the car -- don't panic, Anson's driving -- we're eloping to Norfolk. Don't know for how long. Want me to bring you back a turkey?

You're a fine one to tell me to be careful. You do anything that bloody dozy again and I'll -- Sorry, I suppose I did labour the point yesterday, didn't I? Even forgot to hand over the stuff I'd brought with me, and you didn't remind me. Found myself taking it into the old man's briefing -- and you can wipe that grin off your face, he had no problem guessing who it was for. But I've left it with Jax to drop them in, you should get them today with luck. Any sweaty fingerprints are his. They're Danish, so don't go reading them until after they've done the rounds, had enough of your temperature going up and down like a yoyo.

Never had a chance to tell you -- sneaked a look at your chart and medical file (you never told me you'd had your tonsils out). Know you feel lousy, can't say you looked that great to be honest, but you're doing fine now according to them. Believe it or not you're `comfortable'.

Yeh, that's what I thought you'd say. Have some patience. Better still, find the women's ward. The physio will have got you walking that far by now.

Wasn't too impressed with your nurses. Don't know about you not feeling a flicker, I'd be worried if you had. Wonder if the Cow picked them on purpose, be just like the malicious old sod. Unless -- you don't suppose he fancies that one with the moustache and varicose veins, do you? Can't imagine our George fancying anything myself.

Don't start worrying about Norfolk, you're not missing out, mate. Just a lot of leg work. I'll ring you if I get the chance. I'll make it during the day this time. Maybe then that staff nurse will let you on the phone.

Feels odd having to write to you. Keep turning round to tell you things, expecting to find you next to me. Frightened the life out of Turner, glaring at him. Expect that's why I've got lumbered with Anson now. Still, it won't be for long, mate. Month or so at most. Just, don't start trying to do too much too soon.

Write via the flat. I'll get someone to send it up to me if it looks like we'll be stuck up here any length of time.

Gotta go, sunshine. Eat lots of grapes -- keep you regular.

Bodie

PS If you want to work solo when you get back, take up cigars.

* *

*Dear Ray,

Saw these little beady eyes and pathetic bits of fluff and thought of you. The heroic one on the right's obviously me.

Come to sunny Yarmouth -- wind goes straight through your thermals. Wish you were here all the same.

B.

* *

*Dear Bodie,

Dreamt about you last night. Funny, confused sort of dream. I was crying a lot and you were telling me to pull myself together. That was part of it. --T-h-e--r-e-s-t-- Hey, d'you ever hear that old joke? -- Last night I dreamt I was eating a giant marshmallow. When I woke up the pillow was gone.

It was great to get your letter. Could've done without this Norfolk business. Days are long and boring here. Never see anyone I know. Even Cowley hasn't been in for a day or two -- yeah, I know, your heart's bleeding for me, right? God, that's a sick joke.

Sorry. It must be another of those days. Truth is, I wasn't too good yesterday. They had me back in the Moments-from-the-Mortuary ward again for a bit. Soon chased me out again, but that's why they wouldn't let you speak to me when you rang. Bet it broke your heart -- long distance from Norfolk and you wasted a whole 10p. Don't go worrying, anyway, it isn't much, just a little infection or something. Takes more than this to do me in, mate.

Here, don't you let that maniac do the driving. Never seen him hold the wheel in both hands yet.

Had a go at making it to the women's ward like you said but didn't get very far. Better put it off a bit anyway in the hope some of the hair on me chest grows back, it always was me best asset. Way I look now all I'd be getting would be hasty excuses like when you're sixteen and desperate for it only no one wants to know. You know Ann always used to say she never knew how me mum could have loved something so ugly. She didn't. But I never told Ann that. Dunno why not, didn't make any difference in the end.

Now I'm getting *really* sorry for myself. Sorry, Bodie. Think I'll tear this up and start again.

Food's horrible in here.

Saturday. Got your p.c. today. Nurses thought it was from my girlfriend. Have invented a Belinda to keep 'em happy. You know, it's funny. It struck me today if I didn't have you to write to me and take a bit of interest I wouldn't have anything. It's like I don't exist now I'm in here. Not for anybody, except as something that had to come in for repair and whose condition keeps having to be checked in case they won't ever be able to send it back. Except for your letters, and even to you I'm just an excuse for you to get away from Anson and his bloody haze of smoke as soon as possible.

Feel a bit better today. I'm learning not to expect too much. Few days ago I was even convincing myself Cowley might let me back in by Christmas.

Never thanked you for those magazines. Jax left them for me in sister's office, safely wrapped up thank god. I was asleep or I expect he'd've come in, said hallo. Fellow in the next bed's got 'em at the moment. Wish I hadn't given 'em to him now -- bed springs don't half creak at night, stops me from getting to sleep. How about bringing me something a bit kinkier next time? Desperate measures, and all that. Spirit's willing but the flesh is weak, as they say. Or maybe it's the other way round, had a look down there the other day, still looks much as it did before.

Meals are still disgusting in here. Convenience food is about right -- tastes like it was cooked in one. They keep telling me I ought to eat more. Lost 15 lb so far. I look just like your postcard, how'd you guess?

Listen Bodie, if anything happens to me -- yeah, I know it's not going to but if anything did, I just wanted you to know it's meant a lot just having you out there in the background and writing to me and all that, it just helps to know you're there. Sometimes I look around in here and I'm feeling like hell anyway and I think about what I've got when I do get out and it doesn't seem worth it in any case. I'm not very good at saying these things, but you've helped.

You better tear up these letters. Don't want to be reminded of them when I get out.

Doyle

PS Cowley was just in. Said you'll be up in Norfolk for three weeks or so. Didn't bring me any scotch, but he did grudgingly hand over half a pound of grapes so with any luck I'll be as regular as ever.

* *

*Dear Ray,

It was four days before I got your letter, send them via Control, they know where we'll be next. Sprouted two grey hairs wondering why I hadn't heard from you -- though I don't know why I should assume you'd write straight back. Glad you did, even if it was only because you hadn't got anything else to do.

Listen, I know you feel lousy, doesn't mean you've had it -- remission, remember? But don't go having another one, makes me nervous. Anson's getting pissed off with me haunting phone boxes trying to get a line to London. Everybody up here must be desperate to get back to civilisation, even if not for the same reasons.

Oh, if they told you your father had rung up, don't panic. The old bastard hasn't risen from the grave -- it was the only way I could get any information out of the bloody doctor. You had a rough couple of days reading between all the jargon he spouted and -- yeh, you were asleep again. I'm making out a bill for what you owe me, it's not just the 10p's but what I have to buy to get them. Can't look a packet of peppermints in the face.

The job's a joke, like trying to unravel some bloody great knot. Don't know how we got involved, it's work for the Fraud Squad from what I can make out -- which isn't much at the moment to be honest.

We're back in King's Lynn -- again. Reckon I'll have talked to every businessman in the county at this rate. Glad Cowley told you I'd be up here for three weeks, first I've heard of it. Anson wasn't too thrilled at the news either. Cowley's avoiding both of us at the moment -- well anyone in their right mind would steer clear of Anson and I suppose I was a bit uptight last time I spoke to him. I should be down in London --w-i-t-h--y-o-u-- groping your nurses, not poncing around up here. Things aren't that busy, though I always told you I was indispensable.

Have got a food parcel organised. You lose any more weight and you won't have the strength to lift the sheet to peer down below, never mind remember what you're looking for.

Belinda?

Christ, the things I let you do to me. Still, could've been worse, I suppose.

You know why you're not getting any visitors -- hospital won't let 'em in. Got this abusive message via Control from Murphy wondering what I'd done to screw it up for everyone else. Don't know why the hell he's blaming me. No excitement is the hospital's excuse.

Would've thought Murph was about as exciting as a double hernia myself -- no accounting for taste. What's he got that I haven't, eh?

Get rid of that infection and you'll have more visitors than you know what to do with. Only thing is -- remember how bloody awful hospital visits are? Like when you kept coming to see me after I'd got knifed. It was about the only time we've ever run out of things to talk about, until that staff nurse tripped over your bag. Funny, she never did take to you, can't understand it.

It stopped raining today. Don't suppose you could care less, but I was getting bloody tired of having to bail the car out. Oh, remember that course Cowley made us go on after that corruption case we had a couple of years back -- understanding accounts or something, only neither of us did. Well, I reckon he should demand his money back, it hasn't helped at all. Could do with you up here, way you fiddle your expenses makes you a natural for this sort of thing.

Sorry about the crooked handwriting -- in the car again. Has to be, it's about the only free time we've got. Anson's better with only one hand on the wheel, believe me. It's when he takes them both off.

Later. About my only consolation in all this came last night at the White Hart (lousy food, great barmaid. Beautiful pair of knockers.) -- I did okay there, passed a very happy couple of hours but -- I dunno, maybe I'm getting old. Going through the routine just to get your leg over and give some bird a poke -- got to be more to life than scoring every night, hasn't there?

I've never thought much about the future -- my future that is -- until recently. Certainly never thought about settling down with someone on a steady basis, not seriously. Never met anyone I could bear the thought of waking up next to for the next ten years, I suppose. Except you of course. This isn't the cheeriest sort of letter I know, but writing to you is about the only thing keeping me from belting Anson one. It isn't the cigars, mate. Enjoy one after a meal myself. It's him. And Turner. And Jax. Or maybe it's just me, blaming them for not being you.

You know what it's like, spend too much time in anyone's company and things about them -- catch phrases, mannerisms, start to drive you crazy. Funny, even at your most irritating you've never done that. Bet you're finding it the same stuck on the ward -- worse for you, at least I can get away from Anson every so often.

He sends you his best, incidentally. Best what I'm not sure. Think it was a subtle hint that he's had enough of me and can't work out how you've stuck it all these years.

We've never been ones for talking about the things that matter to us, have we? Never realised that until we started this writing business. Means we've just taken all the important things for granted. Mind, I can see why we haven't got into any deep and meaningful chats -- feel such a prat staring someone in the eyeball while you're saying -- I dunno, whatever.

Maybe that's why people first started to write letters. Easier to get it down on paper in some ways, just so long as you post the bloody thing of course.

Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me. Not because I trust you to guard my back or because you're the best bloody partner anyone could have but because you're you. Ann had you so wrong, sunshine, all the way down the line -- about everything.

Christ, I'm getting sentimental. Forgot to mention, it's 3 in the morning.

Won't be getting many jokes out of this trip, nothing happening.

Tell a lie, it's started to rain again. Suppose I should try and get some sleep, ready for the next round of bloody questions. Highlight so far was Anson getting us stranded yesterday afternoon, ran out of petrol and there aren't many garages once you're off the main roads. Inefficient bugger. You I expect it from. Remember that time we got caught out in Northampton after you got us lost -- tankers' strike was on then so we couldn't get any petrol once we found the garage?

Bodie

PS Don't eat those grapes, frame them. They have to be the first thing Cowley's ever bought anyone.

* *

*Dear Bodie,

Worn the paper thin I've read your letter so often, just couldn't believe it when I got it. I really needed something like that, Bodie. No kidding. Wouldn't have taken much last week to make me retire for good under the covers, mate, and instead you wrote like you did to me.

This is getting ridiculous. I'll be writing you a love letter next.

You'll have guessed that I'm feeling a lot better, think it was your letter that did it.

Who needs ruddy Belinda? Look, I don't care if you meant it all or not, it was what I needed right then.

Now tell me you didn't mean a word of it.

God I'm sorry this letter is so incoherent. Maybe I ought to be telling you how I got up, and what concoction of pills they pumped into me this morning, and how when I dunked me biscuit into me morning tea half of it --

But I won't. It's this life that's beginning to seem unreal to me now, thank god. Like you said, it's easier to get it down on paper. Can't see myself looking into your eyes and saying -- scrap that or you'll stay up in Norfolk with the other bloody Turkeys.

Reminds me (god knows why). You really dropped me in it -- not your fault of course -- know what's coming? Those bloody magazines. Told you I lent them to the bloke in the next bed. Other night I woke up with a jump like Cowley just yelled in me ear and there he is, looming over me compromising me virtue. Got the wrong idea about me you see. I must have been a bit groggy when you first gave them to me cause I never even noticed what the bloody pictures were. I hope to christ bloody Jax never opened 'em up, he'd have got some pretty funny ideas about us.

Anyway I made up for it today all right. Thanks, mate. Cheered me up no end -- even if it took *that* to get me going again. Not that I've got anything against it, of course. Can't have, can I, or it wouldn't have got me going like that?

Makes me wonder, though, what made you buy me them. Listen, I came in because I got shot in the ticker, not to have the bloody operation. I wouldn't dare ask you this face to face. Thought about it a few times. Might never get the chance again so here goes. Have you ever tried it with another bloke -- ? (You don't have to answer this if you don't want. I swear never to mention it again if so.)

Bodie, I gotta go. Hot date with the physio. Will write again tomorrow.

Ray

* *

*Dear Ray,

You weren't kidding when you said you felt better, were you? Was like getting -- I'm so bloody glad to have you back. Know it's only been just over two weeks, feels like forever.

Anson's looking at me like I'm demented. Having ripped your letter open and read it three times in the car, I'm writing away like there's no tomorrow.

Maybe it's because I'm hoping to get a love letter out of you.

Christ, knew this writing lark was a mistake, lulls you into a false sense of security.

But it's the truth, won't pretend otherwise. Too late for that now. Cowley should never have sent me up here. Had too much time to think, much too much -- mainly about you. And me. Settling down.

Don't panic. Unlike the guy in the next bed, I won't take advantage. Believe it or not, while I'm okay on the theory I'm not too hot on seducing blokes, never had any practice. Never even thought about it much until a while ago -- not long, can't even be sure when. Shook the hell out of me. But only of you, with you.

Look, forget most of this, okay? I'm not about to load you down with things you don't want to hear and I'm still too high to be coherent. Was your letter that did it, it was like I could hear you talking, made me go over the top, read too much into it. Anyway, you asked and -- I just need you to know. But I'm glad the magazines didn't make you throw up or anything. Suppose that's why I must have sent them, to find out.

Enough of that.

In view of your eventful life in Ward 301 -- why 301, for godssake? -- I know you'll be *really* fascinated at what we're doing up here. It's still

Oh, shit. Never enough time. Anson's pulled up by a post box so I'll have to send this. Listen, Ray, nothing's changed, I promise you. Unless you want it to that is.

B.

* *

*Dear Bodie,

Been feeling really odd today -- not ill-odd, in fact I feel so much better I'm getting right up everyone's noses, can tell. You always did say I had an irritating way with me, never could see it myself.

Feel odd like it's Christmas soon and I'm a kid again. Of course I want things to have changed. It's funny it took me getting shot and these letters to bring it all out. So you want a love letter -- ? Bodie, that's what I've been writing to you all this time, only I thought maybe you wouldn't see it. Almost hoped you wouldn't, scared, see. Read too much into it -- ? You haven't read *enough*, mate. You couldn't possibly.

All these years waiting to fall in love (sounds like a song, dunnit?) and when it finally happened it took me so much by surprise I couldn't cope with it. I acted strange for a bit, didn't I? You remember, we came out of the Coroner's Court and you asked me to go for a drink with you. If I had, d'you realise, I wouldn't be here now? But on the other hand, if I had, we'd just have had a drink and talked about the job and then gone off home with nothing sorted out. So you see what happened didn't turn out so bad, did it. I'm rambling. Sorry. Been a long day. And it's only 11 am.

Instead, what happened was I went back to my flat and it seemed very empty, very big. I put some music on to make it less quiet, I remember that. Mozart. (Never be able to listen to that piece again.) Even when I was out taking the laundry I was still thinking of you and what you'd say if I came right out with it. Was getting difficult, see, never could be quite sure I wasn't going to mumble it all out in me sleep sometime while I was kipping on the back seat, give you a hell of a shock. Phrased it so many times in my mind. 'Well, mate, how about giving it a try?' That was the best I could come up with. Took you in the end to make it poetry -- 'You and me. Settling down.'

You know what happened next. I thought I was going to die lying there and we'd never even had a fucking chance. That was what hurt most of all. And then you came.

And when I started writing to you I didn't mean it to go like this. Not come right out with it. I know I was feeling very low. Dunno how you put up with me so long. But it looks like you read what I half meant you to, and I'm glad.

Listen you don't have to worry about telling me things I don't want to hear. Bodie, anything you want to tell me, I want to hear. But you don't *have* to, because I think I know anyway. Okay, so it scares the hell out of me. But I reckon we can cope with it. Good job you sent those bloody magazines. They gave me the guts to ask. (Sister found them the other day when I was asleep -- sneaky, that. I told her she could borrow them for the nurses' restroom if she wanted to - - very guileless. Reckon that's why she gave me a delightful session of what's politely termed 'colonic irrigation' this morning. I told her Cowley'd be sure to be bringing some grapes before long but she wasn't to be diverted.)

So you know it all in theory but not in practice, eh. That's interesting. Where and when did you read up on the theory, then?

Dinner arrived then -- icecream scoop of Smash, horsemeat sausage, and beans. Thank god and you for your food parcels, managed to put on 3 lb all due to those. Back to the important things where I left off.

I might as well own up here and now -- no unicorn'd come within a mile of me. Wasn't quite honest with you last time I wrote. I said the bloke in the next bed got the wrong idea about me -- well, he wasn't entirely wrong. I didn't want to say too much to you until I got your reaction -- was fishing, you see. Truth is, unlike you it's more than just theory to me. Oh, I never got into anything really heavy -- no big affairs, I mean. Started when I was a kid, a group of us were into mucking around when we got the chance, not too many girls had our stamina or our desperation, you see -- you'll remember what I mean even if you never tried it yourself. (Why didn't you? Just as a matter of interest.)

Don't be too shocked at me, will you, mate? There's worse to come. When I was in Drugs -- wake up, Bodie -- there was this bloke took quite a shine to me, god knows why. Hell, let's be honest, quite a few of 'em did. Was quite wild in those days -- speed and sodomy every night -- it probably all sounds very nasty to you, but it wasn't. It never seemed any worse to me than

picking up birds and using 'em for a night, better in some ways, blokes know the score better, don't get hurt, don't expect flowers.

Don't get the wrong idea, will you? That's not what I want -- not what I'm hoping for -- with you. Me, I keep clinging on to that beautiful phrase of yours -- 'Settling down.'

Then, while I'm in the mood to get it all off me chest along with me soluble stitches, there was Benny. Remember him? Got done in when we were deep in the Holly business. His dying was one of the things that pushed me over the top with Ann, needed someone so badly after he died and she happened to be there. As it turned out, she didn't help much -- but you did. Remember? When she walked away and you came after me. I think that was when I first began to wish that maybe one day you and I -- though I thought it was a pretty hopeless wish, the last despairing vision of sunlight if you like, aren't I poetic.

Forgive me, mate. I'm tired and rambling, maybe a bit groggy anyway with all the drugs they keep ramming down my throat -- not to mention stuffing up the other end.

I was telling you about Benny.

Not that there's much to tell.

Just that he was lonely and not very bright and he thought I was god, or Superman at the very least, christ he loved those junk comics, used to take him a bundle every now and then. It happened because I felt sorry for him I suppose. Poor backward kid it was probably the only bit of loving he ever got so I don't feel guilty. That was one time I wasn't doing it for myself, not any of it.

Bodie, try not to change your mind just because of all this. It's all in the past and I just wanted you to know. --b-e-f-o-r-e--

But you wanted a love letter.

All right, here goes. (For chrissake, I'm going to seal this up tonight and post it tomorrow without reading it or I'll get cold feet.) I can't say I've loved you since I met you because it wouldn't be true. *Fancied* you, yes. Wanted to get into your bed and your body the moment I saw all that arrogant beauty: yeah, I had more than a few fantasies about movin' in on you, fucking you till you lost all that super-cool.

You lost that anyway, and things have changed. Yeah, I still want to do all that, get hard just thinking about it. But more than that, much more, what I want and need is to know you're there for me and no one else, and you always will be.

Sounds like a tall order?

But that's the way I am -- possessive. Best you should know. And we're so screwed up, Bodie, so odd in this bloody world of ours where killing's cheaper than in a bad movie I don't think we could handle it any other way. All, or nothing. As they say.

So there it is. Look, you want to forget it all, don't mention any of it when you write again and I'll know -- it can be that easy. Seems a bit unreal anyway. Too bloody good to be true. Seen too much, I have, to expect miracles.

Got me bloody palms covered in biro marks. How do I *do* that?

Me hot milk's arriving, sunshine.

Take care.

Ray

* * *

*Dear Ray,

Dunno about the age of miracles but right now you can leave any walking on the water to me. No sweat.

Never had a love letter before so I don't know how yours compare, they'll do me. Only drawback about them is the fact I'm so bloody impatient I read them in the car; it's okay for you playing tent poles under all those nice concealing blankets. I damn near strangled myself. And if you can have that effect on me on paper -- Still, while we were chasing round after that van you had the same effect on me just by drinking a cup of coffee.

So much to say, wish I was more practised at this. Sounds okay in my head. Considering how bloody terrified I've been this last couple of days, wondering if I'd blown everything, I don't know why your letter didn't come as a surprise. But it didn't, was like coming home reading that. You made it so easy for me, sunshine. Always knew you were braver than me. No unicorns, eh?

It's one of the things I love most about you, your honesty. And the way you can be so engagingly thick about yourself.

Try not to change my mind? Listen, dum dum, I couldn't if I tried. So we've both fucked around. I'd look pretty bloody stupid, me with my past giving you a rollicking about yours, wouldn't I? Blokes, girls -- all one night stands, so what difference does it make? Mind, I reckon you had the right idea. Can see it would be a lot less complicated, not so heavy.

Looking back I don't know why I never tried it -- I'm not counting the shared wanks behind the bushes. Christ, we shared Woodbines too, which is how important that was. Besides, when you come down to it that was no more than a bit of mutual eyeing up and down, checking everyone

had the same equipment. They did. Should think lack of opportunity had a lot to do with it; merchant navy (it's not encouraged, plus I'd just discovered women in a *big* way, so I was saving myself -- was only 16 remember); Africa -- I'll tell you about Africa one night when we're snuggled up close. Not proud of those days.

God, I'm drifting off into a romantic haze of lust and tenderness and -- If I start writing bloody poetry you know who'll be to blame, don't you? It's ridiculous, keep thinking I should just be able to reach out and touch you. Nothing heavy, just touch for the pleasure of it. Where the hell was I? Oh, yeh, after I got some sense and packed up the mercs I was in the forces (nuff said?). Anyway, apart from anything else I was too busy perfecting the macho image -- man's gotta be a man and all that crap. Honest. Well you probably guessed anyway, you always have seen right through me.

Listen, me with all my theory (does half an hour flicking through The Joys of Gay Sex count?) and you with your practice -- we always have made a bloody good team. Not going to think about that now.

Too late.

Easy come and all that. Pretended it was your hands on me.

It's lucky I'm writing this in my room. Wish my hand would stop shaking.

Your letter made me want you something fierce. And sweet. Never felt like this before. Used to wonder sometimes if I ever would. Or could.

No problem, sunshine.

Realised something else, too. I've never been the possessive sort, could never understand jealousy. Not really. Just goes to show how important anyone's ever been to me before because I've discovered just how possessive I am. So it's you and me, all the way. No qualifications.

Hope I can make you happy.

Yes, you would have done that for Benny, or for almost anyone else, come to that -- lame dogs, snot nosed kids. Told you before, Ann had you all wrong. But I'm glad he had you to care -- and that you had him. You've had precious little love in your life.

That's all changed now, in case you hadn't realised.

Thought I better spell it out. Sometimes I wonder about you. I mean, you haven't got a clue about yourself, have you? Not if you can believe a few bits of fluff on your chest are the only thing you've got going for you. And this isn't just the voice of bias speaking.

Just thought -- you can explain to Cowley why he won't be able to put you out to stud anymore.

Anson, poor bugger, is getting confused as hell these last few days. Particularly since I've started smiling at him all the time. Way I'm feeling I might even be able to manage it tomorrow as well.

Looked up colonic irrigation. Woman's a bloody sadist.

Christ I miss you.

Bodie

PS Had to unstick this to confess. Think I've blown it already. Anson, who to be fair has been working for the pair of us this last few days (can't imagine what I've been thinking about) asked what the hell was wrong with me because anyone would think I was in love.

Yeh, you've guessed it. I told him.

He bought me a drink. Dunno if it was in congratulation or not. Probably envy. Love you, Ray.

Wanted to write that before, didn't feel as daft as I thought it might. Anyway, why should the truth feel daft? Don't answer that, I bought Anson a drink you see and... Better stick this down again, good and firm. 'Night.

* *

*Dear Bodie,

Reckon your letter should've carried a warning. They gave it to me just after the afternoon nap -- was all groggy, half asleep, struggled up with me heart going like the clappers when I saw your writing because I've been sweating blood since I sent you mine, imagining all sorts of things, like you taking off into the night.

Then I read it.

So help me, Bodie, I was in bloody tears by the time I'd finished it.

So loving.

Felt like it was all cut out for me now and I didn't have to try any more, could just lie back and rest and be happy -- d'you know what I mean, Bodie? It's such a rat race, running and turning till you're exhausted and you dunno where you're going anyway, just that you're looking for someone you can have for yourself.

I dunno, maybe everyone doesn't feel like that. It's always been important to me though -- to find someone. And now I have. Couldn't take it.

So there I was, snuffling into the pillow, great bloody tears running down me neck and into me pyjama top, nose running in torrents, when Sister Hitler turns up, what's all this Mr Doyle, can't have this, pull yourself together man.

Bloody Dr decided to do his rounds then of course, Sister H tells him, look, Mr Doyle's having a fit of the weeps in tones that'd shatter a specimen jar at ten paces. By now the whole bloody ward knows, about the only excitement they'd had since the morning enema. Bet Anson's beginning to seem like really congenial company in the light of what I'm putting up with.

Anyway after all the fuss died down found myself a nice quiet corner between the clean towels and the sterile dressings and read your letter all over again. Oh, Bodie. Talk about a quick recovery -- I reckon I could fight a lion today if you were there to cheer me on.

You had the advantage of me, you know. Alone in your room, lucky sod. Think of me. You know how the feeling comes on you and you just have to do it. It wasn't just the bit about you coming easy pretending it was me that did it though that helped -- was just I felt warm and happy and charged up after reading your letter and when I come to think of it I must be full of it anyway, only made it once since I was in here and that was risky now they've moved me into this communal ward -- kept thinking any minute the curtains'd be whipped away and there Sis H would be with that disapproving glint in her eye and blaring to the whole ward -- `what's all this then? Having a fit of the hots are we Mr Doyle?'

But Jesus, today I was desperate. Had a look in the lavs but didn't fancy it. Smells too clinical, puts me off my stroke. Wandered around restlessly, looking. Kept getting these excited images of you touching yourself imagining it was me running around in me fevered brain. (Yeah... I'll do that for you, lover. More.) Anyway finally one of the Miss Nightingales took pity on me and said if I had so much energy I could spend it outside, was making her nervous watching me prowling round she said.

So there I was out on parole, taking me first steps outside. Christ but it was good to be in the fresh air again, wind blowing on me skin. I dunno why but everything looked better, brighter than I remembered it, sky, grass, etc. Rose tinted specs -- ? I must be in love. I am.

There was this weeping willow out in the grounds. Soon as I saw it I knew that was the place -- kind of primal, bit pagan, fertility rites, you know? Only thing was, would I make it there before it happened anyway -- was having to walk so I didn't rub meself too much, didn't want to waste it all inside me jeans. Anyone watching must have thought I had piles or something I was treading so careful.

Anyway I got there, right in that nice green-walled haven. Leaned against the trunk, unzipped me jeans and just did it there where I was standing, all starryeyed and gazing at the sky between the leaves. It felt bloody wonderful doing it out there, thinking of you holding me that way, stroking me with your tongue -- a million different pictures flashed through me head all of them too exciting to stand and I came in about five seconds all over me thermal vest -- lucky I'd pushed me shirt out of the way. We're gonna have to do something about me, sunshine. When we

finally get it together it's all gonna be over too fast. I always did have a problem that way. Any ideas...

Oh christ I should never have started thinking about it, better lie on me stomach, don't want to frighten Sister Hitler.

That's better. Soon be lights out.

So, what do we do now, Supershot?

Read all your letters from the beginning today to see if I could see it coming. Yeah, reckon I could. I've kept everything you've ever given me, bet you didn't know that. Thanks for ringing me this morning, couldn't say much could we but I think we got it across. No thanks to the crude comments I could hear wafting down the line. Tell Anson I've got a king size Corona for him -- just don't tell him where I'm gonna put it.

I'm tired tonight. Done more today than since it happened. Maybe they'll let me out for the day soon.

Sister Hitler just came up, told me I looked like a ghost, and that I had to leave the rest of me memoirs till the morning. Just two things to say.

Glad you understood about Benny. Not everyone would've done.

And --

I love you, sunshine. And you do make me happy.

Christ, I'm all wet-eyed again, must be something they're putting in the water. Gonna get me head down now and snuffle into the pillow, thinking about your beautiful eyes.

Your

Ray

PS Next day -- tried to write you a poem but couldn't find anything to rhyme with Bodie.

PPS I'm gonna hold you to telling me about Africa, you know. No secrets, sweetheart.

PPPS Hope Cowley doesn't intercept this.

* *

*Dear Ray,

What the hell am I going to do with you?

After the stinking day we've had -- What was it you said, yeh, 'lie back, rest and be happy.' I am, sunshine. All due to you.

Someone must be on our side, pure fluke I got it this fast but we've been waiting to get the transcripts of the Hanson trial and Control packed your letter in with them. Biro splodges all over the envelope, so it was no problem guessing who it was from even before I turned it over and saw what passes for writing. Only just had a chance to read it. Didn't even mind having to carry it around all day, it was enough to know it was there.

You gave me it all, didn't you, sunshine. I'll sleep sweet tonight.

I was knackered, depressed (job's a bummer) and Doyle-sick. Never thought it was possible to miss anyone this much and I only spoke to you Tuesday.

Needed to hear your voice so bad. Had a bloody awful night Monday, woke up convinced I'd imagined all this. Yeah, I know. Stupid. But it was one of those lingering nightmares, the kind you can't shake off. And while you didn't say as much I reckon you must have been in the same state because you sounded the same as me. Still, we soon sorted it out, even allowing for Anson's 'assistance.'

You'll be asleep by now. I've seen you doing that enough times to know just how you'll look too. Always enjoyed watching you wake up, specially when we've been on one of those long night shifts in the car -- all eyes, that first moment when you come to. Couple of blinks, a quick flex and yawn and you'd be ready to face the world -- amazing the number of times you'd turn round and grin at me then, all rosy from sleep.

Did you know you twitch your nose when you're asleep?

I don't want to know what I do.

Your letters are looking on the well-read side, like loved to death. While we're on the subject of hoarding things -- I don't. Or I didn't until -- remember that photo of you that got into the papers after that D Notice hit the dust when we were escorting -- strewth, can't remember his name. That Russian bloke with the good looking daughter. Well, I've got that, very carefully hidden away. Don't know why, doesn't look a bit like you.

Your last letter was beautiful, not just because of what you said but how you said it, you let me share your day. Could damn nearly smell the ward (not nice at all). Sooner you're out of there the better, mate. Has to be a good thing that they let you off for a wander. *I'll* fight the lions, just promise me you'll take on the Sister.

Got a bit damp-eyed myself (and the only thing I'm pumped full of is coffee), didn't realise until I started laughing and found my face was wet. I dunno. Great pair. Then I was in the sun with you, watching that look of desperate concentration until you made it to the willow. Wanton little bugger, aren't you, and so bloody beautiful. Pan.

No, not bloody Peter.

Would have said I was too tired to manage much tonight -- but I cannot lie. The thought of you, your face when you came, eyes huge and smoky, mouth -- want to see that, so much.

Got lots of willows up this neck of the woods, hope we're nowhere near any of them tomorrow, they'll do bugger all for my concentration.

As for what we do now -- what you do is take things nice and easy, do all your exercises (and no more), swallow everything they give you, whatever it tastes like and find a bit of patience. Christ, Ray, it's only a month today since you got hit. Go careful. Please.

Can tell you one thing you won't be doing and that's going off to any convalescent home. No need. Not while I'm here.

Cowley'll go puce when he finds out how much leave he owes me. Been away from you too long. Besides, you're already feeling frisky enough to cause trouble, recognise all the signs. We can rent a place, this time of year it shouldn't be any problem. Anywhere you like, depending on what the hospital says. I'm not so far gone I'm going to take your word for how fit you are.

It's all right, you can start reading this again, I've stopped nagging. Just -- be careful, please, mate.

No good, sunshine, my eyelids keep drooping shut. Been a long day, tomorrow's likely to be longer. Worth it though. We're getting there. Be home soon.

In case you'd forgotten, that's wherever you are.

B.

Saturday: Either Cowley's had a brainstorm or, have you by any remote chance, seen him in the last couple of days? He turned up here this morning -- 4 am, as spritely as hell. God, frightened away some very happy thoughts, he did. Probably timed it on purpose.

All the same, I hardly recognised the old bastard. Not only did he commend me for my efforts - - hope you're taking this in, be expecting you to walk three paces behind in future -- but he offered me a month's leave when this is all over.

Hang on, it's just dawned on me. He owes me five weeks. Crafty old sod.

You thought you'd got problems with Hitler, it's like a CI5 convention up here, taken over two of the local pubs, plus Cowley. Aren't I the lucky one? Feel it, though I don't think any of the credit can go to them.

What's all this I hear about Macklin paying you a visit? Our Brian? Maybe I should be the one to walk three paces behind -- think I will anyway, can watch your bum then. Sorry about the stain, it's only marmalade. Fat chance of anything else with Cowley interrupting me all the time. Up to our ears in bloody paper.

Later: Anson's just handed me a quid's worth of change and told me to dodge Cowley and find a phone -- think he fancies himself as Cupid. Pointed out that I didn't think the hospital would be too thrilled at getting a call at 11.30 at night.

Christ. Cowley's off back to London and asked if there was anything I want him to drop in on you. So Anson pipes up and Cowley's expecting to take this with him. I'll kill Anson when Cowley's gone.

Look a bit pointed if I selotape this down, won't it. How d'you fancy love on the dole?

Doyle's not too promising on the poetry stakes either -- about the only fault I can find in you.

* *

*Bodie --

Rushed note between session on the rubber treadmill and an inspection of the Doyle pectorals by half the teaching school.

Feel terrific this morning and so will you when you hear this --

They're letting me *out* on Friday.

Hold onto your whatever, only for the day.

Any chance Anson could do without you -- ? I know it's a long drive just for the day but honest Bodie I'll be so lost if you don't come, I'm counting on it. Sounds daft, grown man like a lost soul with nowhere to go and no one waiting for me; probably end up at CI5 drinking endless plastic cups of dishwasher coffee, given me a strange feeling of nostalgia that, hadn't thought of CI5 at all in a week what with you and all.

But I'd rather have you than bloody CI5.

Listen B I might have to rush off any second, not rush off literally but finish this in a hurry, post collection might be any minute and if I miss it I'll be sick because then there won't even be any hope.

Keep rereading your letters from the start, found that lovely phrase about wanting to reach out and touch, just touch for the pleasure of it. Oh christ Bodie I need that so much, wanted to touch you so often, just reach out and give you a hug for the sheer joy or something, or have you hold me on a bad day, so bittersweet the thought of it when I was in the car aching and miserable and

needing you to hold me but knowing it never would happen, no one's touched me now in weeks except on the other end of some implement do you realise that?

Bet when I see you I can't think of a single

Gotta go sweetheart

R

* *

*Dear Bodie

Depressed as hell today.

Felt like crying when I got up here and you already half a mile down the road, just got into bed and stuck me head under the covers.

Oh Bodie.

I can't, just can't, spend another x weeks in here. Need to be with you so bad. It's like an ache deep inside, worse than the ache in me ruddy chest.

Never thought I'd go like this -- feel it so much. I mean, I always knew I had a lot of love in me but I always reckoned on most of it going to waste. That's not meant to sound like I thought I was too good for anyone, just true. Even with Ann, she never wanted me like I wanted her, never wanted to touch me as much as I wanted it. I don't mean sex. Used to kid myself she'd change.

I'm always throwing Ann in your face. Sorry. 'S just, what I've got with you is so different. So different, sunshine.

That day, was scared when you came. Okay, I admit that -- scared we'd been living a dream on paper, real life's different. I reckon you must have felt the same. Whitefaced and serious, that was you when you came for me. Felt screwed up with nerves as we went down in that lift.

Then we were by your car, you holding the door open and suddenly you smiled at me, such a sweet smile it was, and a quiet voice asked if I was okay and everything was all right, was like moving out into the sun after hours in a cold room.

Can't remember much about the journey. Just you holding my hand, very tightly and not changing gears unless you absolutely had to, like when that E type maniac flashed through the gap at ninety. Then we were home and you were holding me.

Good job or I'd have fallen down. So sweet when you kissed me then for one godawful moment I was shitscared again but then we were there, and all the way there, we'd made it. I was happy, I cried.

Sorry about that, sheer bloody joy, sunshine.

Sunshine -- that the name of a washing powder or something? For some reason that reminds me, must pick up me laundry when I get out of here. Fancy Rita not letting you have it. Must be the devious way you roll the whites of your eyes.

Loved the way you

* *

*Morning, sweetheart

No, I haven't cracked up completely, despite the shock of having to go back to work this morning. How can seven weeks go so fast?

Was going to wake you up, didn't see why I should be the only one to suffer -- besides, you'll have to get used to it pretty soon, another month at the most, I reckon -- but you've earned your beauty sleep. Besides, you're a bad tempered little sod first thing. Same as me. Mind, I have to admit to coughing loudly. Needn't have bothered. You just mumbled something obscene, stuck your face in the pillow and your arse in the air. How I didn't --

That reminds me, how do you fancy making some subtle enquiries at the chemist? Vaseline tastes terrible and it's a bugger to get rid of. Liberal handed, that's your problem.

I've got to go -- better show willing seeing as the old bastard gave me those extra two weeks off to do a report that only took the pair of us a day.

Just wasted 5 minutes watching you. This is positively the last letter I write for at least a year -- least I don't have to post this one.

Don't forget -- hospital at 2. Make sure you're not late this time.

Love,

B.

PS Will drop your jacket off at the cleaners. Found assorted junk and this in the pocket.

Read it.

This was the letter you were writing when I rang to tell you to start packing, wasn't it? Still don't know how we conned the doctors into letting you go.

7 weeks. Best of my life. All due to you, sunshine. That first day was -- You're beautiful. And you're smiling in your sleep -- you've got your double chin back, too, did you know? Want to slip back under the covers, hold you tight and never let go. Not very practical, is it?

See you about 8. Sweet dreams.

There was a young man called Doyle,

It's no good, you know -- hard to get poetic about boils.

* * * *

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

November

Sebastian

Autumn, winter, Christmas... magical seasons for lovers. The bleak and bitter chillness of their lives: the warmth inside - locked in and safe with siege provisions against the encroaching dark This whole story is a metaphor! Or maybe I'm a pretentious twit and it was just November when I wrote it. I have to say i was shocked by the bleakness of this post-Graveyard story when I read it after a long gap; but also pleased with the way it captures a little CI5 reality along the way, as well as the bound-till-death silver cord that ties our heroes together, no matter what, or who, or when, or where. Wherever they go... they go together....

=====|||=====

The day was dreary, a dark grey lowering, but the room assigned to them in the small hotel was unexpectedly pleasant. Miss Parrish the proprietor opened the door and a flood of rosy light permeated the interior as she switched on a lamp here and there.

“I think you’ll be all right here, gentlemen. Breakfast is from eight till ten, or you can leave the card out for our Continental. If there’s anything you want in the meantime, just ring down for it to Reception.”

Although it was many years since she had left MI-something and she was now a typical old-lady old lady with steel grey hair and a Marks and Sparks twinset, something about the gimlet eyes behind cold thick granny glasses gave Doyle a definite chill. When she had shut the door leaving them alone, Doyle gave a chuckle, throwing one case down onto the floor and setting the larger one down more carefully, continuing the irreverent conversation they had begun with their eyes behind her back:

“Nah, you’re wrong, mate. Cowley never ’ad a thing going for *that* one. She makes Annie Whatsername look softer than a marshmallow.” Wandering over to the dressing table he yawned

widely, running a hand through his hair and peering into the mirror as he did so.

“You reckon? Myself,” Bodie said austerely, “I think the reverse. A HevviFraym corset and cast-iron suspenders wouldn’t put *Cowley* off.”

“Nah, he’d rise excitedly to the challenge,” said Doyle, and gave that surprisingly lewd chuckle, rubbing his hands together. Bodie turned the key in the lock and turned to survey the room, eyes swiftly delineating its characteristics: two pink beds, wall-to-wall white carpet, some tasteful mahogany furniture, a bedside light and a tall standard lamp both shaded in deep pink velvet and heavily fringed, casting cosy shadows across the room. Through the wide bay window could be seen the rapidly-fading November dusk. It made Bodie sense fireworks, and Christmas coming, and the thrill of being locked in and safe with siege provisions against the encroaching dark winter. In the bathroom to one side Ray Doyle hummed noisily as he did whatever he was doing in there, accompanied by splashings.

All in all, this suddenly didn’t seem such a bad place to be.

However, there was work to be done; Bodie heaved a resolute sigh and got down to it, sleeves rolled up and mouth set in a determined line. It was a matter of minutes before the two men, working quickly and together, had the room set up for a weekend of surveillance over a nearby embassy: a pad for notes and a pair of high res. binoculars on a tripod by the net-curtained window, positioned out of the sightline of anyone passing below.

“Reckon this’ll take long?” Bodie asked, and Doyle’s hand made a doubtful ‘so-so’ waggle.

“Depends where he’s got to, dunnit?” He -leaned nearer Bodie confidingly. “Personally, I reckon the old man’s got it wrong this time. Soo’s very politically sensitive, very dodgy right now. He’s never gonna be stupid enough to come back here, now is he?” Bodie shrugged, for the very good reason that he didn’t really care. Hard to work up much interest and involvement in a routine obs. job like this; however, he knew why they had been given it and was in some sense grateful. He leaned back on one deep rose counterpane and surveyed Doyle idly. -His partner was wearing grey slacks and a soft sage v-necked sweater. He was leaning over affixing the plug of his portable cassette recorder to a socket in the wall and pressing the play button. The strains of Vivaldi’s ‘Autumn’ filtered into the room. Doyle’s expression as he turned was one of transfixed bliss.

“You’re so sensitive and artistic, Ray,” Bodie said in his best thick job’s voice.

Doyle growled and ruffled the cap of dark hair as he passed. “Watch it. And that’s my bed you’re messing up,” he added, opening the wardrobe door.

“Who says?” Bodie squinted over at the other, identical one.

“I do. Can’t sleep next to the window,” Doyle explained seriously. “Makes me feel insecure.”

Bodie snorted. “You, insecure? Come off it.” Nevertheless he swung both legs off the bed and

got up, glancing out of the window. The door to the Embassy remained shut, the street empty. Not that Amun Soo, who had been spotted at Tel Aviv three hours ago, could even be in the country as yet. Short notice, this. Handy for Cowley, though. He'd probably been sweating on where to place his newly-fit and ultra-sensitive pairing.

Staying there, Bodie reached for his gun and pressed back the barrel, squinting down it. He reached for a cloth from his Gladstone bag, soaked it in gun oil, and absently began to polish the mechanism, looking out all the while without seeing anything. Not hearing Doyle come up, he felt first the light insubstantial caress as two hands from behind briefly covered his eyes and the warm breath of a voice in his ear: "Don't you ever think of anything else?"

"Eh," Bodie said. Doyle, now beside him, grinned at him, cocking an eye out of the window. There, across the street was a girl, a typist perhaps, snatching a minute's break between documents to throw her sandwich crusts to the pigeons; she had long dark hair, a pink blouse, and a narrow waist. They watched her for a moment in silent, shared appreciation. After a while Bodie put the forgotten gun down; his arm slipped around Doyle, his fingers squeezing tight on the narrow shoulder-bone. The moment was quiet; the urge pressed in on him to find something to say.

"You want to go out tonight?" he asked.

Doyle leaned against him easily, one trainer-shod foot turned sideways, his thin brown fingers twining in a knot of curtain rope over and over.

"We'll 'ave to if we wanna eat."

Doyle was thinner than before the shooting, always-narrow hips sharp inside taut skin, but any aura of fragility this might have lent him was, however, quite false: he had trained extensively in the weeks of his recovery, pushing himself to the limit over and over again. How impossible for Bodie, Bodie who had found him lying there with his blood pumping out too fast, his glazed eyes staring fixedly at the carpet, his breathing a laboured struggle to catch, all images stained indelibly and horrifically on Bodie's memory: how impossible, after that, to have him back and not feel fiercely, dangerously protective towards him. Dangerous in many ways, not least that it both enraged Doyle and upturned his fragile new self-respect, regained at cost.

"Unless you *fancy* the Battleaxe Spinster's institution greens?"

Doyle was looking at him, quizzical. Bodie's eyes were shaded by a dark-lashed droop; his mouth set in a little pensive pout which made him look melancholy. Doyle wanted him cheerful: he nudged Bodie's ticklish ribs and repeated his prediction on the menu. He was rewarded by the return of Bodie's attention; the bigger man grinned down at Doyle with a wry, funny quirk of the lips as he patted Doyle's hip and pushed him away.

"We'll do better than that for you, sunshine. Two Big Macs and a large fries more up your street?"

Oh, that smile. Bodie's peculiar gentleness with him frightened Doyle, made him back off just a little bit: the darkest skeleton in his cupboard opened the door and looked out, every time. Nor did it help to know that Bodie tried not to do it. That made the skeleton loom darker, grin wider.

"Oi." Bodie snapped two fingers in front of his eyes. "Where have you gone?"

There was warm, open friendship in Bodie's look: he was perhaps the only person who, knowing him thoroughly, had ever liked Doyle whole-heartedly, really liked him; no rose-coloured glasses could survive five years of often gritty partnership. A partnership that had hung for a while on a thin line between death and life, or indeed anything less than a return to perfect fitness. Doyle had had to do a lot of thinking in the hospital and it had troubled him, to think that if they could no longer work together their friendship might simply fade away in the way of things, a card at Christmas maybe, a drink together once a year. There were so many things; you never gave them a thought from day to day, nor took them but for granted; and then death brushed you close and left you seeing things in a clearer perspective, your eyes sharpened by the foreclosure that everything would come to an end.

Doyle remembered something else, and smiled.

Feeling himself left out of something private, Bodie turned away. "Let's go, shall we? Unless you're planning on changing."

Doyle looked down at himself in surprise. "Don't need to change, do I?"

"Nah," Bodie assured him, softening; "You're perfect as you are." He watched in faint disbelief as Doyle reached into his overnight case and extracted a pair of sunglasses, hooking them unhurriedly over his nose. "Ray. It's November."

"Might snow."

"And it's dark."

Doyle sucked in his cheeks and shook his head with worried wisdom. "Ah, they can be very hazardous, those streetlights."

Bodie gave in. "Well, if you want to look like Medallion Man himself, there's nothing I can do about it." And ducked as a pillow sailed his way.

He followed his partner flying down the stairs, taking them himself at a more sedate pace. Apparently Miss Parrish had taken note of the descent, because she was waiting for them in the hall.

"Going out, I see?"

Doyle favoured her with his nicest charm; he had used it to good effect in the past, his most notable success being Marge Harper.

-I could do with a bit of it coming my way sometimes, Bodie thought with resignation: then, hard on the heels of that thought came another: at least, whatever I get, good or

-bad, it's the real thing. Doyle collected a key to the door—"in case we get held up"—it was locked, Miss Parrish informed them, promptly at ten: and then the two agents set off into the grimy backstreets. Little Asian kids out late played ball in the gutters, the girls in frail pretty dresses trailing in the grime, the boys forcing unpainted swings upwards to dizzying heights over cracked concrete. Tiny grey gardenless houses backed onto the yards of more of the same. They passed several takeaways of the fish-and-chip, Indian or Chinese variety, each emitting a tempting, warm miasma, but kept walking. Bodie noticed Doyle's breathing, more hurried than his own, and said unthinkingly, "This too far for you?" Doyle whipped round and glared at him sinking Bodie's heart. "Don't fuss, for chrissake." he snapped. "Just give it a rest, Bodie, will you?" Stung at the unexpected viciousness, Bodie retorted: "Sometimes you can be a right little nest of poison, can't you? Just a civil question." Doyle said nothing for a moment. Then: "Sorry." "All right," Bodie said coolly. But the moment had turned a cold edge to the evening. They kept on walking. Determined not to risk another rebuff, Bodie offered no advice as to direction and it was a relief when they came to a grim-looking pub which promised 'Bar Snacks'. "Not exactly the Hilton, but it'll do." "S all right. I'm more at home in a joint where you can spit on the floor." Doyle's rueful grimace made Bodie smile, but distantly: he was still feeling the backlash of Doyle's sudden spite. Inside they ordered pie and chips and settled to wait with a pint of beer. Round brown tables with cork beer mats and hard wooden benches set the scene; a fruit machine spun and jangled incessantly manned by a succession of scruffy youths, and two elderly men threw darts at a board defaced with holes. The sweetish malty smell of stale beer permeated, and the air was blue with smoke.

Altogether it was not particularly pleasant.

Doyle was acutely conscious that he did not want to be here: he didn't like the surroundings, he was quite sure he wasn't going to like the food, and most of all he didn't like the distance between Bodie and himself. Lately, he knew, he had been relying more and more on the abstruse comfort of Bodie's company: Bodie understood without any need of words what it was like to die and against all the odds be brought back. It was expected by outsiders that you would seize this extra gift of life gratefully and get on with living it with three times the zest. Somehow it didn't seem to be as easy as that.

The last thing Doyle wanted was to be estranged from Bodie.

He leaned nearer, meaning to try to restore things, but his companion had his mind on something quite different. Catching Doyle's eye, "In with a chance?" he nodded towards two buxom lasses at the bar.

Doyle inwardly winced. Women since Ann had been fleeting, and now he wasn't even sure it was worth the effort. He had put everything into loving Ann and it still hadn't been enough: all that, and it had come nevertheless to cold pale tears in the street—*you're one thing, Ray, and I'm another*—he didn't think he had any more reserves to give.

And even if there *was* ever to be a longstanding love in his life, he was damn sure he wasn't going to come across her in the Cock and Bull, somewhere in this unsavoury north-west nook of London.

All the same, he mustered a smile when Bodie ushered the two ladies to their table; they were cheerful-looking creatures who would uplift anyone's spirits for a while. Rosa was brunette, with pretty dark eyes; Sal had long red hair which, Siren-like, was attracting the attention of every passing male. Both fell for Doyle instantly as many women did, sensing something fey and complex about him which was probably false, but he generally capitalised on it quite happily, opening wide green eyes and flirting. Nor did they neglect Bodie who was perfect tonight; if he had a darkly brutal air behind the blue-eyed charm they loved it, seeing a sensual strength in the broad shoulders, a spice of danger behind the humour and the promise.

Bodie was in rare sacrificial mood: he was doing his best to make the evening work because he felt a little uncomplicated sex might be just what Doyle needed: had he but known it, Doyle would not have agreed with him, having found that sex was seldom uncomplicated, and an evening's sweaty romp with Rosa and Sal was not what he wanted, on any count at all. But since it seemed to be what *Bodie* wanted, he let himself slide along with it; it was less trouble than to resist and they were nice girls, sweet really.

"Doesn't anyone ever feed you boys?" Sally was asking, watching in fascination Doyle shovel in great and speedy forkfuls of shepherd's pie. Doyle widened his eyes at her, his mouth full, his eyebrows finely arched.

"E needs fattenin' up a bit." Bodie said at once. "Here, sunshine, have some of mine." He tipped Doyle's head back with an easy hand in his curls and popped a chip in his mouth. Doyle swallowed it happily. They were all getting a little drunk. "And no, we're not married, if that's what you're asking."

She flapped a limp wrist at him, deliberately misunderstanding. "Oh, I never thought you were, duckies." This amused both girls, without sending either Bodie or Doyle into raptures. Smiling vaguely down at his plate Bodie thought, *you don't know how right you are*, for being partners in CI5 was very much like a marriage. It wasn't even uncommon to fall a little in love with your partner; most successful pairings were linked by some small passion which sparked in odd manifestations: an overly-biting tongue when the partner was missing, or in danger; a fury vented on them when they returned safe; all the way to a withdrawn grief should they die.

If they died...

Bodie ached, his guts clenching. The pain of it was actually physical: he gazed at the mop of brown curls with a fierce hunger, every nerve tense with worry and despair.

Doyle, pleasantly drowsy on a pint and three scotches, was leaning first against one soft perfumed curve, then another. He caught Bodie's eye on him, saw the odd expression. He reached out and tapped Bodie's hand. "Hey." And when Bodie's gaze locked with his, hurt and

angry and blazing with some fierce and unseen passion, some odd flash of the intuition which made them a good team alerted Doyle to what Bodie was remembering. What he kept remembering. What he could not forget whenever Doyle was at his side—or worse, away from it.

For the first time, Doyle's eyes opened to what Bodie had been through: self-pity and shock had blinded him to all but his own struggle to regain normality. Surprise, then pity overtook him; and a new resolve not to turn Bodie's protective instincts away for reminding him that once he had failed, and so, the talisman of invincibility destroyed, might fail again.

Why didn't you set the locks. Why, Ray?

"It's all right," he said. "We live to fight another day," and the simple words did the trick, the shadow falling away.

"Amen to that. Another drink, ladies?"

Bodie's gallant charm as he leapt to his feet and leaned over them, his eyes that deep nightsea blue, sent shivers down Rosa and Sal's susceptible spines.

"Well, I don't know. Isn't it time we were thinking of moving on somewhere?" Sally said with delicacy.

Bodie met Doyle's eyes, inclined his head slightly. For a moment Doyle did nothing; then he gave a little nod.

Well, that's it then, Bodie thought fatalistically: no getting out of it now.

"You got anywhere in mind?" Doyle was asking, with a little flirtatious toss of the head, lip lifted to show a whitetoothed grin. It was something he did rather well. Bodie had seen it many, many times. He could not repress a smile, watching as Rosa and Sally melted.

"Well, now you come to mention it—"

Bodie offered an arm to each lady and, laughing, they swept along with him, leaving Doyle behind to savour the very last mouthful of whisky. "Are you sure we want the boy with us?" Bodie asked facetiously; with a very telling glance Doyle materialised at his elbow and relieved him of Sally.

That left Bodie with Rosa who was the prettier of the two, velvet eyes and a ripe melony bosom; not that Bodie would have minded, he liked any feminine company if it was warm, friendly and amenable and Rosa certainly fitted the bill. No, it was Doyle who had the taste for cool upper-class bitches, and look where that had got him.

After a chilly but swift walk through dark streets they stopped outside the door of a small terraced house and Sally fumbled for a key. Bodie drew Rosa closer in the circle of his arm.

“Are you sure this is safe, sweetheart?” he murmured into her soft hair. “Me and him, we don’t much go for jealous husbands.”

Rosa whispered in his ear, “Both divorced.”

With his customary speed of attack Bodie it was who reached the bedroom, a frilly ladies’ boudoir, first, along with his all-too willing lady; she leaned over him, tickling his face with the tips of her sweet-smelling hair. Time passed pleasantly. As he surfaced from a perfumed kiss a low chuckle from the doorway made Bodie’s head turn; Doyle was propped there, arms akimbo, shirt open to the waist, appraising him with a look of slow languor.

“Don’t waste much time, do you mate? I could spare you a few chat-up lines if you like.”

“Don’t seem to need ’em,” Bodie shrugged smugly. He turned back to Rosa’s plush lips, mumbling against them: “Besides, ’ad me mouth full, didn’t I.”

“Mind if I join you?”

“Why—am I coming apart?” With amazement, Bodie kept one eye on Doyle, throwing himself down on the bed beside them and making himself comfortable. “Where’s Sally?” he asked; his heart was behaving oddly.

“In the bathroom. And if she doesn’t get a move on I’ll have to start without her.” Doyle chuckled evilly, ran a quick, provocative hand down himself, and closed his eyes.

Within a minute Sally was there, dressed in something green and silky which didn’t stay on long. Good: he could stop worrying about Doyle now. He would, he really would. Firmly Bodie shut his eyes and threw himself into his lady’s embrace with fervour. Go to it, Ray. Enjoy yourself.

=====|||=====

Doyle lay there passively while Sal undressed him; he suddenly felt very tired. “What’s this?” She noticed his chest.

“Gunshot wound,” he answered, and she laughed, clearly disbelieving him. Turning his head to one side as she struggled to draw off his jeans in a most unromantic fashion, he watched Bodie kissing Rosa; both naked already, what a fast worker. Bodie had a good body: strong, muscular, (perfect) skin. He was murmuring something to his girl with an amused twist of his lips; whatever it was it made them both burst out laughing. Sally had arrived at last at his underpants; he was now expected to show some interest in the proceedings.

For a sick second of cold fear Doyle was gripped with uncertainty; but then she touched him and he closed his eyes and it was (thank god) all right after all, his cock awakening to her fondling.

He felt more relief than anything: what he would have liked was to get blown, just to lie back and do nothing while the sweet feeling surged, but he supposed it would be selfish to ask, some women didn't fancy it and who could blame them. So to be friendly he stroked her in return, and soon he felt her settle above him; he held her hips and thrust and was inside her, it was as sweet and as simple as that.

Beside him Bodie was moaning, short little exhalations on a rising note. Lost in his own fantasy, Doyle opened his eyes hazily—and was arrested by the sight of him.

Christ but Bodie was putting more energy into this than he was, palms pressing into the bed, the long strong muscles of back and thigh moving strongly as he took her, his chest rearing up and his head thrust back. The visual impact of this excited Doyle suddenly, the pleasures of voyeurism not lost on him; Sally moved and moaned and he wanted to push her aside; she was blocking his view. He clasped her to his chest, her head beneath his chin; a move she interpreted as affection and kissed his neck while he studied Bodie's face: dark tendrils of hair curled damply on his brow and as he watched entranced, navy blue eyes opened and linked with his.

At that moment Doyle poured himself upwards in a lightning bolt of glory and it was all over.

=====|||=====

After a polite interval, Sally slipped off him and lay beside him. Doyle put an arm around her and held her; she'd probably been disappointed, definitely not one of his better performances. He felt vaguely miserable and ridiculously tired. Sally kissed his shoulder in a comforting kind of way, thereby confirming his impression that he had totally failed to please her.

Bodie was getting his breath back. As Doyle looked over he met Rosa's eye and she smiled at him. She looked pleased, flushed. Well, when they compared notes after this no doubt as to who'd get the better write-up. (Nor who deserved it.) Bodie's arm around her shoulder touched Doyle's: he left it there, a warm and solid comfort.

=====|||=====

“Do you want some coffee?”

Bodie started; the whisper had aroused him from the doze he'd slipped into. “Yeah, that would be great.”

With a smile and a last kiss she slipped out of the bed and into a robe she took from the back of the door. Bodie looked over at Sally and Doyle, tangled up together, both fast asleep. Pity to wake him, but they'd have to be on their way soon. Bodie's brows narrowed into a frown as he surveyed Doyle; even asleep, little lines of stress showed around his eyes. Silver glints in his hair, and on his chest the ugly brand of a wound

most mortal.

Doyle was not yet thirty-five years old.

The familiar tight sensation hit Bodie, an expression of fierce brooding twisting his face:

Doyle had nearly *died*.

It couldn't be right. Not that a young man, full of life and vibrance, moods and feeling should be wiped out in a flash, just like that—all he had to offer to the world gone, flung to the winds and lost. For no good reason.

For no good reason.

And if he had died, Bodie asked himself reasonably, eyes dwelling on the smooth honey of his skin, returning as if drawn to that black nightmarish pucker over his heart: if he had died... What would that have done to you?

He closed his eyes, trying to blot out the rising panic: to quell it, he set about to be practical. To let his mind catalogue the options open to him, to both of them: anything to screen the fearful view of the future which had so nearly become the past. I will do it, he thought, I have to do it; I'll ask him to get out with me, we've done our bit for the nation, Cowley can find some other young hopefuls to do or die.

He touched Doyle's shoulder, found the skin moist, and cool; pulled up the duvet over him. Then, Bodie got up, picked up his clothes from the floor and padded to the bathroom to wash.

=====|||=====

Walking home through dark streets, Doyle was quiet. So many moods, Bodie thought: so many areas of light and shade to make up the complexity of one particular man. Doyle could be childish, distant, scrappy; infuriatingly moral or surprisingly cold-blooded: caring and callous depending on the day of the week. Most people were no better, many were worse. Bodie knew plenty with sweeter tempers he loved a good deal less.

Warm puffs of breath smoked the freezing night air a little. Doyle shivered and turned the fur collar of his leather jacket up, a little comfort against the November chill. Bodie knew better, this time, than to comment.

"Turn down here, yeh?"

Doyle's only reply was a noncommittal sort of sound. "Nice girls," Bodie offered, not that he felt much about them one way or the other; they turned into a side street.

“Yeah, they were. Too nice for us,” Doyle’s sour voice floated up from his chest where he had buried his chin.

“Oh, I dunno. They got what they wanted, didn’t they?”

“That was what they wanted, was it—a quick poke and a wave?”

Uh-oh. Obviously the blues had set in. Bodie felt defensive, as if Doyle were blaming him for something unknown; he had the feeling of stiffness between them, nothing specific, just that Doyle was very far away from him right now.

“All right, all right,” he muttered savagely.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Doyle deliberately, provokingly challenging. Spoiling for a fight.

Bodie clenched his fists, thrust them deep and safe into his jacket pockets. “Thought you’d enjoy it. For chrissake, Ray, you weren’t exactly slow on the boil. Didn’t have to drag you to the bed kicking and screaming, did she?”

He felt resentful, as people do who bear someone’s troubles uncomplainingly for years and never get their sacrifice seen. Doyle was staring at him, with that ominously chilly look.

“I didn’t? Hang on mate, *you* were the flash-eyed Jack. Top marks for effort, sunshine. You really got your rocks off, didn’t you? And you’re telling me you weren’t keen!” He put his hands on his hips and sneered. “I’d love to see it when you’re *really* feelin’ in the mood. Must move mountains, does it?”

He said it very nastily. Had a viciousness to him, Doyle did; not often Bodie standing in the way of it. On top of all the emotions raging in him, Bodie was somewhere feeling a vast astonishment: that Doyle could really *believe* he’d wanted nothing more from the evening than to screw his end away in Rosa.

“Love to see it would you?” he said with a lacing of silky venom and a very pleasant smile. “Yes, I just bet you would.”

Doyle stopped dead still, and turned to face him. His eyes glittered in the half-light; any sensible person would step back right now and in a hurry.

“Quite the little voyeur, aren’t we Doyle?” Bodie hissed, hot with his own rage now, sick with his own blues. “Turns you on, does it, watching: need it a bit kinky these days, do you? Third-hand thrills, watching another bloke doing his stuff in bed—”

Blind with fury Doyle swung a punch at him with the full force of his body weight behind it; Bodie blocked him, letting the hefty blow flash harmlessly past his ear as he sidestepped and caught Doyle as he cannoned into him, off-balance with impetus.

All textbook stuff. Macklin would be proud of them. What came next was in no book ever written on the martial arts. Bodie took Doyle's arm and pushed him to the rough brick wall behind. "Third-hand thrills? Try the real thing, Doyle," he said and leaned into him, bringing his mouth down onto the pout below and imposing on him the most savage, most brutal kiss he was capable of.

He felt the bitter wind blow against their skin as the kiss went on for uncounted time; Doyle's mouth hard, resisting his, then softening, growing warm, his lips finally parting to Bodie's searching tongue. Tasting salt, Bodie swallowed, and kissed him again with fire but no violence: his body pressed against his partner's, and even through denim he could feel the burning heat of Doyle's body, the driving need of his own.

Finally he drew his mouth away, resting his forehead for one brief moment on Doyle's leatherclad shoulder, Doyle's hurried breath warm against his ear.

Then he pulled himself away and stood there, looking at him, his hands clenching into fists.

"So now we know," said Doyle, his voice odd, husky.

"Oh yeah?" Bodie said bitterly. "You think so?"

"Fancy me, do you?"

Bodie drew in a long ragged breath, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Fancy you?" he repeated derisively. "Oh Christ no, Ray, *it's much worse than that.*"

Without looking at his partner he set off, his steps brisk and purposeful. Doyle came after him, conscious of a deep cold which reached through his icy blood right to the heart of him; in five minutes they were back at their hotel. He followed Bodie up the steps to the ugly stained-glass front door; after all, there really was little else he could do.

Inside he leaned against it for a scant second, starting upright when the bone thin figure of Miss Parrish materialised. He slumped back and let Bodie deal with her, eyes running over the broad back, the powerful lines of Bodie's thighs in closecut cords, tuning into the conversation well after it had begun—

"—rather it didn't happen again—"

and Bodie's coolly polite, unhumble murmur of conciliation—

"—doing our friend the Major a favour is one thing, but having men treating the house like a transport cafe is something else entirely—"

"I'll pass on the message," Bodie promised, with a swift and charming smile: and as she vanished back into her domain— through the open door, marked PRIVATE, a television screen

flickered—Doyle came to with a blink, realising Bodie’s hard, dark gaze was piercing him to the bone as he told him:

“We got company.”

Bodie’s eyes looked black in the dim light, glittering with the aftermath of the madness which had seized them; Doyle did not know it but he looked as wild, half-fey in the shadows which cast light on his odd cheek, lent a green shine to his eye. They stared at each other for a moment without speaking.

“Come on,” Bodie said, and he turned and ran straightbacked up the stairs. Doyle followed, taking them an easy three at a time.

In their room, a haven no longer, lounged two of their fellow agents.

“Well, well, now, if it isn’t Butch and Sundance,” Flaherty’s soft Irish drawl greeted them as Doyle kicked shut the door. “Dodie and Boyle, Cowley’s favourite calflings.” An old foe, this: he and Doyle kindled one another like flint against gun-metal, scratching then flaring. Bodie groaned inwardly, watching Doyle’s wary, feral stance as Flaherty uncurled his lean six-foot-one frame and circled him slowly.

This is *all* we needed.

“And what have you been up to, Raymond me sweet?” Flaherty’s long finger flicked Doyle on the cheek, sharp summersky eyes searching, not missing the bruised, swollen lips. “Looking a little *tired*, if I may say so. Just a touch the worse for wear.”

“Shut up, Spud,” said Bodie shortly. “I hear you’re hot tip number one for the Cow’s merit award this month: and a black eye just might ruin your chances.” He liked the Irishman, who was a brilliant shot and smart and quick as mercury; also his placid partner Todman, but right now they were nothing to him, they might as well be stones on the beach. “Bit late for a party, innit? Todders needs his beauty sleep like no-one I know.”

Burly agent 4.8, he of the crinkly brown hair and the best collection of beer cans ever seen—due, he’d assured Bodie gravely, to a lifetime’s quietly joyful experimentation—said from the depths of the pink armchair: “George is worried about you two. Hopes you’re eating well. He’s sent us to share the load, in fact, so you can have regular tea-breaks.”

Doyle threw himself onto the bed, hands behind his head, dirty-soled boots up on the counterpane. It was in fact Bodie’s one, but Bodie decided, looking at the tight set of his partner’s mouth, that to remind Doyle of this would not be prudent.

Oh Christ make them go. Or stay.

“We don’t need bloody minders,” Doyle was snarling at Flaherty, who looked pleased, carefree and winning on points, as he sniffed the air with delicacy. It was faintly rank—possibly boiled

carrots? “That your dinner I can smell? Lucky, lucky little laddies.”

“We dined ite,” Bodie said, “ectually.”

The ridiculous remark broke the tension crackling through the room; Bodie, sitting defensively on the fence, breathed again and they fell to discussing the matters in hand.

“You takin’ first watch?” Bodie addressed the other pairing.

“We fully intend to, Bodie me ol’ mate,” Flaherty responded. “Laid out the sarnies already, for the midnight feast.”

“Oh, and just look at the time,” Bodie said, pointedly examining his watch and leaping to open the door. “If you don’t get going you’ll miss the deadline.”

On his way out Flaherty couldn’t resist one parting shot. “And you look after that little leprechaun of yours, Bodie-boy. He’s lookin’ peaky, to me.”

Doyle sprang up and flew for the door. Bodie slammed it shut on retreating Irish laughter and stood firm.

“Don’t, Ray, it’s not worth it. *Ray*,” fending off Doyle with one hand. “What’s the bloody point, he’s just a stirrer, that’s all.”

Doyle turned away from him and thumped both fists hard against the wall in impotent fury, or despair. He stayed leaning there, head between his arms, staring at the floor.

“You can see what they think. What they all think.”

“No they don’t. Look, Doyle, there’s no real harm in Spud: can’t you see it’s the very *last* thing he’d say if it was true?”

Doyle’s head flew up and he glared at Bodie, green fire in his eye. “No, I don’t see that. I don’t see that at all. Well, I’m damn well going to prove everybody *wrong*, that’s all.”

Bodie grinned, preferring angry to maudlin any day of the week. “That’s my Ray. You do that.”

Feeling better, Bodie wandered around having a yawn, drawing the curtains, switching on the rose-pink standard lamp.

“Bodie.”

“Yeh?”

“Do *you* think I’ll come back?”

Bodie didn't look at him, banging his pillow into shape. "Yeh, no problem."

"You're just saying that."

Bodie was brutal, swinging round and glaring. "Look, mate, I knew someone in the Mercs had half an arm and a foot bitten off by a croc. Next I knew he was in charge of a battalion making raids on weapon stores, and if he could come back anyone could so stop feeling so bloody sorry for yourself and get on with the bloody job."

"I don't bloody well feel sorry for myself!" Doyle snapped. "Just as well, since everyone else is more than makin' up for me." He stamped off and slammed the door of the bathroom shut. There was a sound of taps being wrenched around in angry jerks. Water shuddering and hissing into the bath tub. A tank somewhere started to gurgle, noisily refilling from juddery old pipes.

Bodie raised his eyes heavenwards. He marched to the bathroom, opened the door and looked in. Doyle was stripping off; clouds of steam were rising from the genteel pink tub.

"I'm sure Miss P," Bodie said acidly, "and all the other guests will be thoroughly enjoying your midnight ablutions. They'll probably tell us, just how much they enjoyed it, in the morning."

Doyle clearly cared as much about that as he did about the best knitting patterns. The sage sweater came Bodie's way, followed by Doyle's trousers and two flying socks. Bodie fielded them all neatly and tossed them into the bedroom.

Doyle was stepping over the rim of the bath. "Tell her it's on the Cow's statutes we go to bed clean every night."

"It could be, at that," Bodie agreed as Doyle, naked, slid wholly beneath the water, then resurfaced, blurry-eyed and shaking his head of dripping curls. Some brisk interplay with a bar of soap began. Bodie's gaze darkened, drifting like debris on the tide: he said abruptly: "What about resigning?"

Doyle opened wide eyes at him, totally still, the soap forgotten in his hand.

"Not you," Bodie hastened to say. "Both of us."

Doyle's hand wandered to the ugly puckered snarl on his chest. "Because of this?"

Bodie turned restlessly away. "Not just that. There comes a time, that's all...playing cops and robbers all our lives." He stared unseeingly at three ducks in tasteful ceramic winging their way up the wall, thinking it out as he spoke, his voice rising and quickening as his urgency grew, "We've had a good run, we've done it all, every damn thing Cowley's asked us to do for our bloody country save lying down and dying for it: what about getting out before that's top of the list?"

Doyle looked at him; he seemed totally stunned by the turn of the conversation. "And do what?"

Bodie turned back towards him and looked down at him swishing gently, rhythmically in the bath and said: “I dunno. Insurance salesmen. Couriers. Open a shop. Who cares? We’d find something.”

Doyle snorted suddenly with laughter and rinsed soap out of his ears. “Shopkeepers!” Bodie’s narrow leather holster encircled his broad back; he was balanced on the balls of his feet and frowning into the steamed-up mirror; a hard dark fighting man, every inch of him. Despite himself Doyle felt a bleak erotic stab within; all that power, leashed back. Bodie had the kind of dangerous beauty which women found compelling. Women—and some men. Doyle knew only too well how attractive his partner was to gentlemen that way inclined.

“I’m trying, but I just can’t see you in a butcher’s apron, mate,” he said, a delightfully incongruous image springing to his mind, Bodie in a bloodstained apron, bare strong forearms revealed, wielding a mighty chopper.

Bodie was not to be diverted. He returned and sat on the edge of the bath, gazing broodingly down at Doyle, dark gaze raking him from top to toe. Under the scrutiny Doyle winked, and kicked one foot lazily, languishing like a basking seal. The water was clouded with soap; Doyle’s body hair lifted and settled, lifted, settled, like seaweed drifting around rocks.

“I’m serious, Ray. Okay, it’s been fun, it’s been great, we got paid, laid lead into a few blokes the world was better off without. But now—” Bodie’s voice sharpened with tension— “you damn well nearly died, Ray. I reckon we can call it a day, no sweat, no guilt. Let some other idiots fall under Cowley’s do-or-die spell.”

Doyle sat up. One hell of an evening. He swung himself up and over the edge of the bath, pulled a warmed rosepink towel off the rail, rubbed himself vigorously and efficiently. Drops of water flew everywhere. He threw the towel over his head and said from the depths: “Look mate. That’s a bit drastic, innit? Okay, it’s been a weird night, and we’ve had some hard times lately. It’ll all look different in the morning.”

His buttocks were thin, pale and muscular, a darkened cleft between. “You’re avoiding the issue, mate.” And Doyle whirled to face him, eyes blazing a question, a challenge:

“What *is* the issue, Bodie?” And they were there again, staring into the abyss.

Bodie rubbed his hand over his eyes; he was conscious suddenly of a gritty fatigue.

“You get to bed, Ray.” He turned away and began to strip, boneweary. His watch was the last thing to come off—12.30. Christ. For the sake of quiet he used Doyle’s water; it was still reasonably hot, if scummy with soap, the odd curl of hair here and there. By the time he got to the soaping stage Doyle was back, pulling a striped silk dressing gown around himself and tying it deftly at the waist. His hair was damp and curling tightly, his eyes heavy with fatigue. He stared at Bodie from the doorway.

“You think I’ve lost my edge, don’t you. Don’t fancy trusting me as a partner, is that it?”

“No,” Bodie said. “Christ no, Ray, of course not. I’d trust you with my life tomorrow, you know that. I may have to.”

“I dunno,” Doyle said, “seems everyone’s always looking over my shoulder these days. Especially.”

Of course it must seem like that to him. Touchy and sensitive as he was: no wonder he took it the wrong way, seeing distrust where there was only—something quite different.

“Look, Ray, if I do that it’s only because—”

He stopped abruptly and hauled himself out of the bath, setting off quite a tidal wave in the cool water as he bent over and wrenched out the plug. A dreadful tumult began, loud sucking noises, shuddering pipes and horrible gurglings. Bodie winced. This rate, they’d probably be booted out in the morning by the Iron Lady.

“Because what?” Doyle asked. He hadn’t moved, leaning easily on the doorjamb, one slender fingered hand gripping the frame.

Bodie plucked another large towel off the rail, its soft thick pile a noticeable contrast with the dry sandpaper rectangles which emerged from *his* washing machine.

“Give it a rest, Ray.” Dry enough, he folded the towel neatly, brushed his teeth at speed and padded still naked to the bedroom, pushing past Doyle.

“Look, if we don’t get our heads down soon, we’re gonna be in no fit state for 24hour eyeballs tomorrow, so get to bed.”

He put his gun within easy reach, switched off the main light and rolled into bed. Too much had happened tonight, his mind whirling with a difficult stir of thoughts; he supposed Doyle must be feeling much the same. *Unfinished*, the tumult lamented, *lost chances, undone*.

In the sudden dark, memories burned with unwelcome clarity; Doyle turned over, pressed his cheek into his hand, and remembered Bodie’s kiss.

If you could call it that.

Assault, more like it.

And yet...

He remembered hard lips bruising fire onto sensitive skin, the lazy kiss of Bodie’s tongue with his own; shafts of dark and secret pleasure stabbed him in the guts.

Christ.

More exhausted than he would wish Bodie to know, he fell asleep.

Bodie, not so fortunate, sweated on what to do, what to say, what he wanted—he didn't know—what Doyle wanted—he didn't know that either—and finally he turned his face onto a cool part of the pillow, closed his eyes, and slept.

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Doyle jerked, and awoke with a shock to find Bodie looming over him in the darkness. “What is it?” he slurred groggily, reaching out for his gun, for the light, knocking something off the bedside with a clatter. Bodie stopped him, pressing a hand down on his arm and pushing him back to the bed.

“Okay, mate, it's okay. You were dreaming, that's all. Go back to sleep, it's only five.”

Doyle lay back, exhaling like a surfaced whale. “Sorry,” he muttered. Almost instantly he was asleep again. Bodie slid back between the sheets gratefully—the air in the room had a chill dawn feel—and wondered what would have happened if he had touched Ray, so warm. If—

Next time he woke it was light. His eyes fell upon Doyle, sitting at the window, back to him, a grey blanket slung round his shoulders as he warmed both hands around a steaming mug and stared out at the horizon.

“Bit keen, aren't we?” Bodie's voice croaked with sleep. He always felt terrible in the morning: and Doyle wasn't usually a ray of sunshine, either.

“Don't want Soo to slip through our fingers. I may be farmed out to babysitting jobs these days but that's all the more reason not to let the baby die on me. 'Ave a coffee.”

“Made it for me, have you?” Bodie asked hopefully.

“Kettle's still 'ot,” Doyle said without a pause. Bodie grimaced, rolled over and sat up, prising his eyelids apart. Doyle's blue unshaven jaw was tilted in a determined set and his eyes raked the streets mercilessly.

“God,” Bodie groaned, “Ray Doyle, supersleuth.” He dragged himself out of bed and came to stand behind his partner. “You been reading the *Boy's Own* again?”

“Nah, just Cowley's motivation pamphlets.” Bodie disappeared into the bathroom and reappeared in precisely ten minutes, neat and shining with virtue and efficiency. He narrowed his eyes and peered out at the deserted streets. “I reckon we ought to take a look round the embassy. Just in case.”

In answer Doyle tossed him a piece of paper. "Map." Bodie unfolded it and stared at the diagram. "Cowley said not to tread on any toes."

Bodie grinned, stretching and throwing his chest out, hands behind his head. "You and me? Would we? My dancin' days are over, mate."

"E meant it. Any trouble and we're on our own."

Bodie groaned in earnest, hefting his Magnum from one hand to another. "Not that again."

Embassies were sensitive places: and especially this one, whose occupants were enjoying themselves right now sitting on the fence between Britain, the U.S., and Iran; the apprehension of one of their diplomats suspected of terrorism on the politically neutral ground of an embassy by agents of the host country's government would not weigh too well in Britain's favour.

"That's if one of his own lot don't pick him off anyway," Bodie added gloomily. "They 'ave about fifty branches of the royal family all with a claim to the throne, you know. Die like flies in the swatting season."

Doyle twisted to look at him unblinkingly. "Did your homework, I see."

"Yeah. Riveting stuff." Bodie yawned, feeling a twinge of hunger gripping his belly. "Shall I go down for breakfast first? Or you?" He leaned down over his partner, very close, to catch his reply. Doyle had a large picture of Amun Soo laid on his lap.

Unbearably and inexplicably moved by this, Bodie kissed him on the cheek. Doyle squawked, "Gerroff, Bodie!" and dusted him away.

"Just my natural high spirits," Bodie said, stalking away smugly, "coming out."

Doyle snorted. "Not the only thing comin' out, I reckon."

"Promises, promises," carolled Bodie, batting his eyelids roguishly and heading for the door.

Doyle turned around to stare after him. "Oi. Where d'you think you're going?"

"Breakfast. Don't worry. I'll save some for you."

"If it's black puddin'," Doyle's voice floated glumly through the open door, "don't bother."

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Bodie felt good as he went down the stairs, better than for a good while now; Ray seemed to be in a sunnier frame of mind, not feeling too vengeful. Okay, so nothing was resolved: but things had a way of working themselves out. One way or another. Take each day as it comes...

“Good morning,” Miss Parrish’s voice transfixed him from behind; her smile this morning looked predatory, like a steel trap for animals. “I’d just like, if you don’t mind, to draw your attention to the House Rules, and then if you’d like a table for breakfast—”

The rules began with ‘Guests are requested not to smoke in their Rooms’, ended with ‘Gratuities to the kitchen staff are NOT permitted’; somewhere in the middle was ‘Guests are requested not to draw hot water between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.’

Bodie handed them back, smiling with great charm and contriving a puzzled air. All the way to breakfast he could feel her eyes boring grimly into his back.

It was a bright, cheerful room containing several tables, each with a vase of fresh flowers in the centre of a snow-white tablecloth, a stone jar of chunky marmalade and a generous pat of butter in a glass dish—no tiny foil-wrapped portions here, Bodie was glad to note. From somewhere came the heartening smell of frying bacon, and the waitress who approached him had a wide smile and a pleasantly large bottom. What more could be hoped for?

“—with three sausages?” Bodie said winningly as she scribbled down his order. “Need to keep my strength up.”

She giggled at him and tossed her long blonde hair as she walked away, and Bodie knew he would get his extra sausage. His lips wrinkled smugly: if you were born beautiful, charming and irresistible, you might just as well exploit it.

His stomach gurgled as he contemplated the three-artery-pileup of cholesterol set before him; looked wonderful. Doyle, now he’d probably munch his way through an identical plateful and then float up to the room claiming he’d had a glass of spring water and a little Austrian muesli. Bodie picked up his fork and dived in.

The door opened and in came a man, bald and wrinkled, who boomed out a cheery excitable greeting as he spotted Bodie, who mumbled a muted response.

“Mind if I share? Shame to dirty two tables. Nice girl, that Jane, far enough to do as it is.”

“Er—my mate’ll be down in a minute,” Bodie lied, but undeterred the man sat across from him, beaming as he shook out a snowy napkin and stuffed it inside his collar.

“Name’s Fred. You?”

“Bill,” Bodie said resignedly, shaking the proffered hand.

“Fred and Bill! Sounds like the Flowerpot Men, dunnit? Best breakfast in all London, this,” Fred carried on, “for the price, that is. You on holiday then? Seeing the sights.”

“No chance,” said Bodie glumly. “Sales have been pretty low lately, my boss wants a 30% rise

in definite orders this month.” He loaded a fork with sausage, chunk of bacon, piece of fried bread, and dipped the lot in his egg.

“Salesman, are you?” interpreted Fred, a man of lightning uptake.

“S’right,” Bodie agreed through a mouthful.

“Very interesting,” Fred said valiantly. “Now what line of business would that be, then?”

Bodie ran through half a dozen alternatives from Bugattis to cosmetics, and said unexcitedly, “Vacuum cleaners.”

“You don’t say,” Fred marvelled. “Now me, I’m retired. Coffee for me, love, and two poached eggs.” He winked at the waitress who smiled at him. Then she smiled at Bodie, and whisked off under his admiring gaze.

When he returned it to his breakfast, his companion was peering with him at his plate.

“Like a cooked breakfast, do you?” Fred said gloomily. “Doctor’s orders, me—lowfat diet.” With a jaundiced eye he watched him use up most of the butter on one half-slice of toast.

I do not want, I just do not want the company of this man at breakfast tomorrow, Bodie thought, the taste of his sausage quite tarnished by dislike; and he opened his mouth and began to tell Fred quite a lot more than anyone would want to know about the sales, performance, and technology of your average vacuum cleaner.

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Twenty minutes later he was closing the door of room 14 behind him. The head of curls silhouetted in front of the window looked decidedly fed-up.

“Your turn,” Bodie said, arriving beside him and staring out. “Anything?”

“Nope,” came the disgruntled reply. “Street’s as bare as the parson’s nose.”

“Bit early for your average international terrorist, probably.” Bodie plucked the binoculars out of Doyle’s unresisting hand and displaced him on the stool. “Go and get your juice, old son. You’ll like the waitress. Also a charming fellow guest, name of Fred.”

“Bodie.”

“What?” He didn’t turn, being officially on-duty now, but something in Doyle’s voice tensed him.

“I *don’t* want the waitress. Understand?”

“Okay, fine,” Bodie said lightly. “Leave her for me.”

Doyle snorted, eyes on the broad back of his partner. For a moment it seemed as if he might say something more, but he turned on his heel and left.

“Don’t forget to look out for Fred,” Bodie called after him. “Very good conversationalist.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and Doyle—”

“What?” Doyle stuck his head back around the door, irritable.

“You’re a salesman.”

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Doyle breakfasted by himself, noted the charms of the waitress just as Bodie had, then took his third cup of coffee into the bright lounge. As he sank down into a very comfortable armchair, a lean and rangy figure unfolded itself like a creaky spectral vision from a seat with its back to the door.

“Hello there, hello. Fred’s the name.” The man bounded eagerly over, hand outstretched.

“Ray Doyle,” admitted Doyle sourly, having long ago decided that Bodie’s Fred was most likely one of Bodie’s little fantasies.

“Raid Oil?” echoed Fred doubtfully, but shaking his hand nonetheless. With gloom Doyle saw him take a seat beside him and decided this was going to be a very quick cup of coffee indeed. He reached for it firmly.

“Havin’ your coffee in the lounge then,” Fred said, nodding approvingly.

“S’right,” Doyle agreed, and took a large swallow.

“Then you’ll be off on the beat, no doubt.”

“No doubt at all.”

“Business a bit slack, your mate tells me.”

“Yep.”

“Nice chap,” Fred said clearly disappointed that Doyle was so different. He chuckled. “I’d buy a Christmas tree in August off that one, all right.”

“Me too,” Doyle agreed absently. Out of the window he saw a group of businessmen, dark suited, very close to the Embassy doors. Every hair on head prickled with tension: he catalogued the men rapidly. Oriental, yes; suspicious looking—yes; and, ohmigod, one of them was actually reaching inside his doublebreasted suit—

Doyle leapt to his feet, diving inside his jacket for his gun—not there—*damn* and *fuck* it to hell, every sense alert and ready to go, to move, to run: and then the businessman drew out of his pocket a gold lighter which he flicked as he talked rapidly and lit the cigarette of his nearest colleague.

Doyle sank slowly back down onto the chair, puffing out his cheeks with the gustiness of his sigh.

Watching him were two curious eyes.

“Sorry,” Doyle said, and he sniffed. “Felt a sneeze coming on.”

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Anything?” Bodie queried of his R/T, squinting out over the top of it with one blue eye.

“*Naught but a word from Cowley,*” Flaherty’s tinny voice reported. “*Things are hotting up...so he says.*”

Bodie groaned. “Well, tell him the only thing hotting up round here is—”

“—*Doyle?*” Flaherty enquired, interested.

“My temper,” Bodie told with equanimity. “This is a waste of time, and don’t we all know it.”

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Doyle was on the last two inches of coffee.

“I expect it’s your mate does the talking,” Fred guessed.

“Yeah,” Doyle agreed. “Me, I’m just there to discourage—late arrivals of payment.” With this, he smiled. Fred flinched.

“Well, it’s not everyone gifted with the gab, is it,” he comforted. “How many would you say you sell a week, then?”

Doyle set his cup down, suddenly wary. How many *what?*—Wait a minute—

“Well, season’s coming up now, of course,” he said elusively.

Fred stared at him. He had a peculiarly egg-shaped head, with greasy-looking glasses. “Seasonal sort of trade then, you’d say?”

Doyle stared back. Naturally Christmas trees were seasonal—weren’t they?

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Interesting,” mused Fred excitedly. “People do more of it in the winter, do they?”

Something was amiss here.

“Seems so,” Doyle said floundering, but hoping for the best. He buried his head in his cup—all gone but the dregs.

“Must be all the pine needles. Never get rid of ’em do you?” jested Fred and Doyle’s head snapped up suspiciously. Now they were back to Christmas trees again!

Fed up with this, he decided to lay his cards on the line: placing both hands flat on the table he faced Fred firmly.

“If you’re interested, I could do you a nice Norwegian spruce. Special price.”

“A what?” Fred looked at him askew. “A what, son?”

Doyle pressed it home, smooth and sure and to the bone. “6-footer, flame-resistant pine-o-tex in natural evergreen with a red leatherette pot. Very,” Doyle said, “natty.” And he sat back.

“Ah well,” Fred said after a pause. “Takes all types, dunnit?”

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Bodie was where Doyle had left him, leaning at ease against the wall, the binoculars dangling from one square hand.

“Anything?” Doyle said, shutting the door behind him.

“Not even any street theatre.” Bodie turned his way and glowered darkly. “Looks like being a really thrilling day. Pack the dominoes, did you?”

Doyle chuckled as he walked across the room. “Thought you wanted it borin’. Not twelve hours since you were all for us signing on with the Boy Scouts, or somethin’”

Bodie turned to look at him, his eyes very blue indeed. Doyle stood stock still; but Bodie said, mildly enough, “Yeah, well that’s me, Doyle, always prepared.”

Doyle pursed his lips and peered out of the window. Bit of action, that's what Bodie needed. He was too tough, too large a character to be cooped up like this in a soft pink cage.

No action, however, was forthcoming. Only an old man, looking the other way while beside him a mangy dog squatted. Bodie was incensed. He pushed up the sash window and bawled: "Oi! There's a fifty quid fine for that, you know!"

"Poor old geezer," Doyle said as the man jumped a mile and began a haunted visual search for the source of the reprimand. The dog, unconcerned, continued to perform.

"I'm fed up to here with dogshit on my shoes." The R/T bleeped and Bodie angrily snatched it up. "3.7."

"Just checking up on you," Flaherty's mechanised tones filtered from the tiny metal grille. *"We'll leave the baby rockin' in your tree, then, me mate an' I are off to the ball."*

"What baby," Doyle bemoaned, leaning over Bodie's shoulder.

"You might well ask, me lovey: meself I think the Cow's tossed us an empty bucket."

The connection broken, Doyle was examining the carpet. Bodie glanced at him. "Put some music on, eh? Might liven us up a bit. Even if it's only that Mozart rubbish you were playing last night," he said to be wicked, but Doyle didn't leap in and correct him haughtily, didn't even seem to have heard.

"Do you think Spud and Todders—"

"No, I don't," Bodie said sharply, his spine tensing.

"Why not?"

Bodie grimaced. "Oh, look at Todman. Pipe and slippers chap if ever there was one."

"There was Matheson and King," Doyle said almost defensively.

Bodie shrugged. "Well okay, we all knew about them." He added, half panicking, a jeer: "What's the matter, Doyle? Planning a purge?"

Doyle took no notice of him. "Just wondering, that's all. What any of our chances are—" He stopped, staring out, moody-eyed.

"Of what?" Bodie prompted, his heart pounding, pounding.

"—of living," Doyle said, into the remote distance.

Quietly spoken, terrible in aspect.

After a pause, Bodie said roughly, “You’re not the only one has nightmares, you know,” and from nowhere the vision came: Doyle below him, the view angled and slanted, his slit chest stretched open by a surgeon’s clamps, the bloody arch of his ribs shielding a ravaged heart which trembled and refused to beat: the chink of a bleeding bullet in a dish.

Bodie drummed and tapped his fingers on and on and on. Doyle was silent. “You see?” Bodie said, because he could not bear not to. “You know I’m right. You *know* it. Let’s get out, Doyle, before it’s too bloody late.”

Doyle shook his head. It was tempting, Bodie thought, to shake a bit more of him, but his anger died away as Doyle said, chin tilted:

“Run away, you mean?” and Bodie understood with his gut diving helplessly that now, more than ever, there was no chance for them.

He turned angrily away. “Make us a cuppa,” he said, staring out of the window. “Oh, unless it’s against the bloody house rules, of course.”

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The day passed slowly. People sauntered along the pavement, people went up the Embassy steps. People left the Embassy: but none of them was Amun Soo—unless, as Doyle pointed out, he’d had a foot of shin removed from each leg; Soo was a tall man, and the Embassy visitors seemed one and all to be midgets.

In the late afternoon Doyle snoozed on the bed while Bodie did the watching; he must be feeling more like himself, a week ago he’d have stayed up grim-eyed till midnight rather than give in. Bodie stayed at his post, jettisoning a glance back towards the huddled form on the bed every so often. Ray Doyle! Whether he was blessed or cursed to know him Bodie had no idea.

Doyle twitched, and muttered, and dreamed.

A huge mirrored ballroom dazzled him, so that he could not quite see; he glided about among people whose faces he did not quite know. Confusion and a great weariness troubled him; just to lift one foot and put another down seemed like something tremendous. He was worrying, too; he was late for something important, he had to be somewhere, somewhere else, and how could he get there quickly if he was so weighted down?

He had a partner in his arms, light as down; in the mirrored wall he kept glimpsing the top of her head against his chest. She felt insubstantial, barely real at all and he had no idea who she was.

A tap on his shoulder made him jump. Turning, he saw Bodie there, large and vivid, but it was Bodie with a peculiar look in his eyes which made his heart hammer and his legs turn weak.

“May I have the pleasure?” Bodie asked in his deepest voice, and Doyle let go of his partner, never saw her again. He was enfolded into Bodie’s arms and swept off; and he knew with a vast sense of relief that it was all right now: wherever he had to go Bodie would take him. And Bodie whispered into his ear with the subtlest of charm, “Come with me, Ray.”

Doyle felt himself tremble, life impossibly sweetened: he felt himself hard and tight against Bodie and he knew he was going to have an orgasm.

“It’s all right,” Bodie murmured to him, very seriously, “No-one will care...”

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Doyle awoke with a frightening jolt, heart pounding, skin tingling sickly with shock. For a moment he simply stared up at the ceiling, closed his eyes, opened them and stared again, exhaling as he tried to calm his racing pulse. Bodie was by the window, gazing out; he didn’t turn towards the bed. Doyle watched him, saw the broad shoulders in leather, the dark hair curling over his collar, the fine ends of it just beginning to curl. Someone—Bodie of course—had laid a blanket over him while he dozed: with the chills of the newly-awake he was glad of it.

Not yet wanting to face Bodie, he closed his eyes again. His body thrummed with disappointment, threads of sweet delight still hovering, waiting to be gathered. It brought a bitter smile to his lips: he needed *something*, that was for sure.

The smile died, a hazy imperfect memory stealing into his mind; one night, drunk, flicking beer caps at a spot on the wall, much hilarity. They had had many good times like that, himself and Bodie, firing each other on to new highs of energy, of humour, of wildness—excitement—

And this night—

The lights were low, the television flickered.

Bodie had suggested something, or he had.

He didn’t remember the details; the next morning with a sour belly and an aching head he had dispatched two empty Johnnie Walker bottles down the rubbish chute to shatter at the bottom: old Cowley’d be proud of the singleminded effort he and Bodie were making to boost the Highland economy.

No, the details...

...were unimportant, but he knew beyond doubt or self-delusion that something had happened. Unmistakable, that guilty delight at something secret shared, something intensely thrilling, a little wicked (dirty?) maybe... Bodie had been nice to him for days, a softness in his eye when he looked at him.

In one way he wished he could remember, and yet he didn't need to. Bodie had touched him, and he had wanted Bodie to: they could turn on to one another, it was no use denying it.

Fancy me? he had accused Bodie savagely last night; but Bodie had turned the question aside, and answered quite a different one.

Doyle burned, and yet shivered: newly fragile, to invite Bodie's love was surely to kill forever his chance of independence. He could just imagine Bodie, stepping in solicitous, pinning a cloak around his shoulders to protect him from the storm.

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With one sudden movement Doyle got up, flinging the blanket aside. Bodie jumped, and turned to look at him.

He was not expecting anything, had no expression prepared: had no idea of the sudden beauty of his eyes, a navy blue gleam under black silken lashes, the handsome, tender line of his jaw. Staring at him, Doyle narrowed his eyes, took a deep breath.

"What's the matter?" Bodie said, and after a moment Doyle came over to him, rested his hand on Bodie's shoulder. What would that commit him to? Nothing. He left it there, squeezing gently. "Seen anything?" He nodded at the window.

"Course not," Bodie said lightly. "Beginning to think you're right, mate, this is an oyster with no pearl."

Doyle leaned against him a little, stayed there. Together they looked out at the grey streets in silence.

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The day stretched on: their watch ended at six.

"What shall we do?" Bodie asked idly; he stretched and yawned, all of his joints clicking.

Near enough to notice, Doyle caught the scent of warm sweat; Bodie wore a white shirt, the cuffs of which were rolled up to his elbows, the brown leather of his holster softened and worn in places. The black magnum gleamed, however: Bodie was an army man and you did not take short cuts. "Get an early night, from the sound of you," Doyle growled.

"Need to eat."

"Takeaway?" Doyle suggested, reluctant to go back to the pub. *No more Sals, no more. All that's over.*

The thought came from nowhere; he felt more relief than anything. And then he knew it meant he was getting older, that soon he would be looking back on his youth. It took him by surprise: a chill ran through him, and then another.

“Getting a cold?” Bodie asked, innocuously enough but it caught Doyle right on the raw. He hunched his shoulders and snarled:

“For chrissake will you stop watching me all the fuckin’ time?”

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Bodie said nothing; after a moment he went into the bathroom.

Doyle took off his gun, viciously. He began to unbutton his shirt. A door slammed behind him and another opened.

“Where you going?” He whirled around to catch Bodie leaving, and Bodie looked back at him, a dark, enigmatic look.

“Thought I’d go out. Since you’re in one of your more charming moods.”

Doyle crossed the space between them in two bounds. “*Don’t.*” He took hold of the lapels of Bodie’s jacket in two hands, and Bodie looked down at them expressionless, not caught up with this.

“I know I’m hell to live with,” Doyle said. “Don’t give up on me.”

Two beats of silence; then it broke.

A quirk of humour gleamed from Bodie’s eye. “All right, Raymondo, you win a second chance.” He tapped Doyle’s cheek with a firm finger. “But that’s your lot.”

Making Bodie stay was easy enough. In fact, Doyle had the feeling that making Bodie do anything at all might not be difficult. He found the thought oddly disquieting.

They went down, in the end, to the second sitting of dinner in the hotel; not having prebooked they weren’t entirely welcome. But Miss Parrish, obviously remembering some heady, long-ago nights with a dashing young Cowley, bit down on disfavour and produced an unexpectedly good steak-and-kidney pudding. Fred waved from across the room, clearly disappointed to be on his caramel crème when they were only just starting the soup (oxtail).

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Back in the room, fed and full, Doyle cast a venomous glance at his R/T. “If Spuddy calls in with more sweet sympathy—”

“I’ll take it,” Bodie promised in a hurry; he put the television on. There was a match on, Spurs v. Liverpool in a third-round Cup tie, so they settled down to watch.

“Can you get a drink in this place?” Doyle muttered, feeling the evening’s thirst creep up on him. “Don’t you just bet Miss P ’as Saudi sympathies?”

Bodie made a face. “Yeh, bar’s as dry as a—virgin’s drawers—” He was reaching over to his Gladstone bag, rummaging; came the right way up, with a smug smile. “Fortunately, however—” and he produced a bottle of whisky with a triumphant flourish.

“Good thinkin’,” Doyle approved; but the strange mood of the evening was still upon him. The stuff slid on a smooth and fiery track down his throat; he shifted higher up the bed, leaned on the pillows with his glass in hand and watched the football, though he couldn’t have told you the score.

The little room was cosy, glowing pinkly again. Rain drummed unceasingly on the windowpanes and pattered on the roof; the cars swished by slickly on the wet roads. It was not a night to be out. Bodie lay on his back, on his comfortable bed with a rosy light beside it, contented enough, doing the *Guardian* crossword. He did quite a lot of it out loud, speculating and frowning and scribbling down anagrams.

““Pointers to someone’,” he read, ““without it’.”

““Aven’t got a clue.”

“Just gave you one. Too late. Person,” Bodie said with satisfaction, and his pen moved quickly and scratchily on the page.

Doyle’s eyes flicked from side to side, following the little stick footballers running and running this way and that while the voice of the crowd rose and fell in the background, and the excitable commentator squeaked on and on and on.

Finished, Bodie threw down the paper and the pen and stuffed his hands behind his head, surveying the tensely curved shoulders of his partner, the curls which lay on the collar of his white sweatshirt. Three coloured stripes banded the midriff; as usual Doyle wore brown leather boots tapping restlessly. Bodie considered him, lips pursed in thought.

Doyle was unsettled tonight; anxious, angry vibes filling the room. Bodie took another swallow of his whisky and downed insanity with it.

“Ray.”

“What.”

“Come here a minute.”

Bodie put out a hand. Doyle didn't turn his head, stared straight ahead at the TV screen.

"Ray. Come over here."

Doyle turned, his expression bleak, his eyes a cold and wintry grey. Bodie held his gaze steady, and his outstretched hand. After a moment Doyle tipped back his chin and drank off the beaker of whisky in three or four gulps. Then he set it aside and came over to the bed, perching his hip beside Bodie on the pillow, looking down into Bodie's face, seeing the trouble there, a reflection of his own.

Bodie's frown smoothed out, became instead a smile. His hand slid slowly up Doyle's arm, then curved around the back of his neck. Doyle closed his eyes as he allowed himself to be drawn down. *Maybe this is the answer, after all.* Bodie's mouth was gentle, nuzzling at his then settling, his tongue darting inside Doyle's lips. Little twinges of desire made up his mind for him: he turned within the circle of Bodie's arms, pressing a palm to Bodie's shoulder; and opened his mouth wholly to Bodie's kiss.

The comfort of it vanished as lust ignited in a blaze; Doyle's nerves rang with shock. Disturbed, he opened his eyes to see Bodie's face; unguarded. The vulnerability of it terrified Doyle unaccountably. He thrust himself away from Bodie, breathing hard; stood up and flung himself over to the window. Putting back the curtains he stared out, hard and angry and unseeing, and gave imperfect voice to his thoughts:

"I hate feeling like this," and it hurt him savagely, just as he knew it would have hurt Bodie. Even so, it only took Bodie a moment.

"Don't then, Doyle: simple as that," his voice arrogantly low, mocking, and furious.

"Simple!" Doyle jeered, one foot up on the radiator pipe as he rocked angrily and stared out to the night.

Bodie was angry too, swinging his feet off the bed and getting up in one fluid surge. "Yes it is, bloody simple: don't think I'm goin' to be beggin' to touch you again. You got a vicious streak, Doyle: people like you should carry a health warning."

Doyle winced, believing this only too readily, it being in perfect step with recent events. But he carried on, well-armed; his voice dangerously low, "You've changed your tune. I wasn't that far gone in the hospital, you know: Murph would've laughed himself sick if he'd come in a moment earlier—" Yet it hadn't been funny: Bodie, his eyes furious, desperate, burying his mouth in Doyle's hair—"Not to mention the little débâcle a few weeks before."

Bodie heard him out; he had gone quite white, his eyes blazed fire. "You were more than willing. But don't worry, *mate*." He was by the door, snatching up his leather jacket, dragging it on. "S'funny, innit. There I was, trying to work out a future for both of us. And now I find I'm on my own. Well, believe it or not, that makes it a hell of a lot easier."

“Don’t do anything stupid, Bodie,” Doyle warned, watching his partner with narrowed eyes.

Bodie was experiencing a curious lightheaded sensation, an overpowering relief: he could go anywhere, do anything, he was answerable to no-one. He no longer had to juggle Ray’s sensibilities with his own, struggle with dreams which refused to coincide: this was it. Ray, after due consideration, had scratched it out.

He turned for the door. “That’s sweet, coming from you,” he said coolly. ““Don’t give up on you’, didn’t you say so touchingly? But the trouble is, Ray, you’ve given up on yourself. And that’s too much for anyone to live with.”

The door slammed, rocketing a gust of cool air into the room.

Bodie would be back, no doubt; he wasn’t one to neglect his duty, not Bodie, and their next shift began at six. Doyle gazed out of the window with eyes that felt stretched open; a light was on in the embassy, just one, high up, and the streetlights cast a haloed orange glow on the wet pavements. Rain drizzled down endlessly onto the shining roads. The whole fabric of the house shook a little, and there was Bodie running crisply down the steps, hands shoved into his pockets, neck hunched against the rain.

No further thought was necessary; Doyle snatched up his jacket and ran, flying down the endless stairwell, grabbing open the frontdoor and slamming it shut; vaulting the rail as his jacket flew out behind him like leather wings, landing on the pavement and setting off at a run.

He could still see Bodie, just turning the corner. Running full pelt Doyle caught him up in no time at all. Bodie had turned once to see who was running; he faced forward again now, walking determinedly, head down against the driving rain.

Doyle grabbed at his arm. “Bodie.”

Bodie just looked at him stonily, as if he were a nightmare. Doyle’s heart lurched. Bodie was his mate, good for a laugh, a roustabout drinking session; but he had another face, one Doyle had sussed out the moment they met: he was dangerous, aggressive and chancy by nature, out on the edge just the way you had to be to be a leader in their underworld, not a victim. It was that face of Bodie Doyle was looking into now; the knife in his eyes.

After a moment Bodie removed his gaze from Doyle’s face and walked off. Doyle followed. “Bodie?”

“Fuck off, Doyle.”

He dragged on Bodie’s arm again, all his weight behind it, fully prepared to fight if he had to.

“Let me go,” Bodie ground out, coming to a halt.

“Can’t.”

Bodie’s eyes, haunted by devils, met his.

“*Christ, Ray,*” he said violently, “how much more do you expect me to take?”

Doyle didn’t answer that. A bunch of teenagers holding beer cans and larking about was approaching. Grabbing a handful of Doyle’s jacket Bodie pulled him into a dark alley, a yowling cat fleeing out from behind the dustbins, and manhandled Doyle against the wall, Doyle tense in his hands. But this was better: anything—anger, a fist in his guts—was better than that dreadful, indifferent walk away.

“What am I supposed to do?” Bodie asked with some kind of anguish twisting his face from the inside. “Stand still for all the filth you spit at me and come up all rosy smiles?” He added more quietly, eyes travelling all over Doyle’s battered face, “Look, I know you’ve been through a hard time lately. But whatever I do is wrong.”

“I know what I want now,” Doyle said, desperately.

Bodie stared back unsmilingly. “Yeah. And then what?”

They had something to lose, that was the trouble: not much, perhaps, a dodgy friendship at times. But no-one saw clearer than Doyle, just how risky this was going to be. Yet still he wanted it.

“It can’t be worse than this,” he said at last. Neither one thing nor the other...

“What are you trying to do, Doyle?” Bodie wanted to know, a spark of angry venom still there and feeding on itself, “Lead me on again? ’S probably quite funny, is it, from where you’re standing?” Doyle made a gesture of exasperation, grimacing down at the ground. “I know, you want me to say, ‘Let me toss you off, Ray, you’ll feel ever so much better’,” Bodie mimicked, flying out high on a line of anger, shocking Doyle and dragging his gaze up to Bodie again. “Poor duped fool, on his knees to you while you grant some obscene favour, and all in the name of therapy? Well, listen to this, mate,” and Doyle saw Bodie’s Adam’s apple move rapidly, heard his voice change, “I cried for you. So help me God, it fucking tore me up when I saw you there, like to die. And you make out it’s some sort of game. Well, I’ll play, Doyle. We’ll go back right now and play: you like it a bit wild, don’t you, a bit way out, and yeah, I’ll give you that. But don’t expect me to walk away laughing when you hit me in the guts afterwards with one of your charming little lines: *I hate feeling like this, Bodie,*” and he laughed savagely, a dangerous mockery shining in his eyes. “Plenty more where that came from, I reckon; you seem to have the bottom line in self-pity.”

Doyle’s head felt heavy with despair; Bodie would never, he knew, come closer to saying the forbidden than that. As for himself he seemed unable to say anything at all. Bodie looked at him intensely, and then looked closer.

“Oh Christ.” And Bodie’s arms went around him, pulled him close, cradled his head on one broad shoulder and rubbed his hair. “It’s all right, Ray. Don’t. It’s all right.”

After a while, Bodie’s hands slipped underneath his clothes and touched him, the shock of them cold on his warm skin, but gentle. Shivering, he let himself go with it: it was the only security there was left for him in the world. Bodie’s mouth settled against his, Bodie’s lips warm, both a comfort to him and a lure: again he felt that incredible, desperate diving inside his guts and wanted only more. He wrapped his arms around Bodie and gave himself up to the kiss, making a wild surrender of it, a challenge.

And when Bodie’s ceaseless hands asked a question, Doyle himself unbuckled his jeans, unzipped himself, desperate to be touched, and his eyes fell shut at the pleasure of it. A few moments more and Bodie half-laughed, half-sobbed into his ear, something incoherent; then he dropped to his knees in a stinking alley out beneath the stars and the cold and brought a little pleasure to Doyle, the first he had tasted for so long it seemed like the sweetest of his life.

Afterward Bodie held him roughly in his arms until his breathing slowed and his slumped legs straightened. Bodie’s own legs ached and he scanned right and left with his eyes, looking for passersby. Terraced houses slanted unrelentingly to the skyline behind them and in front; here and there a light shone out, but if anyone had seen the two dark figures in the narrow alley, Bodie doubted they’d have seen what they were doing. Or if they had, who cared? Probably not the first time.

Doyle’s eyes, open now, were trailing over his face hazily. “Come on,” Bodie said, not ungently. “Dunno about you but I’m cold.”

They walked quickly; the rain had slowed to a sprinkle and wisps of cloud, silver shining in drifting gauze. Doyle felt dazed and shivery, cold to the marrow. But excitement threaded through his veins fast and quick: he felt as if he was setting out on some tremendous adventure, his bearer at his side: all the dangerous romance he could want, and secret tender nights in the darkened tent to come.

Bodie walked just as he always did, hands in his pockets, brisk and sure, head down against the drizzle; he looked the same, showed no outward signs of what he had done. They passed the same group of drunken teenagers they had seen before: nearing midnight now, a six-pack of beer inside each of them, louchely aggressive and looking for a fight. Doyle watched Bodie handle them, putting down hecklers goodhumouredly, calm with the sheer assurance of being the best man there: which he undoubtedly was, no question of it. The teenagers went on without trouble, and they didn’t even need to know, Doyle thought wryly, that beneath the armpit of his partner reposed a high-calibre high velocity weapon; the sight of which would disperse all that group male conceit at a stroke—

“Bodie,” he said urgently.

Bodie looked at him in surprise. “You okay?”

“No.”

He felt confused, a weird elation, and still that excitement so intense it sickened him: coming sweetly, fiercely in Bodie’s mouth had not relaxed him, only fired him further: he felt he would never have enough.

“What is it?” Bodie asked him, closer, concern in his eyes. “Soaked, aren’t you.”

His curls hung limp and sodden and his face was wet. “Let’s get back,” he said through chattering teeth.

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In the room they put no lights on; a streetlamp already cast a glow. Doyle stood there, provocative, halfway between the bed and the bathroom.

“Shall I bath? Or stay dirty?”

Bodie surveyed him. “Oh, I think you’ll do as you are,” he said between clenched teeth, and he snatched Doyle, pressing them together hard as his lips slid around to Doyle’s ear. “I’m not going to let you sleep tonight: you know that, don’t you?”

Doyle was sweating, with a twinge of fear. Bodie seemed like a stranger, eyes and teeth gleaming in the half-light: and yet wasn’t that just what he had wanted?

Bodie’s breathing was fast as he held him; laying his fingers along Doyle’s cheek he turned his mouth up to kiss. His hands slid beneath Doyle’s jacket, undid the buttons of his shirt and slipped inside, the cold shock of his hands sending a shiver rippling across Doyle’s skin.

“Let’s go to bed,” Doyle managed.

“No hurry,” Bodie said; his hand cupped Doyle’s neck, his fingers stroking through a tangle of curls as he drew Doyle towards him again, lapped languidly at his lips, then drove his tongue arrogantly into Doyle’s mouth. So unlike a woman, the strength of the arms around him like chains to bind him and keep him: a delicious *tendresse* of fear ran up Doyle’s spine again as he tasted the alien tongue, his cock springing to life; he grabbed Bodie hard, kissing him back with urgency, with fire in his heart.

“Hey,” Bodie murmured, drawing away, “don’t rush,” and Doyle, drawing in great gulps of air, understood with a thrill which dizzied him: Bodie wanted to stay in charge, even (perhaps) knew all about the darkness in his soul.

Head bowed, he began to strip off his clothes. “You ever done this before, Bodie?”

“Of course I have,” Bodie said, lazily amused, eyes trailing over his body, “and don’t try

pretending you haven't, corruption's written all over you." His hand traced down Doyle's naked arm from his shoulder, over his narrow strong forearms to the slender hands releasing his cock from his jeans, the touch lingering. Bodie laid his fingers atop Doyle's for a moment, and watched him, and darkly smiled. "But it's a nice thought."

After a while Bodie threw off his last garment and joined Doyle on the bed; his partner lay there face up, eyes closed.

"So, Ray," he murmured in a voice so low and soft it stroked Doyle's nerves, "you want to play the virgin for me, is that right?"

It was so nearly true. Doyle simply said nothing, did not stir, lapped by a desire so strong he felt weak.

"Or is it Sleeping Beauty?" Bodie's voice caressed him quietly, gentle lips grazing the sensitive opening of his mouth as it quivered. "Oh yes, Ray, I think I know what you want, all right." And Bodie's tender mouth, all-knowing hands, absolved him of all blame, all guilt; and, submerged beneath a black sweep of pleasure so intense he could die for it, a spice of sweet tender pain.

When once he opened his eyes it was to see Bodie studying him through eyes that glittered through the blackest of lashes, an unnerving hunger, a curiosity which burned. After a moment Bodie smiled at him. Doyle saw that he was shaking; stabbed by swift tenderness, he raised his hand to touch Bodie's cheek, then his mouth, beautiful still; and held Bodie's look as long as he could, before the terrible pulses of ecstasy racked him, swept his whole body up and involved it so that even his fingertips felt it; and then, when all he wanted to do was sleep, Bodie was quick with him. He stayed with Bodie until he felt the brilliance of Bodie's desire for him explode, and then he fell asleep.

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When he awoke it was again to Bodie's eyes caressing him, lingering on his face.

"What time is it," Doyle croaked, limp and dazed with heavy, dreamless sleep.

"S only two. Sssh." Bodie stroked him, up and down, long and luxurious and Doyle relaxed under the touch and the eyes until he no longer felt sleepy at all.

He threw back the covers and leaned up on one elbow to look at Bodie, stealing a swift kiss from his lips.

"My turn now, is it?"

Bodie gave it scant consideration, before lying down, his hands uncurling at his sides. "Yeah, if that's what you want."

Doyle considered it for a while longer, while his hand searched slowly over Bodie's body.

"Come on, Ray," Bodie said. "You can take me all right, you're tougher than you look."

There was admiration in that, and something else.

"Yeah, but it worries you, doesn't it?" Doyle guessed.

Bodie sighed as Doyle's rubbing fingers found a sensitive spot. "What does?"

"Losing control."

"I reckon it worries everyone. Even you. But I—"

Doyle pounced on the pause. "—you what?"

Bodie opened his eyes and smiled, a peculiarly sweet smile. "—I trust you."

That and the smile stopped Doyle's breath, stabbed his heart. He said: "So you do. But, you know, I reckon—it just might not be your thing—" He arched an eyebrow at Bodie, waiting.

Bodie lay there, relaxed, unconcerned. "I'd do it for you."

"Yeah," Doyle said softly, "you would, wouldn't you?" And he moved, into Bodie's arms with a little arrogance, a little possessiveness which made Bodie smile.

"We've got time," Doyle said into his ear when another kiss was over. "No need to rush things. You said so yourself." His hands probed Bodie, pressing on the muscles beneath satin skin, the sharpness of bone; he had forgotten that Time was Bodie's *bête noire*.

"Did I?" Bodie said harshly: "Well, that was rash of me; now I'd say get on with it, Doyle, if I were you." Iron arms and legs locked around Doyle, pulled him downwards; Doyle resisted, fighting free, extricating himself finally and rubbing at his left arm where Bodie's grip had burned him.

"Jesus, Bodie," he spat, glaring. He knelt back on his heels, straddling his partner, breathing hard and ignoring the painful glow of abused skin. Bodie just laughed in his face.

"Hurt you, did I?" and his eyes flashed a mocking glint. "Sorry, mate. Just trying to get you going."

Doyle's stare was icy. "What the hell's got into you? I thought you'd be—"

Suicide. He knew it instantly, would have caught it back but Bodie leapt at it like a trickster snatching bullets out of the air: "Did you, Doyle? Should be happy, should I, now that you've so generously, given me everything? Perhaps I should be on my knees to you kissing your bloody

arse in gratitude—?” Then he grinned, a slow delightful smile which didn’t touch the burn of his eyes. “I suppose anything’s possible.”

Doyle sat back, dragging a hand across his lips, a bitter taste in his mouth. “I didn’t mean that and you know it.” But he lied.

“Oh, don’t give me that, Doyle,” Bodie drawled, looking up at him with amusement. “Don’t tell me you don’t think it’s everyone’s lifetime ambition to come on to you.” His hands settled onto Doyle’s hips, pinched him lightly.

Trying to work this through, Doyle battled his rising temper, his sense that all this was slipping out of his grasp. He placed a hand flat on Bodie’s broad chest. “If you wanna keep it just sex, Bodie... Safer that way. Keep your options open...”

Surprised, Bodie opened his eyes wide; he pursed his lips. Then he sighed, a warm gust Doyle felt like a caress on his naked skin, blowing his fears away.

“Ah, no Ray...” A charming, perverse smile lifted his features into pure, arrogant mischief. “I reckon I could make you happy, all right.”

And it was suddenly there again: Doyle breathed hard, and looked down at Bodie, and felt, after all, that they had slipped once more into that curious intimacy so intense there was room for nothing else. They had felt it before, out on the job together. Bodie lifted a hand to trace the curls around his face, taking infinite care, the drift of his fingers exquisite. “But as to time... remember old Marvell, bloody winged chariot and all. Shouldn’t hang about too much, old son.”

“Gather ye rosebuds?” Doyle asked, amused. Then thinking lewdly about it, “Sounds all right.” He ducked his head, kissed Bodie’s chest, tasted salt on each nipple. Bodie sighed, and pulled up the bedclothes around them: the bed smelt warm and sultry. A nice place to be on a cold November night. Leaning over Bodie’s warm skin, the yielding of his belly, the sweet pressure of his thigh: Doyle basked in it.

“This may be the longest night of our lives,” Bodie said into his ear; it jarred Doyle out of his pleasant driftings, and he was tired anyway.

“Certainly feels like it,” he snapped. Bodie’s silence was a speaking one. “Stop it, Bodie. Just bloody stop it, will you? Don’t be so bloody *Camille*. Okay, so you’ve got a touch of the shadows. Not been too ’appy lately. Me, neither. But it’s over now and it’s time to start looking past a funeral with full military honours, because I missed my chance. Geddit?” He paused, looked down deeply into Bodie’s eyes, darker than his own and wilder. “Nobody died, Bodie. *Nobody died.*”

“Not for want of tryin’,” Bodie drawled, with that bright edge of cheery insanity, and looking at the terrible wound on Doyle’s chest, tightly stretched and ridging as it healed: he touched it. Doyle let him, closing his eyes. “Don’t worry, Doyle; keep at it. You’ll make it one day.”

A shining rill of anger trickled through Doyle; but it ebbed when he saw Bodie's expression. "Ah, Bodie. What am I gonna do with you, hey?" he murmured, fierce with love and despair.

"Whatever you like," Bodie said, and there was suddenly so much warmth about him, so much attraction, that Doyle gave himself into it wholly and fled the dark with him, at least for a while.

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Bodie whistled in the shower; he seemed happy, though reading Bodie was never easy. Some people took Bodie as he appeared to be: a born fighter, somewhat mindless, a gleeful, malicious sense of humour like a boy. Not many saw, or cared to see, the twisted line of character which centred Bodie: it didn't matter, anyway. If there was something not quite safe about Bodie it was to CI5's advantage. Not to mention Bodie's lover. And the strength Doyle had feared, he found he worshipped.

Doyle was only too happy to follow Bodie way out, right out to the limits...

To the end.

He poked his head around the bathroom door to find Bodie shaving. Bodie winked at him and carried on, tracing the shaver around his jawline with concentrated care.

Doyle wandered back and checked with Todman, then with Cowley; the latter, he was told, was out of the office and unable to speak to him. Doyle wrinkled his brow and frowned and looked out of the window. A feeble sun was shining this morning. Bodie came into the room behind him and he didn't turn, only rested his head against the arm Bodie slung around him as he leaned to look out beside Doyle. Bodie smelt freshly of soap and manly scents; Doyle could feel the warmth of him beneath his shirt.

After a while he said, "Can you think of any reason the Cow wouldn't want to talk to us?"

"Yeah," Bodie drawled, and ruffled his hair, but Doyle remained pensive. "Operation bloody Susie," he said, remembering.

Bodie looked suddenly alert: "Do you think—?" Then relaxing, "Nah, Doyle, 's just your guilty conscience."

"I dunno," Doyle muttered.

"Oh all right, all right," Bodie said goodhumouredly. "I've always had me faith in you, ever since you picked that winner at Kempton Park." He knelt down on the floor and pulled out the bag containing their armoury.

Doyle's face twisted with an agonised grimace as the cruel memory surfaced. "I never bet on the bloody thing!"

Bodie's smile was smug as he ranged out their ammunition neatly, sorting it. "Yeah, I did though, didn't I?"

No need to remind him. "What did you do with the money?" Doyle asked sourly. "Fifty to one, wannit?"

"Look, Ray, you can't say I didn't treat you with the proceeds."

"Oh yeah, I remember. Nelly's caf—sausage sandwich—cup of tea and a digestive.

"Should back your own hunches, sunshine. Can't leave everything to me."

Doyle knelt beside him, helped him pack it so it was ready for instant use. His eyes flashed up, met Bodie's levelly. "I'm backin' this one."

"Ah, no need to worry," Bodie said easily. "Could fight off an army with this lot."

"How about Towser and Macklin?" Doyle suggested, and Bodie made a face.

"Now that's optimistic."

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The day passed. Nothing.

By the end of their watch the room began to close in on them.

"—and this is the Big Bopper," Bodie droned into the handset, "signin' off for today. After the pips—" Doyle blew the pips through his hand— "the airways are yours, boys." He held out the R/T for Doyle's final, flourishing pip: then thumbed it off.

"That's it for another action-packed day. But cheer up, sweetheart: word is they'll call us off tomorrow night. Before athlete's foot sets in." He rose and stretched, arms behind his head.

"Why does Cowley want Soo anyway?" Doyle idly asked.

Bodie shrugged. "Bit of third degree, no questions asked, I suppose."

"Sprat to catch a mackerel?"

"Yeah, I reckon."

"Been reading up on the political side," Doyle said distantly, "and it looks like Soo's about the worst choice the Council could have made, from our point of view, that is. Very traditionalist.

Goes right with the floggings in the street, no truck with these nasty corrupting Western ideas, sort of thing. Bet Cowley's intending a lecture on the virtues of reform."

"Maybe," Bodie shrugged. "But he's not payin' Soo's salary, is he? Only so much you can do to poke about in the way they choose to run their country."

"Does Cowley know that, though?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Ours not to reason why, Doyle."

Hearing the ring of unfinished poetry and waiting for the inevitable, Doyle regarded him grimly. Bodie chuckled despite himself and kissed him lightly, with the kind of presumptuous arrogance Doyle had expected to resent.

Instead he found himself holding onto Bodie and fighting thirstily for more of his kisses; his hands slid around him, under his armpits, and discovered the hard snub weapon, warmed by Bodie's heat. On a whim his fingers rubbed it gently, slid over it and held onto it as he thrust himself, hard, against Bodie's thigh.

When Bodie released him his eyes were bright with knowing, even with respect. "Randy old toad you are. Pretty, isn't it?"

In answer Doyle slipped the weapon out of its snug leather holster: it came smoothly, just as it should. His hand curled around it with the ease of familiarity—after all, his own was identical—and he cradled it between them, Bodie's thighs pressing against his own: he felt Bodie's unease, the tensing of his hands behind Doyle's back, but Bodie stayed with him, didn't move.

The smooth shining metal was warm to his touch, the black tunnel stared up at them with its one bold eye. Light smacked off it smartly; it glinted its arrogance. The ultimate symbol of power; anyone would bow to the one who held it.

Bodie's breath stirred his hair as lips slid around to his ear. "Safety on, is it?"

Doyle felt for it with his thumb and flicked it off. As he did so he felt his loins flood with obscene pleasure and excitement.

Bodie's eyes were wary now, his grasp on Doyle loose but sure. "Gonna kill us both, is that it?"

"So you keep on sayin'," Doyle replied, the lick of his tongue around his half-smile slow. "Might as well be now as 'ang around waitin' for it."

"Never could stand in a queue, could you, Doyle?" Bodie drawled; he was tensed with alarm, yet he held on. Doyle might be playing, he might be serious: he had the character for it either way. And Bodie did not care to take a chance on it.

"S true," Doyle said, pressing closer. Bodie could feel how hot he was, his body damp with

sweat beneath the thin shirt. “You’re so damn sure we’re gonna snuff it, Bonnie an’ Clyde and all that, why not cheat and go for it before it comes for us? Why not, Bodie, eh?” He jabbed the gun upwards and Bodie recoiled grimly.

“Just bloody watch it, will you, ’cos I’m not sure a hole in the jaw is the best way to go.”

“Then what is?” Doyle asked. He pressed the gun to Bodie’s belly, soft muscle ridging to hard as the snub barrel probed. “Here?” He trawled it upwards, settled it on a soft spot midway between the breastbone, over the pulsing heart. “Or here? Do the job all right, this range.” His eyes were shining: no doubts. No fear.

One second away from death Bodie acted, seized the weapon from Doyle and clicked the safety on as he jerked Doyle’s wrist hard, and held him harder, and thrust the gun straight for his genitals, caressing the outline of his cock with an arrogant sweep of the weapon: “How about here, since this is where all this is comin’ from?” Tenderly, lingering, he eyed the pale pinkness of his partner’s mouth, a part of Doyle which always featured in the occasional sweaty fantasy he had indulged himself with when longing had seemed a far step from reality: gently, carefully, he traced the Magnum around the sensuous curve of the mouth, then slipped it between lips which parted for it. “There, Ray,” he said, voice low, “it’s a substitute, innit? You suck on this—” he pressed it in a little deeper— “when what you really want is something else. Something that won’t blow away the back of your head when it goes off.” He smiled, a curve of arrogance. “Not quite, anyway.” And then he snatched the gun away, spun it in his hand.

Doyle tasted metal laced with corbomite and spat, wiping his mouth on his hand, glaring at Bodie. Bodie took him in two hands again, gentle but inexorable, a smooth course set in motion by Doyle’s perversity and unstoppable now. Doyle knew what was coming—indeed, he had courted it—and fear laced his high excitement; his heart knocked in his ears and he felt dizzy, his head ringing.

“Tastes nasty, eh?” Bodie whispered to him. “Let’s see if we can chase it away. Something sweeter—”

Doyle heard the rasp of a zipper; closed his eyes trembling; heard the dark whisper: “Come on, Ray. Kneel for me.” And, blind but sure, he knelt, knowing that Bodie would not disappoint him.

He felt the caress of it over his ear, and the cold kiss of it at his temple.

He said, muffled: “Keep it there.”

“Of course,” Bodie said above him, and smiled, and shut his eyes.

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In the night he woke, and found Bodie propped on one elbow, and watching him again by the moonlight which cast a path through unshaded glass. The room was silvery, Bodie’s face pale;

he met Doyle's wideopen eyes. Smiled: briefly, then the smile died; he resumed his brooding, self-absorbed stare at Doyle's body.

"A'right?" Doyle asked him, yawning. They were both rather short on sleep, and nights in a single bed were cramped. He lay back on the pillow and examined Bodie's face, stark and perfect in the pale purity of moonshine, his eyes darkened by shadows.

"You're beautiful, Ray, you know that?" Bodie asked, in a strangely detached, almost impersonal way.

Of all things... A gurgle arose in Doyle's throat. "You don't mean that."

But the silence, even the intensity of Bodie's gaze had something disturbing about it: the dark, melancholy sweep of Bodie's fears became monstrous, filled the room from within, beating on the window.

"Don't you want this?" Doyle asked quietly; he slipped his hands into Bodie's armpits for the delights of warmth, and silken hair damp to his touch: "Don't you, Bodie?"

Bodie stared at him, aloof, almost aristocratic, an expression Doyle would have laughed at outright under any other circumstances.

"Don't be bloody stupid."

Because love, when it turned this way, might free you from one kind of misery even as it enslaved you with others; but you could never, having once tasted it, spit it away in the wind.

"Bodie—I need you," Doyle said, panicking suddenly, snatching at time the way Bodie did. And Bodie smiled at him, a little quirk of his cheek as he touched Doyle's hand, lacing their fingers gently. "I know."

The comfort of it was immense; as he settled down to sleep again, near to Bodie, he knew they would be all right.

The were both of them complex, unpredictable, with stardrive needs born of the path they had taken; but together they would be all right.

Wherever he needed to go, Bodie would take him

He fell asleep.

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Bodie went down for breakfast, ate enormously, smiled sweetly at the waitress and at Fred, and returned to call Cowley.

The old man was unavailable.

Bodie shook his head. "I dunno, Doyle. 'S odd."

"That's what I've been sayin', innit?" Doyle began with painstaking earnestness, "I'm beginning to wonder—think we should confer with Spud 'n Dud?"

"Nah, they'll just take your head off," Bodie disagreed. "Listen, today's the deadline, right? Nothing happens today, we clear out, leaving, of course, a tip for the maid."

"Payin' our bill?" Doyle wondered.

Bodie gave it his best concentration. "Nah. She can send it on to Cowley."

Doyle was pushing past him as he spoke; Bodie tripped him, catching him and tipping him back in his arms, Doyle instantly arching perilously, tango-style. Bodie began to hum something Spanish. "We gotta stop meeting like this," Doyle breathed, a centimetre away.

"Yeah: this any better?" Bodie agreed, crossing his eyes and leering.

Doyle came up from the impossible position in a fluid move, and he was chuckling. Bodie sank onto the bed and watched him.

Bodie did not yet dare to believe in what had happened to them: it seemed safest not to look it in the eye lest it bang in his face and vanish. He was playing it by ear; Ray was difficult. Not easy to understand, disturbingly sexual: not, most definitely, an easy ride. Keep him guessing, that was the thing; keep him intrigued: look at the way Ray was looking at him now, interest and appreciation livening his eyes. Bodie blew him a kiss, and smiled.

He still had plenty of tricks up his sleeves; oh yes, Ray might surely think he was the last word in brilliant sexual eccentricity, but Bodie knew better, and more, and worse...

Then, when it was all passing, all that sexual rush and fury, perhaps they might find out what they really had going for them.

If they got that far, of course.

He caught Doyle's hand, and pulled him towards him. Noting the darkening shades of mood, Doyle said, "Now what?"

"Do you believe in premonition, Ray?" Bodie asked him, keeping him there with easy strength, holding onto his hand.

Looking straight into his eyes, Doyle said, "Yes, I suppose I do."

Bodie nudged his knee against Doyle's thigh, a new and precious intimacy. "Then take me seriously."

Doyle was quiet for a moment, staring down. Then he lifted his eyes and said lightly, "I know what's the trouble with you. Don't suppose you were too thrilled about the prospect of a new partner, just when you'd got me trained."

Bodie picked up his cue, "Yeah, took long enough—" but his heart wasn't in it and he continued, his voice dropping, "Listen, Ray—" and he saw the irritation flash into Doyle's eyes, his unwillingness to go over and over it. Bodie just said: "There's a little voice in my head keeps telling me this is borrowed time, Ray. That's all."

Doyle politely retrieved his hand, squatting by the bed. He began to stir around in the ammunition case, sticking clips into his pockets, sliding them into the tight back pocket of his jeans. Bodie squatted too, watching him very carefully, very seriously, eyes on the rounded curve of his partner's cheek. He raised his hand to shape a caress around it, light as a butterfly's wing. He said, consideringly: "I'd really hate, you know, to lose you. So soon."

Perfectly still, Doyle watched him, his eyes a stony grey. Bodie smiled at him, puffed out his cheeks and blew a straggling curl off his forehead, hummed a few bars of 'Waltzing Matilda'; then breaking off, grinning at Doyle's faraway expression. "Ah, don't look like that, Ray. Like your budgie died and you'd just bought a new tin of seed."

"What do you *want*, Bodie?" Doyle asked with a kind of desperation, brought up at last to stare Bodie's point in the face. "Set ourselves up in a little glass case or something and look out at the world?" Bodie was silent, his eyes dwelling on Doyle's face, eyes, mouth. After a moment Doyle remembered to speak again; he said, more gently, "We couldn't live that way, fella. Get bored in no time, we would."

"Can't do without this, is that it?" Angered now, Bodie reached out and flipped Doyle's gun. "Feel less of a man without it, do you? You could always take up killing birds."

A little stain of colour crept along Doyle's cheekbones: his head lifted and he stared Bodie in the eye. "Comin' from you, that's sweet. You got a licence in triplicate: didn't want to take any chances on losin' it, didja Bodie?"

But Bodie had already repented. "Ah don't, Ray. Don't let's fight. Okay, if that's what you want. We'll go on till Cowley retires us, gives us our old age pension and the CI5 gold watch for distinguished service in the field."

He winked at Doyle and got up, to ease cramping thighs. Doyle stayed there a moment longer, thinking. "Waltzin' Matilda, Matilda, my darlin'," Bodie sang quietly, looking out of the window.

"That's not the tune," Doyle said absently.

“Nah, it is,” Bodie said loftily. “Proper, original tune that is.”

Doyle looked up at him, momentarily diverted. “You’re up the chute, Bodie. It goes like this.” And he la-laed unselfconsciously.

Bodie made a face. “Too bloody Rolf Harris, mate. *This* is the original. As learnt in the Ozzie outback, in person.” And he resumed his performance.

Matilda, my darling. A strange sweet sinking filled Doyle’s belly, as he got up. He was thinking something quite ridiculous: that to be Bodie’s darling, to have the other man lay claim to him with just that endearment, might just be his own personal price. A price above nations, above rubies; above pride itself.

“Bodie.” He sprang up and over to where his partner leaned forward, hands on the sill. “Just had a thought.”

Bodie mimed shock, arrest, disbelief. “Come here.” His hand settled on Doyle’s forehead. “Take it easy now Ray, still comin’ is it?”

“How about this. Ask the Cow to be taken off Active. Too old, lost our bottle, got religion, whatever. Go into admin.—who knows, you might end up in Cowley’s spot, he’s gotta die some time, ’asn’t he? Or on the trainin’ side of things. You know—here’s the shooter, make-a-will-and-do-it-quick-sort of thing.”

Bodie stared at him, unsure how to take this. “You serious?” Doyle thought about it, lip caught between teeth, then he nodded.

“You’d do that?”

“Yeah, I reckon.”

“Right now?” Bodie said.

Doyle shook his head. “Ah, no. See this one out, eh? Safe enough ’ere even for you, innit? Go and practise your knots or somethin’.” And Bodie subsided to think it over; their whole lives on the brink of change.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when Doyle, his hands clasped moodily around a mug of coffee, spotted a limousine drawing up outside the embassy. “Bodie.” His hand went out, grabbed his partner’s sleeve. “Wha’?” Bodie applied himself to the binoculars. The door of the car opened and out got a tall man, flanked by two more. “Yeh, that’s ’im,” Bodie said economically, grabbing the R/T and tossing it to Doyle, who was checking his gun, swift and obsessive, stuffing it inside his jacket: “Better wake up the Spud. This is it mate.”

The fire-escape was a rickety iron contraption. They flew down it five steps at a time, Bodie addressing his R/T as he ran: “How long?”

“One minute,” the R/T said. *“Get to it, laddo, meet you there.”*

Action. Adrenalin pumped through Doyle’s veins, giving him a dizzying rush of fear and excitement; he steadied, as he always did, tasted the extra drive of it, the edge. The very air seemed stronger, keener around him, he felt alive and ready to go. This was more like it. Swiftly and unobtrusively he slipped around the rear of the small white building, gun drawn, dragging on a black hood—absolute anonymity, that was in the ground rules, but he momentarily hated it; and then he forgot it. Bodie, ex-Para, looked at home in his as he scudded around the side of the building at the identical moment to Doyle; he gestured to indicate that Todman and Flaherty were in position at the front— counting one, two, three— Doyle and Bodie charged the door, running, flying kick bashing it down. Immediately the piercing whine of an alarm sounded; they ignored it. If this was going to work at all it had to be fast: should be, Christ, they’d planned it often enough, exactly this strike-and-run scenario. They arrived in a pillared hall: empty. Looking up they could see a galleried landing with two, three doors opening onto it, very dangerous, had to watch it all the time. Keeping his eyes stretched wide Bodie motioned Doyle in front of him, up the stairs, covering every angle except the rear which was the job of their colleagues, no chance to check, just trust.

Doyle was right out there in the bloody front line, oh god the thoughtless courage of him. The alarm wailed mournfully. Doyle reached the top of the stairs. And at that moment a man burst out of one of the doors and centred the gun he held on Doyle.

Instantly Bodie killed him, steadying the gun carefully on his other hand: nerves did not affect him at all as he shot, not until he realised, as the man cartwheeled over the banister and thudded to the floor, just how close Doyle had come. His heart thudding and his guts diving Bodie was up the last four stairs in a flash, ejecting spent cartridges and slipping in others. “Cover me,” he said tersely. “I’m goin’ in.”

Doyle spat and wiped his mouth. “The fuck you are.” They had never, not since the first days of training, played it that way. Doyle, faster and smaller, had always gone in first, ably and expertly covered by his partner, the better long-range shot.

In that second, looking into Doyle’s dead, cold eyes, Bodie knew and understood that there were harder ways of losing Doyle than seeing him fall.

Eyes hard and bleak, he drew up his gun, gestured Doyle on his way.

Soo was there, in the first room, with the two men he had entered the building with. Both had guns drawn, both loosed off shots as Doyle burst in yelling and diving— “Freeze!”

The shots whined past and smacked into the doorjamb, over the head of the man rolling. Then there was Bodie, there behind him, the large Uzi up and ready.

For a moment no-one moved.

A smile crossed Bodie's lips. The worst was over: Doyle was alive, sitting up on the floor. "Come on, drop 'em. You can't argue with this, can you?" And he lifted the black heavy machine-gun, ready, despite the touch of humour to fire; resolute.

"Only sensible," Doyle added, catlike and watchful as he crouched on the floor. "He won't hesitate, you know, 'e got out of bed the wrong side."

With a gesture to his companions, Soo raised his hands. With a mutter, they dropped their guns.

Doyle darted in to pick them up. "Now you come nice an' quietly," he said to Soo, "No-one'll get hurt. Someone just wants a little chat with you, thass all."

"Maybe a cup of tea if you're lucky," Bodie chimed in poshly.

Doyle pursed his lips, sucked in his cheeks. "Ooh, that's pushin' it a bit. Thursday, innit?" And they were off, clattering down the stairs, Soo in front of them, cheerful in their satisfaction that the job had gone off well, no bloodshed, Mission (stage one) Accomplished.

No sign of Spud and Dud. Bodie thrust Soo none too gently into the rear of the Capri parked exactly where their fellow agents had promised; the man was wearing a dark overcoat, had a certain nobility to his darkeyed looks. He acquiesced to Bodie's manhandling with a kind of patience; it occurred to Bodie that almost certainly he thought he was being taken to his execution. So he winked at him and gave a grin. "Nothing to worry about. Like 'e said, just a talk."

"I don't spik your language," Amun Soo said coldly.

"This language—? Universal," Doyle told him, looking in the rear mirror, and they were off, gunning away from the kerb with a terrible screech of tyres. Bodie winced delicately. Thank god it wasn't his car!

Ten yards down the road was a blueshirted bobby. Doyle whistled, uncouth as ever. "Close, that."

"Nah, had a story ready," Bodie said unperturbed, as if explaining away the abduction of a diplomat from the sacred ground of an embassy with a submachine gun dangling from your arm was of small matter to a talented liar.

Doyle had the R/T out, driving with one hand on the wheel, using a prearranged code: "Baby's in the cradle. On our way to the nursery. ETA ten minutes."

"Message received and understood, Night-hawk."

Doyle chucked the handset over the back of the seat to Bodie. "Think we'll get our merit awards for this?"

“Nope,” Bodie said gloomily, “more likely a fulltime post in this department. Sometimes it doesn’t pay to be too good, y’know.” As he spoke he spotted a brown van, which he had also spotted in the last street.

Doyle was looking in the rear mirror. “There’s still a chance.”

“You spotted it,” Bodie said in admiration. “They don’t call you Nighthawk for nothing. Would you care for a little lie down?” This last politely, to Soo: a flash of blue eyes and he had pressed the man, gently enough, to the seat and covered him with a rug.

“Been with us since we started,” Doyle said on a note of surprise; because no-one should have got away from the Embassy in time to follow them, that was what Flaherty and Todman were there for. Speaking of whom— “I suppose it’s not our little friends, is it? You know how they love a party.”

“They got a Capri, haven’t they? Standard issue, innit?”

“Except 6.2. He got the 2CV.”

“Yeh, but that’s because he told Our Leader he was a cognac man.”

Doyle swerved down a side street without signalling then doubled back around the square. When the silver nose of the Capri slipped out onto the road again, they could see the brown rear of the van a hundred yards in front of them.

“That’s beautiful, mate,” Bodie said, impressed. A dark head could be seen poking out of the van’s rear window. “Look—” Bodie pulled Soo’s head up for a brief look— “That a friend of yours, sunshine?” He patted the head back down again, onto his lap.

The man looked up at him, cool and impassive. He had a certain aristocracy to his looks; Bodie was fleetingly reminded of Persian nobility, flying carpets and forty thieves. “I have no friends in this country.”

“I know the feeling,” Bodie said with a grimace. *Poor bugger, doesn’t look like a terrorist. Probably got a photo of his kids in his pocket.* “How long, Ray?” Still, an hour with

Cowley never killed anyone. Came pretty damn close at times, mind you. But that was only if you worked for him. This fella’d be back home by teatime, with a good story to tell— ABDUCTED by aliens! TAKEN in a strange craft! INTERROGATED by a small green Scot with a limp!—

Doyle’s voice cut into his lightening thoughts: “Ten minutes if we’re lucky. Fifteen if there’s bloody lights on the Finnieston Road again.”

“Who are you?” Soo asked suddenly; his dark eyes, open and big as pansies, had never left Bodie’s face.

Bodie looked down at him, saw the curl of his nostrils, the tint of his skin brushed by a brighter sun than ever shone here.

“Nobody,” he echoed softly. “Me and him—nobody at all.” And Amun Soo met his eyes for a moment in perfect understanding, for in the context of duty, he too was nobody; a cypher to be moved by his country at will.

Bodie was to remember this afterwards, when it became important to him to believe that the man understood, would not blame Bodie for what happened; but instead what lingered to haunt him was a sense of his own treachery. Quite unjustified. He no more than any of them knew what lay ahead as they travelled along the wide London road, eyes shaded against the dazzle of the low November sun.

The turned off the bypass at last, took narrow streets again. Doyle was giving the insect-dotted windscreen a blast with antifreeze, the wipers swishing this way and that; he was driving fast but not urgently. Postbox, petshop, fish and chippie. Into an industrial backwater, bodyshops littered with rusting tools. And here was the particular graveyard of abandoned vehicles they sought; Doyle turned in. As he did so, Bodie’s “Wait a minute!” clashed with his own curse: “Christ, Bodie! That’s not—”

Turning in behind them was the little brown van.

“If there’s anything you want to tell us,” Doyle said.

“—now might be a good time,” Bodie added, brighteyed. He was stashing ammo into a belt, sorting it fast and furious. But Soo looked merely blank.

“Was ’e behind?” Doyle said urgently, swinging their car along a covering line of vehicles, bumping up and down on the rough terrain.

“No, no chance,” Bodie said calmly. “No way both of us could have missed him.”

“Then someone somewhere’s a bit leaky.” He pulled the car to a scorching halt behind the disused garage offices. “Where the *hell* is the old man?” He pulled out his gun, checked it speedily.

Bodie gave him a slow smile beneath the burn of his eyes. “How does ‘not here’ sound to you?”

“Very likely,” Doyle said grimly, and thumped his hand onto the dashboard: “*Damnit!* You beginning to get the feeling we’ve been set up?”

“Or strung up.” Bodie glanced over at the van, a hundred yards away, from which two, three—too bloody many—brown figures were emerging.

Doyle cast him a swift glance, stuffing his pockets full of bullets, clips, the lot. “I take it all

back, 3.7, you're a bloody seer. *You* can pick the Kempton Park runner next time."

"Never works on anything good," Bodie said glumly. Time was running out on them. They dragged Soo out of the car and dashed around the back into the office. They could see, all around them, little brown-overalled men like crabs scuttling for cover, finding vantage points—

"Safe House," Doyle said viciously. He dropped to one knee behind a window, sighted his gun through it, grim and set and in a rage.

"These—are they your friends?" Soo asked, from where he lay on the floor, pushed there by Bodie and snarled at to stay.

"Nope. Are they yours?" Bodie asked grimly, busy.

"No."

"Party's not going to be much fun then, is it?" Bodie said with sweet, black temper, blue eyes gleaming and watchful, very very watchful as they darted all around, front, back, sides, front.

"Where the *hell* is Cowley?" Doyle exploded as they crawled onto the floor and examined the empty room for vantage points.

This seemed, at present, just about as dangerous as anything they had ever done. Bodie was deeply troubled, searching his mind for something, anything, which would get them out of here alive; but right now he just had this grim feeling they'd get no takers at all on life insurance. *Pity. Sorry, Auntie Sheila. Never mind. You'll like me African tusk thing.* "Too many bloody windows," he muttered, savagely thrusting the butt of his gun through the glass, recovering it and sighting it in through the hole: little brown spiders, scuttling. "We're going to get surrounded in here, Doyle."

Doyle snorted. "Thanks, Bodie. I hadn't noticed that." He was seething, breathing quite hard: but he forced himself to slow down, calm his nerves, set himself straight. "I don't like this. There's something wrong."

"Maybe we should just make our excuses and leave?"

"So where are Spud an' bloody Dud when we need 'em?"

Bodie didn't answer that. He was remembering Todman, taking up a position at the front of the building. And a whisk of flying blond hair as his partner circled the corner beyond.

And then—nothing.

"Yeah, I think we should be tryin' to make a run for it," Doyle decreed, watching like a hawk for the first move, for any move at all.

“That’s brilliant, mate. Trouble is, the Old Man wanted us here—”

“Old Man isn’t here himself. And I thought he was the Star Guest.”

“—other trouble is, I’ve got this feelin’ that now we’re ’ere, they may just fancy a quick game before we leave,” Bodie concluded with gritty fatalism.

Actually, something was happening, but not the quick explosive start they were tensed for. A man with a megaphone was approaching the ramshackle building, one arm raised.

“That’s brave,” Bodie muttered, raising his rifle an inch, “I wouldn’t like his job.”

“What makes you think we haven’t got it?” Doyle growled; his mind was working overtime on things he planned to say to Cowley when they got back.

“YOU KNOW WHAT WE’RE HERE FOR,” boomed out the megaphone. *“LEAVE IT AND GO AND THERE’LL BE NO TROUBLE.”*

Bodie looked down at Soo, and back up at Doyle. Soo made no pleas for his life, did not beg them to stay. “He doesn’t look like a terrorist, does ’e?” Bodie said softly, to his partner, and Doyle just shook his head, crouching on his haunches, whipcord thighs straining his tight and faded jeans.

“I think we should take it back where we found it.”

“Flying carpet?” Bodie suggested sarcastically, because clearly they wouldn’t even get as far as the road.

“In the Embassy, I was safe,” Soo said. “Many people worked hard to bring me there, where I might be protected. And you have undone all that.” He said it with no particular reproach, still calm, merely laying the facts before them.

“Who’s after you?” Doyle demanded, hard and direct.

Soo shrugged. “It could be many people...in my position, one has many enemies. Particularly now, when the election is due.”

“We’ve got to get him back there,” Doyle said. “It’s the only way to get a chance—”

“Oh brilliant, Doyle,” Bodie snapped, getting edgy. “I’ll just pop out and explain then, shall I?” Doyle was on the R/T now, picking up a crackle of static; he flipped it, banged it. “Still no back-up.”

“Trouble,” Bodie muttered; all of this had an increasingly nasty look to it, like something recovered from the back of the fridge. The man with the megaphone was retreating, at a run; obviously they had decided enough lip service had been paid to negotiation. “Well, if you’re

ready, mate, I think they are.”

And as the bangs and blasts began, Doyle said to Bodie: “You were right, you know. Let’s open a cafe together,” but he was never sure if Bodie had heard him, because by then they were in the thick of it.

=====|||=====

Soo died very early on, struck quickly and cleanly by a bullet in the head. The two CI5 men lasted quite a long time, scooping and pressing and aiming and firing, firing; the air was blue and the skies seemed to ring with noise. There was so much blood and confusion that Doyle could not decide, crawling hazily about the floor some time later, whether or not Bodie was dead; he was silent, marble-white, and his right hand appeared to be in bloody tatters. It didn’t seem to matter a great deal, since Doyle knew it was only a matter of time before they came in here and finished everyone off, himself included; he couldn’t shoot any more, too damn tired, something wrong in his chest.

Too many. Sorry, Bodie. He laid his head down next to the dark one of his mate. *Gave it our best shot.*

Only he had the feeling it had all been bloody futile.

=====|||=====

They met in the corridor outside Cowley’s office. It had been a long time, and each found the changes in the other unsettling, but then there were bound to be changes. Bodie looked fit but for the sling and bandage he wore on his right hand; he was thinner, grimmer. Doyle was quiet: still thin, still greyish. He would pick up, no doubt, in warmer weather.

By now, some three weeks after the trouble, they had each of them pieced it all together; and nothing they had learned predisposed them fondly towards Cowley. And so the interview began.

“You wanted him dead,” Doyle accused, eyes hard and stony, “so you set him up. Someone else kills him, and *you* come out of it smelling of roses.”

Cowley eyed his surly operative coldly. “The British Government wanted him dead, Doyle, and this way we’ve avoided any hint of an international incident. You know quite well if you’ve read the papers that any number of his own countrymen were out for his life before the election takes place. Now the party he represents will be, in all likelihood, overthrown and replaced by one—less *extreme* in its views. I tell you, the world’s a safer place today without him in it.”

“Who’s to judge that?” Doyle said, quiet, but in his eyes were depths of violence.

Cowley said: “I did, Doyle. I judged that.”

“Funny that,” Bodie said, stirring from where he leaned against the wall. “Then why do I feel as if his death’s on my conscience?”

“And mine.” Doyle’s gaze never left Cowley for an instant.

“Not only that,” Bodie said lightly, “but his death came rather expensive, wouldn’t you say?” The fingers of his one good hand tapped unceasingly on the wall. “At the price of Todman, for example. And nearly at the price of Doyle and me, as well.”

“You’ve forgotten something, Bodie,” Doyle said. “We’re expendable. In black and white on our contracts, that is.”

Cowley made a noise, an exclamation. He pushed his chair away from the desk and stood up, a small, irascible man who still had the power to chill his operatives with a glance, a word—even these two. He met their eyes unflinchingly, angry in his own right. “Ach, Doyle. You and Bright-Eyes there were meant to dump Soo and run. No-one said you had to hang around doing your Western Heroes act.”

“Yeh, but we wouldn’t have,” Bodie burst out, stung, “if we’d had back-up to cover us out, would we?”

That silenced them all for a moment, for these two, bruised and hurt and altered as they were, had at least come back. Todman hadn’t been so lucky. Killed by some bodyguard’s bullet before he ever left the Embassy, his term of duty with George Cowley finished before its time.

And theirs?

Cowley did not mention the future. Nor did they.

In the circumstances, an astonishing omission.

=====|||=====

Bodie turned right outside the grey anonymous building which housed CI5, head down, trudging along. Doyle kept up with him.

“Where you going?”

“Physio,” Bodie said. He did not look at Doyle.

Doyle asked because he had to: “You gonna be able to shoot with that thing?” Bodie’s hand was a mess, shattered horrifically in crossfire: ironic. They had delivered Soo to his execution, as per the (hush-hush) behest of Her Majesty’s Government who paid their salaries and required of them to ask no questions even in the dirtiest wars: if they had been knocked about a little in the

process, so what? They had done their job. Their wages were safe.

Bodie met his eyes then, and a chill swept across Doyle's skin, starting at his cheeks and travelling quickly downwards so that he felt drenched with cold all through. "Who knows?" Bodie shrugged: two words to dismiss his livelihood, his life.

Doyle opened his mouth to speak, but could not. Bodie was turning, about to go on his way; a separate entity now, encased in walls of grey solitude. Doyle could scarcely believe that once they had—

Shared something intolerably precious. Better to drift apart, now, like this, than go the way they had been falling.

Not because what they had was not strong enough.

"Shall I come?" he heard himself ask, a last shot in the dark.

But because it was, as Bodie had seen, too strong by far for either of them to survive the breaking of it.

Bodie was looking at him brusquely, ice in his eyes. "No, don't bother."

Better this way. He had seen Spud: ferociously dryeyed, burning up within. It was not comfortable to be near him.

He watched Bodie go on his way. Something was breaking inside him, but it was all for the best. Darkness was encroaching on the street; it was November, the evenings started early. Soon it would be Christmas, buses packed with shoppers, Santa everywhere you looked. He watched every step of Bodie's, but Bodie did not get very far along the pavement, his pace faltering, then bringing him to a halt.

He turned around, and faced Doyle. "Ray?"

Doyle could not answer, his throat choked.

"Come with me, will you?" Bodie asked, almost diffidently, and Doyle nodded. Wherever they had to go—

They would go together.

He began to run.

September 1991

Zeropanic

On Heat

Sebastian

A story whose first line is still enough to make me blush. I wanted to write something that was purely and simply erotic and a pleasant, erm, release from all the churning turmoil and emotion of the longer works I was immersed in at the time. One little thing of note: among my group, there was a feeling that my stories were miserable, depressing, unpleasant affairs (though I always maintained that this was not so and that I simply had the wrong readers). Kindly, well-meant advice was given me to the effect that I should shape up and make it much, much clearer that an ending was happy, if it was, and if it wasn't, maybe it should be. With that in mind, with my permission one of my friends added the last three lines to this story for me, hoping to save me from the sort of backlash which I sometimes got over Siren. I believe the post-scripiter was HG, a gifted and lyrical writer and a very good friend, and the story is the better for it.

=====|||=====

He knew he was going to jerk off that night. Idly watching TV, as he lounged on the settee, sleeves rolled up, shirt casually unbuttoned, there was a full, sweet ache in the pit of his stomach, and he was overly conscious of the press of tight denim over his groin. In this mood, failing some amenable feminine company, Doyle would contentedly make love to himself.

He didn't hurry. Tonight, he wanted it slow. Not that he didn't like it the other way -- a fast, hard beat in a tense, early morning sweat that would bring him off in seconds, send him out relaxed into the day -- but tonight, when there was no rush, no pressure, he wanted it slow.

And sweet. Oh, yeah, he knew how to make himself feel good. Better than anyone did. He had the advantage of years of careful exploration of his own body, experimenting with its response.

He switched off the telly, wandered around the flat checking locks, putting out lights, making sure the taps were turned off tight. The usual routine. His last visit was to the bathroom, and then he walked to the bedroom, bare feet padding on the thick carpet.

He stood before the mirror, rolling down the sleeves slowly, slipping free the last of the buttons. Then he pushed the shirt back off his shoulders, watching himself the whole time through dreamy, slitted eyes. His fingers moved to his belt, pulling the leather smoothly through the loop, unhitching the buckle, lifting the prong free of the hole so that the belt swung loose. He undid the stud of his jeans, then pushed the zip down, easing it over the gentle bulge of his sex, just far enough. He stayed that way for a while, eyes travelling over the dishevelled, half-dressed creature in the glass. He put one hand on his hip, running the fingers of the other through soft curls, posing languidly. Finally, with a lopsided grin at his own narcissism, he turned away and finished undressing.

Naked, he returned to the mirror, looking at the pleasing pale gold of his own skin, the changing shadows that shifted as he turned a little in the dim, glowing light. He stretched, thoroughly and luxuriously, so he could watch the taut clench and slow relaxation of every well-defined muscle. He stared into his own face, into the hazy, hungry green of his eyes, absorbed in himself; trailed soft fingertips down his cheek, making his nerves tingle with light, anticipatory thrills, drew them down his throat as he tipped up his chin. Down over the delicate bones of chest, sternum, to play in the soft dark hair there, gently at first, then pulling it up between finger and thumb, bringing twinges of pleasure/pain. His small, brown nipples stood out already, proud little peaks of flesh drawn tightly together in anticipation of his own touch. He slid his hand across his chest, over the ribs, into his armpit, palm gliding over the nipple, massaging gently, then withdrew his fingers from the warm dampness to touch it properly, the pads of his fingertips rubbing across the rough puckered skin. Felt good ... He drew in a little, sighing breath of pleasure, half shutting his eyes, raised a finger to his mouth, then drew it moistly around the other neglected breast. A fleeting regret that he could not mouth his own nipples touched him, but the idea itself excited him as his hand trailed on down over his belly, fingertip dipping in and out of his flat navel. Withdrawing, teasingly denying the upward arch of flesh, he rubbed a slow hand down each arm in turn, fingers curved to cup his shoulder, then sliding down over soft haired forearm, fingers closing around each wrist, gripping.

His gaze went down at last to the softly swelling penis between his thighs. Momentarily entranced by lewdness, he parted them wider, rolling his warm sex between his palms, but that suited his mood only briefly, and he returned to dreamy sensuality, slowing the pace, watching his spread fingers glide over the down of his inner thighs, the other hand rubbing over hip and sliding behind to move open palmed over the curve of his hard muscled buttocks, fingers parting to search for and find the secret place between.

It was not a caress he usually used in his autoeroticism, and he wasn't sure why he did it now, but the thrill of pleasure he felt as his fingertip touched the entrance to his body urged him to continue, to explore this almost untasted facet of his sexuality more thoroughly tonight. His heart was quickening, picking up speed, his cock arching upright now, pointing arrow-straight up his belly, demanding attention with an arrogance he could no longer ignore.

"I love you," he said to his drooping lashed reflection, softly.

He liked to hear the words: words turned him on.

The pace of things had changed, grown more urgent. Voyeuristic still, he tilted the mirror slightly so he could continue to watch himself, and threw himself down on the bed.

Ah, yeah ... Christ, it felt so good. He sighed, head tossing to one side, open eyed, and the mirror slanted his reflection back at him. His hand slid down, took hold of himself with easy familiarity, squeezing the distended shaft of flesh -- so warm and good, so delightfully responsive to his own sure touch. He let his thighs fall apart so he could see his testes. Watching it always made it more exciting. He wished someone else was watching him, too -- Bodie, closest to his heart, flashed into his mind. If Doyle got so aroused watching this pleasuring of himself, maybe Bodie would, too. The sudden thought of Bodie excited him further. He half closed his eyes so he could watch the mental image as well as the real one, visualising Bodie naked, Bodie doing this. Maybe Bodie was doing this, now, lying on his own bed with his own knees apart, tossing himself off, rubbing his own heavy sex with the same self-knowing awareness of what made himself feel good ... maybe they could watch one another, do it together ...

Beyond now the inhibition and the automatic decency he would have retained had this not been a very solitary, private act, designed for himself alone, the wild image was exciting him beyond belief. He was panting quite hard, now, half lifting his head so he could watch the movement of his hand. He was getting -- oh, so close -- have to slow down ...

With a supreme act of will, eyes gritted shut, he took his hand away, slipping back immediately from the peak. He stretched his legs out, toes curling unconsciously, clenching the muscles in his thighs. He looked down at himself, the big, rosy headed cock resting, unfilled, on his belly. He ran a gentle finger over the moist tip, collected a trace of slippery dampness and brought it to his mouth to taste, touching it with the delicate point of his tongue, then rubbing the salty moisture the full curve of his lips in a sensuous, slow sweep, he liked his own taste. It aroused him, and again Bodie slid into his mind -- how would Bodie taste? Like this? They could try it, see if they could tell themselves apart, on each other's fingers, or lips ... Would Bodie dare? Oh, God, so bloody arousing ... Caught in an ecstatic, painful stasis where he dared not continue with the usual rhythmic caressings his body pleaded for, he held still, trembling, his mind racing with fevered images of Bodie's lips and tongue on him, while his fingertip traced an almost unbearable stimulation beneath his foreskin, barely touching, sliding over the slippery moisture, scraping so delicately the rich nerve ends of his glans, shockingly thrilling sensations coursing through him, sensations very close to pain...

"Oh, yeah," he whispered, head turning on the pillow, eyes shut now. "Suck me, Bodie ... Lick me there -- oh, yeah, just there..."

His flicking fingers masqueraded as Bodie's imaginary tongue, and this time he nearly lost control altogether, the tide rising in a seemingly unstoppable surge. But he was an expert at this, master of his own pleasure, and again he regained control, breathing hard.

Calm down, lover, you got all night.

Needing a slower, less direct touch, his other hand reached beneath to fondle his testicles,

rolling them gently in the delicate rough/soft sac. Holding his breath, his middle finger probed further, stroking the sensitive skin there -- then he shifted, pushing it even further back to graze over the tight knot of flesh.

His heart was pounding, really racing. Uninhibited enough since childhood, when he had explored his own body thoroughly, without shame, learning freely what gave him pleasure, somehow he had never bothered much with this, not needing it, and it was quite awkward to do - - but tonight --

He still didn't need it. But somehow he wanted to try it, desperately intrigued by the idea, by the tingling thrill that had shot through him when he had touched himself tentatively this way...

Unalarmed by the picture he must present, for there was only the mirror to see, and that, too, became blind if he shut his own eyes, he drew his knees, up, lifted his hips a little, and pressed the finger to his sphincter, his balls pushing warmly against his wrist, a soft, sweet contact.

He just touched himself there, eyes tightly screwed up, trying to accept the sensation, fingertip barely brushing the sensitive, tightly clenched opening.

Come on, Doyle, don't be so bloody coy. Ease up...

Too tense -- tight--

Exciting, though -- forbidden, wicked -- he rocked gently against his probing finger, imagining it was --

Bodie --

Bodie, touching him with such intimacy, gently pushing into him --

As he was pushing gently into his own body, slowly gaining entrance, sliding through the tight ring of muscle closing tight on the intruder, expelling it, taking it in again, through to the smooth, soft walled channel -- oh, Jesus, yeah, it felt good --

"Fuck me, Bodie," he whispered, scarcely conscious of what he was saying, just knowing it was firing him on, giving him so much delight, so much sweetness. "Fuck me, screw me, do it to me ..."

"Fuck me --"

Bodie, taking him, pressing that heavy cock deep inside him, as far as he could reach ... so good he was helpless, delirious with flooding pleasure. Make it last? No way, and as Bodie joined them, made them one, his free hand grasped himself and, pressing down, he spurted milky bouts of ecstasy over his gripping, unconscious fingers as his mouth turned and searched blindly for the lips that were not there, never had been, never could be...

He lay without thought, chest rising and falling, one hand flung up over his eyes, heartbeat pounding in his ears. The receding ecstasy fled like a dream.

For that was all it was.

Doyle was prosaic about his sexual fantasies. They didn't trouble him with guilt, nor soul searching. He'd tried it all in his secret world, and forgot it after. That particular fantasy was among those he wasn't sure he wanted to come true. One could summon perfection more reliably in one's daydreams, while reality had an immutable will of its own. He simply lay there for a while, idly dreaming, one hand propped behind his head, the other playing lazily in the stickiness on his belly, finding his own moisture pleasing to every sense, drawing fingertip circles in it, twining a slippery curl of damp pubic hair around one forefinger. Yeah, that had been good. Something else. Totally relaxed, all the tension drained from him, he felt too lazy to get up and wash. In a moment ...

He could see himself in the mirror, an abandoned, wanton sight, lazily sprawled across the bed. His eyes rose to his face, and caught a dreamy, cat-like languor there, which dissolved into a cynical, white-toothed grin, amused at his own sensuality. You're a little animal, Doyle ... no holds barred when it comes to making it with yourself, are there? Never guess it to look at you...Imagine Cowley if he could see you now. Or a woman. Or his partner. Change their whole view of you, it would. Never look you in the eye again.

But maybe everyone had the same, secret lives, did the same things in the privacy of their own beds. Yeah, course they did. Even Bodie?

Bodie, again ... Bodie kept intruding into his thoughts, tonight. No, intruding was the wrong word. Doyle welcomed him there. He had a lot to be grateful to Bodie for. Bodie stayed constant; and he was, Doyle knew, loyal to his partner above all else. That little lonely corner in his mind - the one he supposed everyone had -- had been filled for good when Bodie came along. Something about himself -- Doyle didn't know what -- appealed to the big ex-army man, brought out his protective instincts; his admiration, too. Bodie was an accepted part of his life, now, and if Doyle were in trouble, Bodie'd be the person he'd turn to; they were very close. Nice, that.

He smiled to himself, hand sliding up and down his shaft; without having realised it, he was hardening again. Demanding little monster, he thought, looking down at himself with some fondness; so it's twice tonight you want it, is it? Not had enough yet, eh?

His hand made slow, rhythmic movements, the urgency gone, but the desire for pleasure rising anew under the subtle, slick rubbing; his mind wandering.

There was a sudden noise.

His brows narrowed into a frown, Doyle listened, his hand stilling.

The click of a door. Only one person had a key to his flat.

"Doyle?"

A far-off shout, in a familiar voice.

Panic arrived; then inexplicably, passed, unmourned.

Doyle slid into a crazy overdrive. He didn't move.

"Doyle? You in 'ere? Shout if you've got someone with you --"

Oh, very subtle, Bodie. Doyle smiled. Something had taken him over, sent him into a state of devilish unconcern. He simply lay, and waited.

The bedroom door was flung wide. Bodie appeared. He looked annoyed.

"Why the bloody hell didn't you answer? Or were you asleep?"

Then he looked at Doyle. Really looked at him.

Doyle enjoyed the dawning bolt of comprehension that froze Bodie's face. He tipped his head back, naked, unashamed, one hand lazily stroking himself.

"What are you doing?" Bodie said, eyes wide with disbelief, voice strange.

"What's it look like?" answered Doyle. "'S fun. Come and join in."

Bodie was really in shock. Doyle's world had been dreamy and sensual for an hour now; Bodie was still mentally way behind, having only just come in from the streets, his thoughts on routine things.

Bodie was very still, his face frozen, his eyes dark in the dim light of the bedroom. Doyle watched the quick rise and fall of his blackclad chest beneath the ochre leather jacket. He was hardly breathing, himself. Something had begun to stir in him, quite unrelated to the musky cloud of heat still dazing his senses; a dim awareness of something horrific, but he ignored it for now, still on a rising high.

"Bodie?" he said, very low, husky, and held out a hand. "Please ..."

With an unexpected movement, Bodie whirled, and was gone, slamming the door behind him with vehement force.

Doyle shut his eyes, for no more than the barest second. A quick, neat roll, feet touched the ground, and he was off after his partner like a lick of lightening, wrenching the bathrobe off the door on the way with such violence that the cotton loop ripped with a tearing, jagged sound. He didn't notice.

He caught up with Bodie in the hall, his mate about to powerhouse it through the front door, rigid shouldered. "Wait," said Doyle through gritted teeth. "Just wait."

Instinctively, he grabbed Bodie's arm. Slowly, Bodie looked down at it. Doyle was horribly conscious of his own nakedness, bare feet planted apart, the hopeful, awkward erection still protruding upward in a ridiculous attitude of selfseeking amorality, totally behind the run of things. Doyle shuddered and dropped his hand, began to shrug the white towelling robe on. He held Bodie's gaze steadily all the while, though he had flushed, high colour staining his skin, the heat coursing through him now of a very different tenor. Fingers that shook a little sought deftness as he tied his belt firmly, covering himself with finality.

"Stay and talk."

Bodie just looked at him, not quite meeting his eyes now, remote and very pale.

"Just talk," repeated Doyle, and when there was no reply, his own patience snapped. "For godsake, Bodie! You're not the only one embarrassed around 'ere, or 'adn't you noticed!" He slammed a fist into the wall and, turning, buried his head on his arm.

After a moment of watching the slouched, dejected figure propped against the wall, Bodie's hand left the door. He crossed to Doyle and took his shoulder, turned him.

Doyle met his eyes, mutinous, angry, and embarrassed.

Bodie's lips quirked into a little smile. "What a relief."

"What is?"

"Thought you were bloody cryin'."

Belying the forced levity, hard nails dug into off white toweling, into the thinly fleshed bone beneath. Then, slowly, Bodie let him go.

Doyle didn't smile in return, though he was conscious of relief. Now, Bodie would stay. "Go and pour us a drink, eh, sunshine? Reckon we need one. Just give me a minute, okay?" he said awkwardly, one hand rising to brush through his hair in a nervous gesture, until Bodie dropped his eyes, and nodded.

In the bathroom, breathing hard, Doyle shut the door and leaned against it for a moment. Then, opening his eyes, he stared into the mirror, saw his own slightly flushed face, wide, darkly pupilled eyes -- and was hit by a shocking rush of recognition. It seemed so far off, now, that wanton self-flaunting, that uninhibited flung-limbed performance reflected back to his greedy eyes.

It had seemed so natural, so delightful to give into his body's every whim, at the time.

Now, Doyle actually winced in self-disgust, watching his face twist into an involuntary attitude of embarrassed disbelief. He shivered, too, feeling his insides curl into a nervous knot of shame and near hysteria -- whatever mad devilment had taken him over, to behave so in Bodie's presence?

In a sudden orgy of self-dislike, he wrenched on the taps in a flood and swathed his hot face and sticky genitals in a rush of freezing cold water, submerging himself in a flurry of icy reality.

Whatever had he done ...?

So unfair to Bodie ...

Bodie, who had asked no part in his fantasies, let alone been prepared to be involved in them for real.

Christ almighty, what a thing to do to someone.

He dried himself angrily, dragging a rough spiked towel over tender flesh in unconscious, vicious self-castigation for the needs he had not even tried to control, not even when sheer moral expediency, not to mention courtesy, should have intervened and imposed its own limits.

Pulling on fresh clothes in haste, his lips curled as he bitterly recalled his earlier, smug musings on his own lack of inhibition. Then he had been almost proud -- 'Look, Freud, no hangups' -- but now, he saw it as it truly was: an amoral, self-willed, self-centred determination to be good to himself, at the expense of anything, to have what he must have at all costs.

And Bodie had had to be caught up in the middle of it.

Raymond Doyle faced himself in the mirror of his own soul, and disliked what he saw.

He set his teeth, because Bodie had stayed, and if Bodie had that courage then he, too, must find it and equal it. Dressed in clean, fresh clothing from head to toe, he went out to face the results of his own callous selfishness without default.

Bodie tensed at his entry, but didn't look up.

"Drink's there, mate," he said, in a voice one would have called normal. "You're runnin' a bit low, looks about time for the trolley run to Oddbins."

It took Doyle a moment even to take in what Bodie meant, but Bodie indicated the nearly empty bottle, and he latched suddenly on to comprehension.

"Hmmm ..." Doyle dropped to his haunches, grateful for something to do, and for Bodie's graceful beginning. He began looking through the dusty cupboard. "Nother bottle, see," he said, extracting one from behind the ranks of Drambuie, cherry brandy, creme de menthe -- squat relics with lopsided labels from foreign holidays, rarely touched, the screw lid of each thickly

encrusted with a crystalline sugary deposit. Not knowing what to do with the Johnny Walker now he'd got it, he held it awkwardly, weighing it in his hand, then he set it down on the table.

Bodie raised an eyebrow ... "if we get through that lot, there's gonna be two Cowleys glarin' out at us from over his desk tomorrow morning." That was Bodie, all right. Doyle felt a slight backing off in the tension between them.

It returned with equal force when he moved toward Bodie, who was sitting in his usual place at one end of Doyle's corduroy and chrome couch, the usual space beside him left for Doyle.

He couldn't do it. Not now, not tonight. Maybe never again. He was conscious of Bodie's quizzical eye on him as he swerved off at the last moment, dropped to occupy one of the armchairs. Not exactly subtle. But then, Bodie could hardly be surprised by unsubtlety, not any more.

Damn, damn, damn. One moment of idiocy measurable in seconds, to ruin five years of carefully worked on friendship? He shut his eyes, took a long swallow of his drink, knowing that Bodie, curious, was still studying him, but needing the time to think. Now everything between them would be altered by constraint. It would leap into being every time they were alone together, like now, so that he was afraid to sit near him lest the chance touch of thigh on thigh should lead Bodie to remember. In the car, on stakeout, he would have to be wary of every fleeting physical contact -- Bodie always polite, always reserved, always awkward -- His eyes flashed open, stared straight ahead, past Bodie's unreadable face.

No. It needn't be like that. They'd get over it. He was over reacting; it was still too close, the pounding symptoms of anxiety still with him, his skin burning. That would fade, and surely, with it his constraint.

Looking at those wide open, considering eyes, robbed of all their lucid colour by the dim light, Bodie wondered what to do. His eyes drifted over Doyle, recording the off note in his dress: dark shirt with pale green trousers. That, alone, convinced Bodie that Doyle was severely off key. His style of clothes might look casual, but was in fact carefully planned. Lapses in couture such as this one were unknown. In short, *he* might be embarrassed, but Doyle must be mortified. And Doyle mattered too much to be lost, left behind. It had happened too often to Bodie before. This one, this mate of all those he had ever had, male or female -- this one, Bodie was concerned to keep.

Coming to a decision, Bodie jumped to his feet and went for the hi-fi. The unwavering, distant line of Doyle's gaze jumped, startled, and followed him.

"Got anything new?" asked Bodie, deliberately casual, with his back to him as he crouched by the smoky plastic cabinet.

"Turandot," said Doyle, and grinned, unexpectedly and unseen. The gulped whisky was settling down well, coiling warm, soothing fronds of fire around his nervy guts.

Bodie made a sound of displeasure. "Can't stick that Paraguayan stuff."

"It's not --" began Doyle, and subsided. Bodie knew that as well as he did. Liked to play the fool, did Bodie. Act stupider than he was.

But Bodie wasn't stupid, not at all.

Doyle's gaze dwelt on the broad shoulders, the dark head awkwardly twisted, a squint of concentration screwing up his face as he scanned the record sleeve.

"Dire Straits," Doyle said.

"Ah, c'mon, it's not that bad," came the deliberately cross purposed reply, sending shivers down Doyle's spine. Bodie found the requested disc, then, and flipped it out of its sleeve, flicking it one handed onto the turntable and setting the needle.

It was low and melodic enough to ignore.

"Why did you come here tonight?" asked Doyle suddenly, as Bodie meticulously propped dust sleeve and cover together against the wall.

Bodie looked up, then, and met his eyes unafraid. Now, as never before, they needed trust.

"Dunno," he admitted. "At a loose end ... Thought you might wanna go for a drink, something like that."

Doyle checked his watch. "'S after closing hours, for godsake."

Bodie shrugged. "Okay, then, so I came to raid your personal bar."

The tension was back again. It showed in the way they watched each other, and in the things they did not say.

Finally, Doyle gave a rueful smile, looked away. Bodie was not being honest with him. Maybe it was up to him to make the first move. "Wish you'd knocked first ..."

And there it was out in the open, up for discussion. He waited.

"I'll know better," Bodie said expressionlessly, "next time, won't I?"

Head whipping around, Doyle's gaze transfixed him. "I meant for your sake. Not mine," he said, very low, very steady.

The reply was unexpected.

"I know that."

Doyle stared at him. Bodie rose to his feet. Amazingly, he extended a hand. "C'mon."

Doyle looked up at him; saw his mate standing there, head cocked to one side, a half smile on his lips and one hand held out, open palmed. "C'mon," Bodie said, again, reasonable, lightly affectionate, "you don't sit there." He took Doyle's arm and pulled him up. "Not your place." He led them to the settee and settled them together.

"*This* is," he said, and slung his arm around Doyle's shoulders in the careless, sexfree embrace that was the hallmark of Bodie's attitude toward him. "Here's your drink," he said, leaning forward without releasing him. "Get it down you; tense as a tickflea, you are."

Unresisting at last, because Bodie seemed to know what to do, Doyle let his head fall sideways onto Bodie's offered shoulder, inhaling the scent of warm leather and Bodie. He could pick Bodie out in a crowd by scent alone. Nothing to do with the strength of it, just that it was a familiar part of his life. It gave him, in an odd way, a sense of security from day to day.

"You've forgiven me, then," he said, eyes shut.

"Nothing to forgive, sunshine, *unless* you're dribbling on me jacket," Bodie amended with severity.

"Don't dribble," said Doyle, affronted, feeling something very warm, very comforting beginning to sweep through him that had nothing at all to do with the whisky. He gazed up at the side of Bodie's face.

"Fell asleep on me once. Still got the marks to prove it," said Bodie, and ducked Doyle's blow of indignation, laughing. At Doyle's insistence, they searched for the mark without success, up and down Bodie's sleeve, on his lapels, using the ridiculous excuse to regain the intimacy that looked casual, but which was, in fact, the precious byproduct of five years' partnership. Finally, Bodie pushed him away, breathless and chuckling. "Geddoff, Doyle, now I come to think of it, I reckon I 'ad it cleaned since." He threw a hand to his chest and declaimed, dramatically, "Out! damned spot --"

Doyle's deep, earthy chuckles slowly subsided. He sat there quietly for a moment, turning his glass in his fingers.

"Bodie," he said, turning his head to stare unseeing at the window.

"Yeah." Bode ran a hand through his dark hair, restoring it to something like smoothness with a brisk stroking movement of his fingers.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't keep saying that. I told you, nothing to forgive," said Bodie with determined calm.

Doyle's hand shot out, gripped his wrist. "No. I embarrassed you," he said tightly. He was glad the lights were dim.

"I can take worse things than a red face, Doyle."

"You didn't take it. You took off like a bloody sole on an oilslick, and I don't fuckin' well blame you," Doyle said bitterly, pulling away from the diffuse comfort of Bodie's arm. "It was disgusting. Just, I dunno, a hell of a shock."

There was a little silence. Doyle had his eyes open, staring at nothing, the glass forgotten in his hand tilted a little to one side. Bodie watched the aloof, unflawed profile, the down curling lashes wavering slightly as Doyle breathed, too quietly.

"Why didn't you call out?" he asked curiously, since it seemed Doyle wanted the penance of flaying honesty, "or get into bed?"

There was no reply for a moment. Then, Doyle said, face still averted, "I didn't want to."

The softly spoken phrase slunk into the near darkness like danger stealing on sleepers unaware. Stricken, Bodie said nothing.

Doyle gazed angrily down into his lap. He set the glass down on the table with a nerve jumping clink. "You know how it is. You get hot, all in a haze, and you, you know, it's like you lose the sense of what's right an' what isn't, and I was thinking about you, and --"

Bodie's sudden sharp enquiry drew Doyle's gaze. "You were what?"

Oh, fuck it. Bloody wonderful thing to say.

He could read nothing in Bodie's face, its proud lines unsoftened now, like staring at the Sphinx through sunglasses, eyes under dark brows unlit.

"Okay," he conceded belligerently, "so I was thinkin' about you. S'not a crime, is it?" He sat hunched up, elbows pressing painfully into his knees, chin sunk into his cupped hands as he stared mulishly ahead.

"Why were you thinking of me?"

Doyle shrugged. "I dunno. Just was."

He felt a hand on his shoulder, but he wouldn't turn.

"Fancy me, then, do you?" Bodie, trying for lightness -- failing.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, maybe I do." Then he did turn, a hint of challenge in his eyes as he stared at Bodie.

Bodie let out a long breath, curious eyes searching Doyle's face. Doyle lifted his head with a kind of defiant pride.

"Learned a lot about me tonight, 'aven't you? Shocked, eh, Bodie?" He grinned, perfectly humourless.

Abruptly, Bodie looked away. "You should have told me before."

"Why?" said Doyle harshly, unaccountably annoyed by this. "Don't feel you have to tell me all *your* secret turnons, do you?"

"No," said Bodie, "but maybe I would have done if you had." His eyes met Doyle's again.

Irritated and uncomprehending, Doyle just glared at him.

Until it struck home.

Comprehension dawned, widening his eyes, picking up the speed of his heart.

"You --"

Bodie just looked at him, his face totally closed.

"Then, why didn't you --"

"The same reason you didn't," Bodie interrupted, "I suppose."

It was very late at night. Too much to take in. It was as if it wasn't happening, not to him: viewed on screen, perhaps, or in the limitless vision of one's own mind, prompted by wild what-ifs. Lightheaded, he turned to Bodie, to see what Bodie would do next. Thus, with no preconception, he waited.

Fool, he thought, as Bodie's hands seized his shoulders, I should have guessed. Should have known he wanted this, if I did.

But it was not all like his fantasies.

For if it was all happening to someone else, then no wonder Bodie, too, was a different person (the affectionate mate he knew lost behind what was happening to them). Bodie was hard, solid against him, breathing roughly and heavily, eyes jet hard as his mouth descended savagely on Doyle's. He seemed driven by some inner frenzy, uncommunicated to Doyle. Dazed by the assault and even, strangely, aroused by it, he lay passively under the demands of Bodie's hunger.

Not like this ... couldn't be happening ... must be dreaming ...

Reality slammed life through his limp form when Bodie, having torn away clothes, woke Doyle to the unequivocal realisation that this was his partner, his best friend, that they were both half naked, and that he was within half an inch of being raped.

Lightening reflexes sprang into force. He rolled, and Bodie was gone, thumping to the floor beside him. Doyle jumped him, straddled his thighs, pinioned his wrists with bruising strength, and stared down into unfathomable eyes.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, Bodie," he hissed between clenched teeth. "Not like that."

Bodie was as shaken and confused as Doyle, but none of that showed on his face. He even managed a twisted travesty of a smile. "Changed your mind? Desperate for it, you were, an hour ago."

Doyle flushed, but did not look away. "Yeah, that's more like it," he said evenly, coldly, staring down. "I thought it'd all start coming out soon, knew you were taking it too bloody well. Get it out of your system, Bodie, go on. Tell me how disgustin' I looked. Really let fly, Bodie. I want it all now, don't want it flung back at me when you've 'ad time to chew on it a while, let it fester a bit. Knew the sweet understanding wouldn't last for long. And you --" he let his voice bite, emphasizing the word, "You think *rape's* a fair comeback, do you? Pay off for the crime?" Bodie was tensing, trying to throw him off. Doyle merely squeezed his thighs tighter around Bodie's thighs pressed between his own, skin sliding smoothly on soft skin. His cock was standing hard and erect as he stared down into Bodie's shuttered face with angry, slitted eyes.

His voice, however, was gentle, the voice of a lover whispering mysterious magic in the dead of night as he murmured, "How's it feel now, Bodie? Now it's your turn to wonder what it's like getting fucked. Feel good, does it? Making you hard, yet?"

Bodie's voice was hoarse with fury, shame, disgust -- all those things.

"Fuckin' bastard. Goin' to plan, is it? A quick screw, that's what you want. Go on, you do that. Fuck me through the gut, *lover*. Make yourself happy. I won't fight."

All Doyle's anger left him.

He was left with only weariness, and a terrible compressed feeling of sorrow, and defeat. Later, he knew, it would rise and overwhelm him.

For this time they had blown it. Being what they were, they walked a fine edge of friendship and trust and could fall only too easily, to watch it all shatter, unfulfilled. They had lost their way; facing disaster. Troubled, unsure, he looked down into Bodie's face, not really seeing the defiant, rebellious expression, seeing instead the years of dependence, begun on a cool, impersonal level necessary for the teaming Cowley had ordained, widening to a tentative liking, to a genuine interest and care that the other should be safe and happy.

"What do you want, Bodie?" he asked softly. Regardless, heedless of anything, the question laid

bare to its essential, knuckle white, devoid of complexity. "I don't think you even know."

Bodie watched him, frowning now, seeing the stark ribbed chest perfectly still. Whether he knew it or not, Doyle was holding his breath, waiting for his answer. That touched him, and so, too, the suddenly gentle slant of Doyle's voice. What were they doing? Learning to hate one another?

Once begun, that would be too easy.

So, it could not be allowed.

He smiled, a little shakily, flipped the hand of Doyle's that was resting on his shoulder. "Didn't know you cared too much about what I wanted."

Confession made, he felt calm. He watched the expressions flicker through the strange eyes, and saw Doyle arrive, at last, at the conclusion.

"Thought I wanted a quick fuck, didn't you?" Doyle asked.

The smile of the crocodile. Bodie forced lightness. "Randy old toad, you are. 'Spect you run through us all in your head, looking for something new and kinky to try out -- tonight was my night, eh? And when I walked in you thought you'd struck it lucky -- try it on, why not?" The bitterness was showing through despite himself. He had been badly hurt earlier, almost as if Doyle had dragged something private, precious to Bodie himself, through the dirt. He would have got over that, only Doyle would call him back, make him stay, go over and over it when Bodie only wanted to forget ...

Doyle, stopped in his tracks by Bodie's startling opinion of him, stared into the distance. He said slowly, "That really what you think of me?"

Not wanting to hurt him, Bodie felt uncomfortable, but Doyle's clear searching gaze demanded truth. "You mainly think about yourself, yeah," he mumbled, and patted him on the arm to soften it. "Get what you want."

Doyle inclined his head slightly, looking far away. He hadn't moved. Bodie was beginning to feel ridiculous now the sexual heat had fled, lying here half bare with his partner sitting astride him, naked thighs gripping his own, the soft intriguing weight of Doyle's genitals resting on his belly. He moved restlessly, but nothing happened.

Suddenly, Doyle removed his gaze from distant introspection, looked down. He traced a finger from Bodie's throat downward, watching it all the way. "I confess," he said. "Guilty as charged."

Bodie had lost the thread of this. "Come on, Ray, let me up now, okay?" he urged gently. "We went a bit wild, but it's over now."

"Is it?" Doyle asked, and answered himself. "It'll never be over."

Bodie was mystified. He studied Doyle's face. It wore the cool, still look he had noticed at various times before, an expression that lent him an unaware, precarious beauty. Ray Doyle was an attractive man whose appeal lay in his sensuality rather than his looks, which were imperfect and unusual, but at times he did acquire something rare, that pulled at your heart.

Doyle's palms, flat, touched Bodie's chest, circled his nipples, slowly. "You were wrong, about what I wanted," he said abruptly, continuing. "I didn't even know it myself, but I know what it is now."

Bodie started to say something, but changed it. His mouth was dry. It was pleasant, the way Doyle was touching him like this, the soft, sure movements of his hands producing sweet, strange feelings.

"Oh, yeah?" he said with rough, quiet affection, "had you all wrong, did I?"

"Not entirely," said Doyle, and gave him a direct, unreadable look. "Can't you see what I'm trying to tell you?"

"No," said Bodie flatly, but it was strange. He felt peculiar, light headed, as if he were about to laugh from sheer joy at some good news he wasn't even sure he'd received.

Again, that strange, searching look. "You'll get the drift," said Doyle. He was very near, and suddenly Bodie knew without a doubt that, for better or worse, they were going to make love.

"I'm still one behind."

"What?" Doyle, who had been dreaming, lifted his head off Bodie's stomach and stared up at Bodie's face. Bodie still had his eyes closed.

"I'm one behind," Bodie mused. "You had a start on me, remember?"

Doyle smiled. He folded both hands across Bodie's belly and propped his chin on them. "'S not a race, mate. And you didn't miss much. Was better with you, than without you."

Opening his eyes, Bodie extended a hand and cupped the side of Doyle's face, gingerly threading through tousled hair. Doyle turned his cheek and nuzzled Bodie's palm, their eyes never leaving one another.

"Ray."

"Yeah?"

"What *were* you thinking about?" Bodie asked curiously, after a long silence. To his surprise and dawning delight, Doyle actually flushed, looking away, a little abashed grin curling across his lips.

Bodie's own mirrored it, amused and incredulous. He reached out, caught Doyle's chin, trying to turn him, but Doyle wouldn't look, fending him off, laughing. "Come on, give, mate."

"Don't keep remindin' me of it," Doyle said, ducking his head and burying his hot face on Bodie's stomach. "Don't Bodie. Please, 's a very embarrassing memory."

"Even after what we've just done?" said Bodie, lowering his tone to one deep and intimate, but although Doyle, who was actually as overwhelmed and cheerful as Bodie himself, warmed to it, he still shook his head.

"Why, worse than that, was it?" Bodie gave a chuckle, ruffling the damp curls under his hand. "You randy little bugger. You sure it was about me? All this reticence, mate, I'm beginning to wonder."

Doyle raised his head, gave him an intense catlike stare. "Yeah, it was about you," he confirmed quietly, "and, no, it wasn't worse than what we did just now. It was just -- different, and one day I'll tell you. But not right now."

"Okay," said Bodie, suddenly soft, because Doyle had said 'one day' and maybe that meant there would be a future for them. Hands under Doyle's wet armpits, he hauled him up to lie on top of him, searching his face. So well known to him -- yet oddly unfamiliar. Long established in the old relationship, easy with it, they were now only at the beginning of the new, and they were essentially, strangers here.

Then Doyle smiled at him, revealing absurd, tiny dimples, and Bodie found he did not miss what they no longer had.

"You stayin' the night?"

"You want me to?"

"Yeah."

"We gonna do what you were gettin' off to?"

"You're *never* gonna let me live that down, are you? For the rest of my life?"

Caught on an upsurge of emotion, Bodie hugged him exuberantly close, released him. "Rest of our lives."

Not strangers at all, he found himself realising as Doyle smiled again.

"Sounds fine to me."

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Pantomime

Sebastian

Another story written when I was asked for one, but with more real heart to it, I think: Bodie and Doyle coming together after one too many reminders that life is short and loneliness is hard. I am glad they didn't spend the night alone: I hope they never spend another alone.

=====|||=====

"I'm free!" carolled Bodie, appearing from behind the door. He grabbed his startled partner and gave him two smacking kisses, which left Ray Doyle, though he didn't know it, with one bright lipstick oval on each cheek.

Doyle brushed Bodie off, cackling, and stood back to admire him for a moment: Bodie was decked out in the full regalia of a pantomime dame, black wig, hooped crimson skirt, garish make-up, eyelashes six inches long wafting up and down like a punkah-wallah, and a very large bustière.

Doyle had to laugh. Bodie was so superbly incongruous and so happy as he gave Doyle a twirl, the better to admire his red and white spotted bloomers. Then his eye roamed over Doyle critically.

"Couldn't you think of anything else, Ray? You had that one last time."

"Only one left in the shop," Doyle retorted, strutting in, resplendent in small gold loin cloth and jungle sandals.

"You think you look good in it, you mean," Bodie said amused: old Ray liked to get his kit off, bare his nipples to the world, and if you were shaped like he was you probably would, too.

Opening the door to the kitchen-through diner-through-lounge let out a pulsating wall of noise. You might be daunted if you were of a sensitive nature: Cowley's top agent kept on walking, right through to where fifty people or more milled about in various peculiar costumes and a haze of smoke hung in the air. The steady beat of music thumped on and on. Doyle shouldered his way between the Knave of Hearts, a mummy trailing bandages and a headless camel to get to the bar, where he helped himself to a large Scotch and some melting ice cubes fished from a glass bowl.

"Did you bring me a present?" Bodie asked in his ear, and Doyle turned around and regarded him with smoky green eyes.

"No."

"Oh, thanks," Bodie scoffed, unsurprised. "Only me birthday, innit?" He watched Doyle take one swallow, his eyes closing as the Scotch hit home, taking another slowly. Dark chest hair dived between Ray's taut brown nipples almost to his belly button. "Should have a jewel in there, mate." Bodie jabbed it with a cruelly carmined fingernail.

"You're getting confused. This is Tarzan, not the Arabian Nights."

"Anyone give you a feel as you swung your way up the stairs?" Bodie asked, eyeing the brevity of the twisted cloth knotted around Doyle's hips.

"Only met a dog," was Doyle's response to that, and Bodie laughed, patted him kindly on the shoulder, and vanished into the crowd..

Doyle drifted for a while on the fringes of society, listening in to snatches of conversation here and there, acknowledging a few people; he was not in a party mood, had only come to please Bodie, whose evening would be spoilt if he did not turn up; but then again he was probably going to spoil it anyway before the night was out.

He wandered after a while through the last arch into the lounge area, where there was the latest trendy Knightsbridge accessory, a conversation pit. It was padded with black and gold stripey cushions, and perched above it was a white television on a swivelling stalk. The couple entwined to one side on the cushions seemed not to notice his arrival as he vaulted the back and took the seat opposite; he sprawled back, sipped his drink, and after a moment noticed that the television was showing a blue movie -- and not one Bodie would have been able to rent down the local corner shop, either.

The couple left soon afterwards, joined lips leading the way to Bodie's bedroom. Doyle kept his eyes fixed on the screen, taking sips from his glass from time to time. People blundered past behind him occasionally but soon gravitated back towards the drink and the food. It sounded like a great party, it was going with a swing. Good for Bodie. How old was he? Not thirty, surely. Twenty-nine? Four years older than Vickery, then. But then Vickery had joined the squad unusually young.

The cushions dipped and a very large flamboyant dame brandishing a whisky bottle dropped beside him in a flourish of skirts. It said in a deep voice, "How's my timing for a refill?"

He extended his glass. "Thanks. Make it a big one. Where'd you get this film, Bodie?"

Bodie winked one outrageously fringed eye. His wig had slipped a little to one side. "Fell off the back of a lorry, doncha know." His normal voice resumed. "Nah, Murph copped a load of 'em down Soho when he was waiting for Harry B., remember? Nice little earner for someone: Cowley took 'em in, but -- " Bodie sighed soulfully, " -- this one got lost on the way." He looked at Doyle, who was gulping back a hearty swallow of drink, eyes fixed all the while on the screen. Bodie's eyes followed his.

"Not gay, is it?" he asked.

"It's everything," Doyle answered. "Only thing hasn't put in an appearance is a donkey, and that can't be long."

Bodie's eyes were drawn down to the loincloth, which had lifted away from Doyle's flat belly like a silken tent erecting on the desert sands.

"But you like it," he observed.

"I wouldn't say *like* it," Doyle said tartly, and then he caught the drift of Bodie's blue-eyed gaze. "Yeah, well, that's just a natural reaction, innit? And that's just exactly why there'll always be a market for filth, Bodie."

"So long as Men are Men," Bodie intoned, and then he popped a hand onto Doyle's bare thigh, entering into the spirit of his own costume with relish: "A hard man is good to find, young Sir -- !"

"Geddoff." Doyle swatted at him half-heartedly, only sharpening up his defence when Bodie's large and capable hand actually wrapped itself around a handful of tautened loincloth. "Bodie -- !"

"Nothing's safe, is it, you old slapper, you?" came a new voice from behind. "You wanna watch her, young lad, she's been through the ranks and now she's after the officers."

Anders, fellow agent, acknowledging Doyle with a slap on the shoulder, while Bodie got an enthusiastic hug and a bottle: "How's young Vickery doing then, Ray? Hear you were down the ozzie earlier."

"Okay," Doyle said. His voice was very quiet, and his eyes flicked back to the screen and stayed there.

"Cramp 'is style for a bit, won't it? An' him heading to be the brightest star in Cowley's heaven. Where'd the bastards get him?"

"Left lung, right ventricle."

"Nasty."

"Go and get a drink, Anders," Bodie said, watching Doyle's fingers knead and pinch up the stripey fabric of the settee. "Got a bit of catching up to do in that department, haven't you?"

"Good idea, Widow Twankey. You look the business, man! -- the business!" and he rapped his knuckles on the pink plastic protuberances worn by his host, laughed loudly and crudely, and slipped away into the crowd.

Bodie stayed. His partner just sat there, legs apart, eyes fixed on the screen.

"Doyle?" Bodie queried quietly. You would have had to be watching with every fibre of attention not to miss the tiniest shake of Doyle's head, and thereby all the colour fled away from the day and left it grey.

"Oh christ." Bodie's head dropped back on the sofa; he sighed. "When?"

"Two hours ago," Doyle answered; he had not looked at Bodie yet but now he did, tilting his head that way. "I didn't want to spoil the party, you know?"

"No, right."

"It was quite quick. He didn't come round at all."

"How old was he?"

"25. Married. First kid due as we speak."

"God," Bodie said softly. "Life's a shit and then you die, eh?"

"That's about it... Even Cowley's cut up about this one."

Everyone had liked Steve Vickery. Young, enthusiastic, gifted. Now dead.

For a few moments their eyes dwelled together on the screen where various human beings celebrated the fact of being alive in the most direct way possible. But after a while Doyle sighed, slapped Bodie on the thigh. Beneath the fabric of the skirt the knobs of suspenders bumped against his palm. "Better go and circulate, mate -- it's gonna look odd otherwise."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Nothing that hasn't happened before, is it?"

Bodie's rouged and embellished face stared into his, oddly enough not unattractive, a very handsome woman, you might say. Twin fluorescent earrings in the shape of cherries dangled beneath his ears; his pale skin was gilded with cosmetics. Yet looking out at Doyle from this stranger's face were the eyes of the man he knew better than anyone. Bizarre. He didn't know if he liked the way it made him feel, but it was better than other things waiting in the wings for him to feel. Exciting, in a way. Rather wicked.

He lifted a hand to brush some loose strands of coarse black hair away from Bodie's face; it worried him, the way it kept draping itself where it did not belong. "I'm okay, Bodie, you don't have to hang around. I'm not about to top meself or anything. Just -- not in the mood to mix and be merry, all right?"

"Stay on when they've all gone," Bodie said, brow creased, "Have a drink with me."

"Okay," Doyle said. "Of course I will," and there was a silence. He looked at Bodie a moment longer. "You'll have to take the costume off, though, Bodie, you're starting to look too good to me."

"Ooh," Bodie camped, "I should be so lucky," and he minced his way off through to the next room.

The film had finished, grainy lines and a hiss of static coming from the TV. Doyle looked around for the remote, couldn't find it. In the next room he could just see Bodie's dark head and bouncing cherry earrings next to a mop of red curls -- Jennie Allen from the office. Be a nice birthday present for Bodie, that, Doyle reflected, getting up and kneeling to attend to the video. Good luck to you, mate. Wouldn't hurt her, would it, to impart a bit of feel-good factor to Bodie on his birthday?

The film began to run again as he took his seat once more and he let himself sink down, sip his drink, get engrossed.

"What are you doing here all by yourself?"

He jumped, almost spilling his drink. Christ almighty, Nell Gwynn. AKA Jennie Allen herself, long red hair and a D-cup: ideal for the role. She was sinking gracefully onto the cushion next to him in a flurry of lacy petticoats. Never kick a gift horse in the mouth, didn't they say? His arm slid around her as the retort left him -- "Waitin' for you of course, darlin' -- " and his mind effortlessly supplied the exchange which must have taken place -

Do me a favour, Jen -- go and cheer up Ray for me, he's a bit low tonight -- delivered in Bodie's best beseeching tone, deep blue eyes beguiling her

Well, thank you, Bodie. He was highly amused by that. Greater love hath no man, than he lay down his bird for a friend.

He put his drink down with exaggerated care and turned towards her. "What have you been up

to, 4.5? You've got lipstick on your face," she said, looking at him critically.

"That's Bodie's," he heard himself say, and laughed, cracking up. Then, "Ssh," he hushed her query with his finger, eyes flicking up as his attention was caught by the film, and her pretty nose wrinkled as she followed his gaze.

"That's disgusting."

Which irritated him enough to make him pursue it: "Is it? Only natural, isn't it?"

"Just because it's natural doesn't mean we have to have it rammed down our throats, does it?" she said tartly, an unfortunate choice of metaphor which amused him hugely and he laughed, spluttering into his drink and almost choking, which earned him a very straight look; but he was just drunk enough not to care which way it went. It was Bodie who fancied her: he could take it or leave it. She let him kiss her, anyway, and cuddled close to him without too much reluctance, even though he had hardly anything on. Didn't delve into the loincloth, sadly, but then you couldn't expect that, after all. In your teenage years you could be dangerously misled by movies like this one: girl coming on hot and strong for it five seconds after you caught their eye -- Yeah, come to think of it, if Jennie'd read the script she should be wrenching down the cloth by now, eyes aglow, licking her lips at what she found within

This improbable image made him choke with laughter, pull away from the kiss, rub his nose, grinning. "What's the matter with you, 4.5.?" she asked, resigned, quite tolerant really; Cowley's agents ran on a taut, fast fuse, everybody knew that.

"Too much drink. Come here." He drew her nearer again and began to investigate the rounded tops of her breasts and the intriguing creamy plunge between them.

"Ray," she pushed him off, "Everyone'll see -- "

"No-one here to see. Unless the TV's two-way and there's a squad on eyeballs' peerin' through it -- "

A drenching thought if ever there was one. But he wasn't really in the mood anyway. Not for sex, not tonight, with all the courtesies and attention to another person which it would necessarily entail, now that Men were New and Women had Needs. He would have to work too hard at it, when all he knew he could manage for certain was a quick hard drive towards oblivion, all by himself, no room for passengers.

And by tomorrow a report of his performance would be all round the section. No thanks.

He kissed her again, had one last friendly feel around the Nell Gwynne bustline -- "You've done your duty, sweetheart. I'll remember you in me will. Off you go and play now, go on."

"Mm?" She lifted her head: eyes, a lighter blue than Bodie's, stared into his.

"That was -- " he paused, swallowed, feeling the sourness of alcohol rise in his throat -"lovely, darlin'. But it's one of those nights when I'm best left alone." He smiled, lip lifting, head tilting. "You can get me another drink while you're up." And he reached out for his glass, put it into her hands.

People came and went. Some sat by him and watched the film for a while. Some of these went swiftly into the bedroom thereafter; it must be getting full in there. The movie was on its third run-through by now: he was getting to know the plot really quite well, and it could be summed up in about a sentence.

Vickery should have been here tonight, though it would have been just a passing visit: for while his body lay bloodless on the self-draining mortuary slab his wife too lay in hospital with some problem of pregnancy (a closed book to Doyle), about to give birth to their first child.

First and last.

Wonder if he had a costume ready for tonight. Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen...

"How you doing, mate?"

Bodie again, on another visit. The wig slipping to one side and one of the earrings gone. He looked unusually flushed.

"Rough out there, is it?" Doyle asked sympathetically; he tipped his head back and looked up into Bodie's face. Bodie frowned down.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Bit of a headache. " He closed his eyes as Bodie's fingers brushed through his hair, probed his temples for the pressure point. "Oi, not too hard."

"That better?" A gentler touch, which his jangled nerves interpreted as more intimate than Bodie had probably intended it. He moved his head away, unsettled.

"Isn't it about time they were all going home?"

Bodie's hand dropped away; he looked out into the next room. "They're drifting away now. Drink's run out."

"An' who can blame it," Doyle said grimly, and then burst into a giggle, and Bodie laughed with him, and fed him more drink till the pain left him, floating away on a cloud. Then Bodie went and Doyle slipped into a troubled doze, huge aggressive bottles with long skinny legs in running shoes pounding past, heading angrily for the exit. Stevie Vickery's last breath and then stillness, the staring horror in his open eyes, the flat line on the monitor running on and on and on, the machine-screach of a pointless siren call for help -

He had jumped then, and he jumped now as the echo of it flashed through his dream-state but he did not really wake.

A chorus of Happy Birthday roused him at one point and he joined in loudly where he sat, pounding the cushion beside him for emphasis, hoping Bodie would hear his voice in the next room and know he was there.

And then he slept again, almost naked, head drooping to one side, glass dropping from one limp hand to the plush white carpet; the glass stayed intact as it rolled, then settled on its side. One or two brown drops slid quickly to the rim, crept over, slunk into the pile and vanished. Doyle slept on and did not dream.

Dipping, then bouncing... Doyle opened his eyes to see his partner flopping heavily into the place beside him. "A'right?" Doyle yawned, and dredged up a sleepy smile.

"Yeah, " Bodie said easily, bending forwards to a tray placed on the floor. "Mostly gone home now, just a few left passed out on the floor."

"Good party?"

Bodie shrugged. "No worse than any I suppose... The bed's got someone on it, d'you mind staying in here? Not cold, anyhow."

Bodie was pouring a very expensive brandy into two balloon glasses from a dark and elegant bottle. "This one didn't run out then?" Doyle commented with a small grin, reaching out, taking the glass, rolling it in his palm the way you were supposed to.

"I chained it down. It struggled, but -- "

Made him smile, anyway. Bodie could always make him smile, even at the most inappropriate moments. Defusing bombs, after shootouts while people lay around them dead, in Cowley's office with the old man in a strop: Bodie's black wit would whip out wickedly and crease him up. The TV had gone static again. "Run the film, Bodie. You'll like it."

Bodie reached out to press the buttons. "Will I?"

"Yeah, it's got its moments. Cheers. Happy Birthday."

"Hardly, is it?" Bodie said unsmiling, but he raised his glass, knocked it firmly against Doyle's and took a swallow of his brandy.

Doyle swilled it around in his mouth, grimacing. "Mmm... good, this, innit? Nah, but life goes on. Don't think about it any more tonight."

And that really was the only way. Carry on, don't think about it: after all, it wasn't as if it could

ever happen to you.

Doyle shifted around, lifting his legs up onto the settee, ran a hand down his chest, sipped at his brandy and looked across at Bodie, who was at that moment engrossed in the film; the wig was off, leaving his hair unusually tousled, both false eyelashes gone (but then Bodie's own were hardly less black or less silky): one cherry earring remained, gypsy-style, lips perhaps a little redder than lifelike. He looked a little like a black-and-white photograph, tinted prettily with an afterthought of artificial colour as they used to do before the advent of polychrome. The costume had gone; back on its hanger, presumably, ready to be returned to the hire shop in the morning. Now Bodie wore an old black T-shirt and boxer shorts: it was a hot night.

Even so, Doyle shivered, skin bare to the midnight air.

Bodie noticed: "Cold? I'll get a couple of blankets," but he didn't move, eyes returning to the screen. Doyle kicked off his sandals and put his bare feet into Bodie's lap. Bodie looked down at them.

"Didn't paint your toenails this time," he observed.

"Had a rush to get 'ere." He passed on from that quickly: "Thanks for sending me Jennie."

Bodie twisted his head to look at him. "How'd you get on?" Mildly curious.

"She was okay. Sweet. Did her best, but -- " He shrugged. "I dunno, I just wasn't in the mood."

"Funny," Bodie said wryly, and inclined his head towards the TV without looking at it, "I got the feeling that you were."

"Yeah, well. I must be getting old. Sometimes it's just too much trouble -- you know?"

"Yeh. I know."

There was silence for a little while. Bodie watched the film; Doyle watched Bodie.

"You looked good tonight," he said quietly.

Bodie's expressive mouth drooped. "As a dame -- ?"

"Yeah," Doyle said, and then a little crease of amusement appeared in his cheek. "Hey, maybe it's time to start worrying about meseif, d'you think? When my partner in drag looks better to me than Nell Gwynn."

"You didn't tell her that, did you?" Bodie said with a crooked little grin, and they laughed for a moment together. "Want some more of this -- ?" he waggled the bottle, but Doyle shook his head.

"I'd say I'd had enough, wouldn't you?" He shook his head, slapped himself on the belly, tutting. "If Cowley knew what I just said -- 's probably a sacking offence, innit?"

"What is?" Bodie asked, his voice dark, deep, easy.

"Wishing you were a woman." His eyes opened wide and dwelt on Bodie.

Bodie took his time, had a drink, rolling his brandy glass around in his hands and looking at it. "D'you mean you wish I was a woman? Or wish you were?"

To hell with it. "Either of us." God, he must be drunk. Might make Bodie's birthday a night to remember, all right, but not, perhaps, for the right reasons.

On the other hand, there were other, crueller things abroad to shadow this birthday of Bodie's... a little drunken flirtation in the dead of the night seemed nothing beside it. Tonight he did not have the resources to take on a stranger; but this was only Bodie, and Bodie could look after himself. Would tell him to shut up, go to sleep, if he was talking nonsense, which he probably was. He dug his toes into the bare muscle of Bodie's thigh, stretched out to arch his whole body, flung his arms above his head, and yawned: "Don't remind me about this in the morning, will you?"

"I won't," Bodie said, and looked him over, the near-naked body sprawling over his, scrawny sprinter's muscles, shallow navel so unlike the deep crease of a woman's: such an intimate sight, that peculiar little knot of skin there on view on the surface of the flat belly; and then dark hair travelling down the centre of his body and disappearing into the twist of cloth about his loins. The general pose not so much Tarzan, more -- Jesus of Nazareth. After crucifixion.

Oh, it was one of those nights, all right, drink and talk and tragedy all whirling around in his mind, but a certain strange opportunity seemed to be in the air: Doyle's toenails dug cruelly into the soft skin of his inner thigh, and Bodie said, frowning, "In fact -- "

Doyle looked at him, heavy-lidded, drowsy-eyed, waiting.

" -- I won't remind you about this, either." And Bodie shoved Doyle's feet gently off his lap and knelt upon the floor, hands upon his own thighs, looking up.

Fighting to focus, Doyle looked into depths of midnight blue and lost himself; brandy-scented breath brushed his cheek, followed by Bodie's fingertip, tracing the outline of his lips: and then came Bodie's mouth, settling over his, kissing him once, perfectly gentle.

Do I really want to do this? Doyle shut his eyes, and opened his mouth. Bodie immediately moved in closer, taking advantage of that; the kiss became real.

Bodie's tongue lazily caressed his and lit him up like a circuit, power flitting from nerve to nerve, waking up, ready for the countdown. On fire with it, Doyle slipped a demanding arm around the man kissing him, taking his hand and pressing it down to his chest, closing the strong

fingers around his nipple then leaving him to toy with it any way he wished. Bodie's mouth tasted of lipstick, his skin still smelt lightly of cosmetics, much as a woman's might; perhaps that was why this seemed as natural as anything he ever did.

But the arms closing around him were strong, constricting; if he didn't throw them off he was helpless, but helpless, for once, seemed to be exactly what he wanted to be. Bodie was here, there was nothing to worry about and nothing he needed to fight. He gave a sigh and relaxed, slumping against the cushions of the sofa, compliant and exposed.

Looking at him, Bodie felt strangely wounded, fit to die of whatever this sickness was. Doyle was so tense tonight, worryingly strung-out; the look of him earlier had stabbed at Bodie's heart like a thorn. Those strange eyes, dwelling inwards on some intimations of mortality; the way he had looked when Anders -

He had wanted so much to take that look away. Anything. He would do anything it took. From the simple comfort of a kiss on to -- whatever.

He fondled each nipple in turn, softly, thoroughly, pinching it into a peak: Doyle sighed and arched his back. Bodie leaned forwards, brushed Doyle's ear with the merest whisper - "Let me bring you off, Ray?"

Doyle's eyes came hazily open and he looked at him, a velvety, secretive whisper leaving him: "What did you say -- ?"

Bodie looked into his eyes, took hold of his hand, and whispered clearly: "Shall I make you come?"

Doyle turned the hand in his and pressed it right over his heart, pleasure-seeking. Bodie's fingers immediately began to stroke his nipple again, circling, pressing, teasing gently. The smile that shaped Doyle's mouth as he looked down made Bodie's heart stop, then surge; and Doyle said to him softly, deeply: "Shouldn't encourage me really, should you?"

Bodie rested his cheek against Doyle's for a brief moment, nuzzling him, feeling the rasp of Doyle's chin against his own girl-smooth one. "You need it..."

"Do I?" Doyle sighed; he closed his eyes again, but one hand reached out to find and then settle on Bodie's hair, twisting it around and around his fingers.

Bodie moved his head under the gentle caress, and spoke from the absolute heart of himself: "I worry about you. Take it all so hard, don't you?"

"You're so sweet when you're drunk, Bodie."

"Yes," Bodie whispered, "and so are you," and he kissed his mouth again, tongue sweetly teasing, delicate and thrilling. His hand followed the line of hair from nipple to belly, smoothing it down in its course; then his fingers reached for the knot of the ridiculous loincloth and began

to work it free.

Doyle's eyes came open at the intimacy; he stared out across the room, up at the film where people pranced and postured and formed peculiar shapes with one another. The touch of Bodie's fingertips was sweet...

And as he leaned back and pressed himself into Bodie's hand he knew he was a long, long way away from the world, fatigue and alcohol swimming through his brain and lifting him out of reality: but not so far out that he did not sense that there was trouble waiting in the wings, that bran for breakfast and a whole fleet of Hail Marys wasn't going to sort this one. But it was, it seemed, the sweetest of sins... He sighed, and let his gaze drift on the TV as Bodie jerked him off swiftly, and Bodie's lips touched his cheek as he whispered to him warmly, intimately, definitely leading him on: "Is that what you'd like me to do, Ray? To you?"

It threw him like a switch, lashes sweeping down as he came, sweet honey-fire in his loins bursting upwards towards his heart and warming him all through; and then the last thing he knew was the touch of Bodie's lips close to his mouth as he drifted away into sleep.

Bodie moved very quietly through the house, turning off lights, ruthlessly ignoring empty bottles, glasses, half-eaten plates of food, the inevitable party debris. Like everything else, it would all have to wait until tomorrow.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...

He shook out two grey blankets from the airing cupboard and returned to the lounge; Doyle had turned onto his side on the wide couch, peaceful and still, breathing deep and even. The loin cloth had come off: Bodie picked it up, folded it and put it to one side, then he covered Doyle with the blanket, and still he didn't stir.

Bodie lay down on the floor and pulled the other blanket over himself, closing his eyes, finding instant darkness inside his own head.

The clock struck two. So: it was already tomorrow.

His guts ached still, with a sort of sadness, an unfulfillment that had nothing to do with the faint sexual charge wired up inside himself, but everything to do with dread: of tomorrow? Of dark times to come?

Doyle had been so very drunk. He might not even remember.

Bodie smiled, grimly, and tightened his fingers on the wool of the blanket. Oh, Doyle would remember all right. Hell to pay.

But at least they were alive. And life was, after all, so very much more dangerous than death: Death, Bodie was sure, could spring no surprises. For Stevie Vickery there would be no more beginnings. Even dangerous ones.

Bodie closed his eyes and slept. Behind him, despite him, Time ticked on.

-- THE END --

October, 1996

Zeropanic

Perfect Day *Part One*

I never liked stories, my own least of all, in which you could glimpse the writer's femininity coyly peeping out, Bodie and Doyle rewritten as two teenage girls, all giggles and cutesy banter. I wanted, always, B and D to be very masculine - in outlook, dialogue, mean tough ruthlessness, the full male works. Great passion, real emotion shines out brighter from a crack in harsh stone walls than from marshmallow landscapes: piling on page after page of oozing 'love-you' dialogue does not always a stronger love-story make. The B and D in this story are not always very nice. But they are 'real', at least to me. And, as always, desperately in love.

=====|||=====

Bodie paced restlessly.

"He's a maniac, Ray, a bloody psycho."

"What, worse than you, you mean? You can handle him," Doyle said reasonably, fighting on from the depths of somewhere now that Bodie had all but refused him point-blank: "I've seen you."

"Yeah, but is it worth it?" Bodie turned to grimace at him. "When I get back I don't sleep for a week."

"Look, Bodie --" Doyle tossed a can of beer through the air "-- I wouldn't ask, believe me I wouldn't, if I didn't have to."

The tab went *snap*. Bodie tipped back his head and took a few deep swallows. When he lifted the can away from his mouth a fine froth hinged it like a beige moustache; he wiped it off with his hand. "Bit thick is she, this bird of yours?" he asked suspiciously. "Getting the wrong side of Clay Carver was not a bright career move.

"I know that. That's why I need you to help. Come on, Bodie! You're always tellin' me he owes you a favour."

Bodie made a face. "Yeah, but I was savin' it to use for myself."

"She's a silly young kid who played with fire and got her fingers burned," Doyle said rapidly. "Okay, she's made a stupid blunder. Can't say at nineteen I didn't make one or two myself, how about you?"

"Look, Ray. It's not our business. It's not CI5's business. Best leave 'em to work out their own thing in their own way. Maybe it was an empty threat. You know, warn her off."

"Carver doesn't make empty threats. He can't see the point, real thing's so much more fun."

"She's only a kid, Ray. Got years in front of her. It's just her job on the line, not her life."

"She put everything she'd got into that business, Bodie. She'll lose the lot if Clay Carver blacklists her. You *know* he's got all the small traders in his pocket."

Bodie's look said expressively that small trade was small trade. Doyle's temper rose. "I can't believe you're so heartless, Bodie. It's not much to ask, is it?"

Bodie looked at him, very deliberately. The air in the room stilled, went quiet. "Yes, it is."

After a moment Doyle shrugged, turned away. "Well, you know this Carver bloke, I don't. But I tell you, Bodie, if it was me he owed a favour to I wouldn't hesitate."

"Good job it's not you then, innit?" Bodie responded cryptically, and that seemed about the end of it.

Except that Bodie seemed to feel, uncharacteristically, guilty about the whole affair; uninvited, the following night he turned up at Doyle's flat with a sixpack of beer and raised the subject again himself.

"I don't want to talk about it," Doyle said coldly, inwardly hopeful, and he took a beer. "You've made up your mind, haven't you, and that's it."

"What is she to you, Ray?" Bodie asked with a grim set to his mouth. "You plannin' on marrying her or something?"

"No," Doyle said, exasperated, "friend of a friend. She's just a kid in trouble, that's all. Never even -- "

Bodie's face twisted. " -- and you never will, if you don't ride up on your white charger to save her, that right?"

Doyle's lip curled as he looked at Bodie. "Yeah, that's how you would see it, isn't it. I should've known it was pointless askin' you. I've been around you long enough to know that whatever little scrap of conscience and decent feelin' you might have had withered off the vine years ago. Now you only do things if there's somethin' in it for you, right?"

Bodie turned away, mouth tight. Doyle knew that had got to him; nothing Bodie hated more than Doyle's accurate stabs at the inner truth of himself. Well, he'd blown it now.

"Fuck off, Bodie," he said moodily and grabbed the rest of the beer, darting off with it into the kitchen and opening the fridge door, stashing it inside with finality. "Just get off my back: go home." But when he rose to his feet it was to find Bodie standing there blocking the narrow arch to the living-room beyond. "I told you to push off."

Bodie looked down at him, taller and broader than his partner and better looking, dark hair neat, dark eyes brooding; he held the can in his fingers so tight it was making little noises of protest.

"Excuse me," Doyle said with absolute ice, and he tried to shoulder his way past, but Bodie was immovable.

"Maybe you're right."

"About what in particular?" Doyle planted his feet, folded his arms and faced him out, hostile.

Bodie stared down at him, expression strange. Doyle glared up, the hairs on the back of his neck starting to prickle.

"Maybe I'd do it if there was something in it for me."

Doyle exhaled with triumph, his shoulders sagging with relief. "Right. Well, now we know where we stand, let's start negotiating, shall we?"

As Bodie stood aside he thrust his way through, went to sit on the window-ledge in the living-room where he could look out at the city passing below, readying himself for the fight he knew now he would win.

Bodie didn't seem in any hurry to start. He crumpled the can he held and tossed it into the wastebin. He came into the room and stood near Doyle, staring out at the red glow of rear lights, the bright twisting bracelet of the road winding its way along to somewhere far away.

"S funny, don't you think," Bodie's voice broke the silence.

"What is?"

"You an' me. Why did the Cow team us?"

"I dunno," Doyle shrugged. "Man's a mystery."

Bodie turned to look at him, looking right through him instead. "No, I mean -- what did he see?"

About to reply sarcastically Doyle closed his mouth on it; he still required a favour from Bodie. "He thought we'd get on well together, I suppose."

"But we don't," Bodie said. It was not a question and still he did not sit down.

"We're all right," Doyle said, immediately and unaccountably defensive. "Get the best scores every week, we do. Only Turner and Jax -- "

Bodie cut in: " -- I didn't mean that." He tugged the curtain cord so that the velvet drape crept a little way across the window, pulled it back again. "Yeah, we work okay together."

"Well, that's why the Cow teamed us then. No need to look any deeper, is there?"

Bodie did not say anything. Doyle sighed and got up off the window-seat, swinging his way across the room to get his difficult partner a drink. Brooding, Bodie watched him walk, the swing of his hips; his eyes narrowed.

Full up with beer Doyle poured them each a shot of whisky from the bottle on the bar.

"Come on then, Bodie," he said, crossing the room, glass outstretched. "What is it you want?"

Bodie took the glass and a deep swallow. "Nothing."

"Aw, come *on*," Doyle exclaimed, grimacing. "You said you did."

Bodie looked at him and in the depths of his eyes something blackly danced. "You're lucky. I changed my mind."

Doyle thumped the back of the chair. "*No*. Look, Bodie, this is important. It's really important," Doyle said, spelling it out, "*to me*." He banged his chest. "Come on. I'll owe you one. Several. Pass on all my used girlfriends to you for a month. Give you all my change for the coffee machine. Sit through the African Queen with you again. Clean your gun for you."

Bodie did not smile; you could not, at this moment, imagine him ever smiling. Doyle had put no lights on in the room, the streetlamps below and wide white moon made it interesting; and the view was far and away the best thing about this flat, the sunsets across the city spectacular. But right now, looking at Bodie standing tall and dark and unlit, he decided his nerves were unhappy: so he went around the room and lit the small lamps and the big standard in the corner.

Cosy. And abruptly, Bodie became cosier too: ceased to stare at him in that unnerving way so that you remembered his days as a soldier of fortune, a paid assassin and a bringer of war.

He grinned at Doyle, and tossed the rest of his whisky down. "What you got to offer me then, sunshine?"

"Anything," Doyle told him at once, carefree because he could not imagine anything Bodie would want of him he would not give with all his heart in this most worthy of causes. "Up to and including doing all your written reports for a month."

"Trouble is, you can't spell."

"No worse than you," Doyle said, astounded. He came over with the whisky bottle, and hung it over Bodie's empty glass.

Bodie set it down filled, and took hold of Doyle's wrist. "How about your body, sweetheart?"

"Okay by me," Doyle said; but he ducked as Bodie's mouth threatened. "Be serious."

"Very," Bodie remarked; he wiped his mouth on his hand and took another sip of liquor, staring at Doyle with dark intensity.

Knowing too well his partner's offbeat humour, Doyle removed himself from the vicinity in a hurry and went to look again out of the window. Feeling a stare burn uncomfortably into his back he soon turned, hitched himself up on the window-seat again.

"Let's stop muckin' around. You gonna help me, or not?"

"You gotta understand, Doyle. If it was for you, I'd do it," Bodie said, and looked away. "But some silly little bitch I've never met -- "

"But I want you to do it, so it is for me, isn't it?" Doyle put in quickly. "Do it for me. I'm askin' you." He jumped off his perch and tumbled to kneel at Bodie's feet, looking up. "Yes?"

Bodie's face grimaced with a kind of exasperation. He aimed a gentle kick at Doyle's ribs. "Bugger off, Doyle, I'm goin' home." He threw down the rest of his drink, and headed for the door.

Doyle jumped to his feet, sour with the knowledge he had got this wrong. He followed Bodie's crisp, straightbacked walk to the door and gathered himself for one last appeal.

"Bodie. Ah, please," he said simply.

And Bodie turned at his peril, and looked at him, eyes narrowed against the light. He saw Ray Doyle, his partner of two years, still in his working gear (scruffy shirt, gun still planted there beneath his arm, faded jeans and clean white Kickers) just as he had been two hours ago when he had chased their quarry on foot through Covent Garden, cornered him and jammed a gun in his ribs. Good runner, Doyle was; good agent all round, in fact; sharp and bright and hard. His curls were loose and shining: washed this morning, Bodie decided, in a hasty shower; Doyle had come

in five minutes late. His wide grey eyes were fixed on Bodie; he looked faintly anxious, a crease appearing in his cheek as his white teeth settled on his lower lip.

Bodie stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked on his heels.

"Think about it?" Doyle asked, quick to press an advantage he sensed: no matter what the cause, of which he was quite and perfectly unaware.

Bodie looked at him without smiling. "You really want this, don't you."

"Haven't I said so?"

"Okay. I'll do it. But then, angel-fish, *you* do something for *me*."

So this was it. Victory! "Anything. I swear it," Doyle trotted out glibly, but his heart thumped uneasily at the look in Bodie's eyes, and the little smile which twisted Bodie's mouth at his words did nothing to reassure him.

"Your tongue's going to get you into a lot of trouble one day, sunshine."

Doyle propped one hand on his hip and slouched, insolent. His head tilted. "Don't tell me. You want me to paint your picture?"

Bodie put a hand on his elbow, ushered him back into the living-room.

"Let's talk," he said in a deep American drawl.

This time Bodie sat down, in one of the armchairs: Doyle stretched out on the settee, hands behind his head.

"Let's get to the point, Doyle," Bodie said without preamble: "I don't think it's really sunk into that flossy head of yours that beggin' favours from Clay Carver is not something I crave to do. In fact, I'd work quite definitely hard not to do it at all. And to do it because some fancy piece of yours took it into her empty head to trade on his patch without asking -- "

"All right, all right," Doyle cut in as Bodie tut-tutted and shook his head from side to side. "You don't want to do it. I get it."

"I've told you over and over that I don't want to do it. But that doesn't matter to you, you've made that quite clear. So now let's see," Bodie said, "just what *you're* prepared to offer up."

"Look, I'd do it myself," said Doyle, thoroughly pissed off with all this, "if I stood a snowball's chance in hell of -- "

Bodie's voice simply rose above his. "Let's start with what you're *not* prepared to do."

Doyle heaved a sigh. Resigned himself to play Bodie's game. "If we must."

Bodie regarded him with a lazy eye. "Murder, presumably, is not on the table."

"Unless it's yours." Doyle sniffed, rubbed a hand across his nose.

"Would you -- let's see. Lie, cheat, steal -- ? Commit adultery?"

Doyle grinned; then quelled it. Bodie was not laughing. "Just my normal way of life, mate."

"Would you take one of my girlfriends off my hands?"

"Yep." A cautionary thought occurred to Doyle. "Not expectin', is she?"

"Not as far as I know." All was silence as Bodie mused. "Say I wanted -- one of my ex-colleagues, from my African days say -- out of the way. Would you set up a hit for me? Be easy for you Doyle, good shot an' all, you are."

The smile died on Doyle's lips; he was beginning not to like the feel of this, Bodie so intense, studying him like a butterfly under glass.

"Like we said, murder's not up for discussion."

"Call it euthanasia in this case. Okay. Rubic Zeiss can rest easy in his bed. So."

"Get on with it, Bodie."

"Would you leave CI5 and set up a firearms business with me?"

"No."

"Would you sleep with me?"

"*Bodie.*" He grimaced at the tackiness.

"Would you?"

Something knocked the breath out of Doyle, because at last it was real.

The heat of his heart told him so, the tense set of Bodie's mouth, the glitter in his eyes.

"Are you serious?"

"Curious," Bodie said, hard.

Doyle got up in one move and turned towards the window. He leaned an arm against the wall,

rested his chin on his knuckles. "Jesus, Bodie," he said quietly, and gazed down at the passing traffic as he had done a hundred, a thousand times before. Yet he had never been so blind to it before.

"Is that it, then?" he said without turning.

"Is that what?"

"That's what you want, is it?"

Bodie's voice stayed even, quiet. "Yeah, that's it."

Doyle kept on looking out. The dusk was layered; midnight hovering darkly across the ground to the horizon, yet the sky was a vast dome of light. A fire engine, flashing blue and siren wailing, careered through the streets, closely followed by a police car, and two police bikers flanking it. Something, somewhere, was going up in flames.

Bodie, behind him, said: "I take it you're saying no."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"I think we'd better forget the whole thing."

He was on his way out, halfway through the door when Doyle got to him. "Bodie. Hang on."

Bodie's skin looked like marble beneath the ghostly light, which picked out blueblack tints in his hair, made his eyes dark and opaque. Doyle pulled him in and slammed the door shut.

"Bodie. I'm thinkin'. Don't rush me."

"How much time d'you need for one syllable?" Bodie returned ironically. "Stupid idea. Forget it."

Sleep with Bodie: save a soul. The very weirdness of the bargain intrigued Doyle: without another thought he put out his hand. "Deal?"

Bodie eyed the hand but didn't touch it. "Doyle, you'll never go through with it," he drawled with insolence.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I know you, Doyle. You'll promise anything to get what you want. Then afterwards you'll conveniently forget you ever said it."

"Screw it, Bodie," Doyle said in disgust. "If you haven't the guts for it, then -- "

Bodie smiled, and shoved two hands into his pockets. "Oh, I've got the guts for it, Ray."

"Right." Without waiting this time, Doyle leaned over, seized his hand firmly and dropped it. "Done. Signed, sealed, delivered -- "

"-- you're mine?" Bodie said derisively.

Doyle shot him a speculative glance. "And let's get it straight -- when you say, *sleep with me*, I suppose you don't mean pyjamas and cocoa then lights out at ten."

"Well, it sounds all right," Bodie said expressionlessly, "as far as it goes."

Doyle hustled himself nearer Bodie and looked at him, unconsciously aggressive. "Let's spell it out, Bodie. Sleep with me --?"

"Sex with you," Bodie said, coolly enough, and the sound of it echoed between them, casting a new and different light on everything, everything that had ever occurred between them: all their history had to be rewritten now. Bodie saw his expression and said ironically: "Yeah, Ray, that's about the state of it. I lie down for Clay Carver, and you -- you do the same for me." His voice had dropped, suddenly, to a low murmur: the silence which ensued was resonant and Bodie's quick smile sharkish, bitter. "Well. Not bad going, for a bird you hardly know and I don't know at all, is it? I hope she's worth it, sunshine, I really do."

After a moment Doyle coughed to clear his throat, and followed Bodie to the door. But Bodie left without a backward look.

Doyle opened a bleary eye.

2.04 a.m. and the phone was ringing. He groped for it, knocked off something else with a clatter, cursed, and got it at last into his hand.

"Doyle," he mumbled into it, rubbing his eyes.

"Bodie. Just to let you know it's all taken care of."

And you had to wake me up to tell me, was his first, unworthy thought.

"Good. That's -- great. Go okay?"

"It went okay, yeah. "

" -- Bodie? You okay? You sound -- "

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"So -- "

"So I'll see you in the morning."

Doyle replaced the receiver, and turned over to embed himself more deeply within the sheets and blankets. Awakened in the night, four hours to go till up-time. Bliss, after all.

He closed his eyes and instantly the image sprang up before them of Bodie, pulling on a pair of white gloves and looking at him.

Intrigued and aroused by this he lay and let the fantasy wander: the thought of Bodie touching him that way unexpectedly exquisite. Drifting in and out of dreams, his subconscious wooed him with scenarios; and during one of these, while the fantasy Bodie prepared to thrust into him a beautiful, jewelled pin, he fell heavily into sleep and did not dream again.

At work the next day Bodie was pale and uncommunicative. Warned off, Doyle did not mention matters other than routine. They got on with the business of the day.

At break time, after a cup of poor machine coffee, Bodie sat on a desk and looked at Doyle properly for the first time that morning. "Well? How did she take it? Gonna get on her knees to apply some serious gratitude, is she?"

"Who?"

Bodie's eyes dwelt on him in curiosity. "Your bird. When she heard she was off the hook."

Doyle clapped one hand to his head and cursed. "Christ! D'you know, I haven't told her yet." He began to hunt through his pockets for small change.

After a moment, Bodie laughed, with an odd twist to it. "You beat me, Doyle, you really do."

There was a phone nearby. He moved towards it. "I'll ring her now."

"Look, have I got this right? It was," Bodie said, moving with him, "*important* to you, was it?"

Doyle directed a black look at him, sorting out a 10p and two fives. "You know it was."

"That's good," his partner murmured, high on some sweet, cynical amusement. "Because it certainly was to me."

Misunderstanding, Doyle cut in: "Don't worry. You'll get your dues."

Bodie looked at him blankly for a moment; then he laughed again, unconditionally amused this time. "Christ, but I'd almost forgotten. Tonight the lovely Raymond serves himself up like a Persian banquet. For my delight."

"Shut up, Bodie," Doyle muttered, conscious of stares. The phone clicked and buzzed in his ear.

"Don't worry, Ray." Bodie patted him on the shoulder with brisk reassurance. "I'll let you pass, I think."

Doyle stared at him. In his ear the phone ceased to ring; he thrust in his coin as the pips went. A voice said: "Can I help you?" Gathering his wits, Doyle said, "Yeah, Miss Kaufman, please," and when she answered her extension he relayed the information quickly and cleanly, cutting her off: "-- yeah, great, yeah, but listen, Jen, in a hurry, must go. See you some time. Yeah. Yeah, right. Don't mention it. Be seeing you."

He had rushed it, in the light of more pressing concerns, but when he turned around it was to find Bodie gone, rather than hanging at his shoulder eavesdropping as he had expected.

"Dammit!" Doyle swore at the empty space; they had an afternoon's briefing to come, and when he got to the room assigned for it, it was crowded. He threaded a way through the assembled agents, sourly ignoring even the friendliest of comments, and hitched himself onto a desk beside Bodie.

"Very much relieved, eternally grateful. Anything she can do -- "

"I'm so happy, Doyle," Bodie said ironically, adding as a suited stranger entered and a hush fell. "What next, Ambassador? Animal Liberation, Nelson Mandela?"

The lecturer, from the look of him, was one of Cowley's club friends on a free lunch trip. Not known for civil respect, the sixty-four CI5 agents eyed him with varying degrees of boredom, disinterest, disfavour, or what Cowley might call dumb insolence. Two hours later, it was over.

"Not too bad," Doyle remarked as he picked up his notepad (blank) and his pen and swung himself off the desk.

"Might be useful if ever we get lost in Bengal, yes," Bodie returned grimly.

"Oh come on, he wasn't that bad. Never knew that trick about the water and the silver bullets, did you?"

"Never needed to," came the disgruntled reply.

Doyle threw up his hands in exasperation. "What's eating you, Bodie? You've been crabby as hell -- " He looked at Bodie suspiciously. "Not sickening for somethin', are you?"

Bodie ignored this, shouldering on. Doyle grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him back. "What *is* the matter?"

"Doyle," his partner said wearily, "let me go. I've got some notes to finish, I'll see you around tomorrow."

It began to dawn on Doyle that something was wrong, but then Bodie could be a puzzle; a dark and silent mood betook him sometimes and it was best to leave him alone until it passed. Tomorrow, no doubt, he'd be back to normal, bounce in with a rubber rat to terrorise the typing pool.

Only this time --

"I wanna talk to you." Someone jostled Doyle from behind; he whipped around and glared. All around them agents flowed like tributaries of a river. He lowered his voice as he said: "You doin' anything tonight?"

"Yes," Bodie said unemotionally.

"I'll drive you home, then," Doyle said.

The city streets sped past and dusk enveloped the car. The silence within had become notable some minutes ago.

Not taking his eyes off the road, Doyle said: "So. How long you been after tryin' it on with me, then?"

"Dunno," Bodie shrugged. Carefully, he eased his long legs out in front of him. Spotting his chance in the rear mirror, Doyle flipped the indicator quickly and pulled out sharply. The Capri accelerated to overtake an aging lorry emitting noxious clouds of smoke.

"What about tonight? Oh yeah, you're busy. Tomorrow?"

"I told you." Ice splintered Bodie's voice. "I'll let you off. I wasn't serious."

Doyle pulled back in again, settling behind an Allegro with a dodgy rear light. "Oh, I think you were, Bodie."

"At the time, maybe, but *I've told you, Doyle*, I'm not intending to hold you to it. For godsake. So now can we just forget it?"

He had never heard Bodie in quite this mood. He was really pushing it; inside his shirt his skin prickled with sweat. But his voice was cool enough as he said: "Oh no, matey, we can't. We made a deal, right? and we're sticking to it."

Bodie dragged down the passenger mirror and checked it as Doyle nipped out again to get past the Allegro, whose erratic course was getting on his nerves, and nipped in again behind an oil tanker. "You got your mind on the road, have you, *sunshine*? Not on the Norton now, y'know; this baby's six feet wide."

Not to be diverted, by no means, Doyle said grimly: "I said, we're gonna do exactly what we agreed."

Bodie stirred one finger in the dust on the window-ledge. "Yeah? How you gonna manage that then, Doyle: all on your own?"

His partner choked on an expletive, waved one hand in the air. "I dunno what's the matter with you, Bodie. You stick your neck out, you really risked it last night, you know, what the hell made you think I wouldn't shove your teeth down your throat?"

"Why should you?" Bodie said. "No slur on *your* honour, is it?"

"-- you go through all that, you get through the hard part --and now you've changed your mind. Not gonna bother after all. Well, I'm not 'avin' it, mate. I want it all straight. You did me a favour and now I'd rather go through the lie-back-and-think-of-England routine than have you hold this over me for years."

Bodie's fingers which had been drumming on the window-ledge stopped; then resumed again. "You think I'd do that?" He sounded no more than curious; a little careful, maybe.

"How do I know?"

Bodie moved violently, causing Doyle to eye him sideways. "Look, Ray, the only bloody thing I want from you is for you to bloody drop it. Stop going on about it. Kill off a few thousand brain cells, will you, and cultivate amnesia. It's over, dammit. You got what you wanted, didn't you; and *keep your eyes on the bloody road.*"

His hand shot out and grabbed the wheel, turning it fractionally. Doyle cursed him loudly and profanely, though a cold sweat had broken out on his skin: an excellent driver, one of the best, he just had not been paying attention when the tanker in front had pulled to a halt, emergency flashers going like crazy; they had missed it by inches.

"Where the hell are we going, for chrissake?" Bodie asked him, realising for the first time -- "Bloody *hell*, Doyle, where've you got in mind -- ? Dover?" For that indeed was the large legend borne by the blue sign they had just passed. All around them serious signs were popping up, demanding a decision: they were coming to a major junction.

Doyle deflected this calmly. "Just wanted to sort a few things out. What's changed, Bodie? -- no need to panic, I'm not abducting you, we'll go off here." The car pulled down the slip-road and began the long turn around. "-- What did I say?"

Bodie was still, very still. "Nothing," he said. "I'm sure, quite sure, that you handled everything with the greatest sensitivity."

Doyle was looking at road signs coming up thick and fast. "Chigwell or Ealing?" he said urgently.

"Chigwell then East Stride," Bodie said without looking.

"You gonna answer my question?" Doyle said, moving into the correct lane. Bodie ignored him. They were going to get nowhere.

He took Bodie home.

But if Bodie thought that was the end of it, well, then Bodie had another think coming, that was all.

Usually they went out on a Saturday night, quick drink, try to score with any likely looking birds, game of darts if not. Although they had not, precisely, quarrelled, certainly something had changed: neither of them mentioned meeting up when the weekend came around. Tired and stretched after a day training with Macklin, Doyle did not give more than a moment's thought to going out alone; he'd stay in, do something relaxing, have an early bath then bed.

He was in the back room when the doorbell rang; absorbed in another world, it made him jump. Wiping his fingers on an old cloth he went to answer the door.

Bodie stood on the threshold. (Didn't charge in as he usually would.) "You busy?" Bodie asked.

A mixture of emotions gave way beneath the desire to make Bodie stay: "Bit of paintin'. Come and see?" He stood back invitingly, but Bodie stayed where he was.

"I was just passin'."

"Come and look at this," and Doyle led the way through to the back bedroom, not looking to see if Bodie followed: how could he not?

Bodie examined the canvas from all angles while Doyle waited, patient, a little embarrassed.

"What d'you think?" Bodie was usually rude about his artistic pretensions, and something pithy was what he was expecting: so when Bodie said seriously, "It's good. I like it," Doyle snorted.

"Come on."

"No, I really do."

"No you don't. You're just saying that because -- "

He stopped dead still, overwhelmed by his incaution. He had meant to say nothing of the sort. But a surprising sensitivity about Bodie's opinion had, for a moment, stood in the way of all else; and it was too late now. He had said it. So there it was.

But it seemed, after all, that Bodie was ready to talk. For after a moment, Bodie turned away from him and stared at the wall. "Look, Ray, it hasn't made any difference before. Why should it now? All this time... you didn't even guess."

Doyle laid down his brush on the easel tray. "So. It wasn't a spur of the moment thing at all."

"No," Bodie said with his back to him. A moment passed. Then Bodie turned and looked at his partner, scruffy in overalls and besmeared with paint. "You don't have to worry about it, Ray. I won't let it get in the way."

A silence fell between them. Doyle was remembering a look of Bodie's which surfaced at odd times. After a while Bodie made a gesture: "Look, Ray -- hard day today. I'd better go."

"Wait," Doyle said, and he moved two steps forward, took Bodie by the arms; hands settling on the black leather of his jacket, gripping. A light leapt from his eyes and transfixed Bodie, who forgot even to worry about getting paint on his clothes; watercolour, it would wash off.

"You gonna hold me to it, Bodie? Are you?"

Bodie's eyes creased a little, in surprise perhaps, in anger. "God in heaven, Ray, do you want me to?"

"Oh, I think you should," Doyle said, very low: but he was caught unawares by the look in Bodie's eye now, another look of Bodie's he was familiar with and it unsettled him: he could swear, at times, that Bodie all but disliked him. Just sometimes, it crept through.

Yeah, but Bodie fancied him, didn't he.

That was the real power, and he held it.

"Come on," he whispered. "We could go into the bedroom -- "

Bodie shoved him violently away. "I told you: no."

"Lost your nerve?" Doyle jeered. "Or maybe, yeah, just maybe, you'd rather toss off to a dream than try it for real. Safer, innit?"

"Well, there is that," Bodie said, and Doyle saw with a thrill of fear that Bodie was angry again. "Yeah, there's that all right. You couldn't possibly be as good as I can make you be." Twelve stones of hard, fit fighter seriously annoyed with him, an odd dark fire in his eyes Doyle had never seen before though he recognised it; and here he was deliberately provoking it.

Crazy, Doyle; you're crazy, he told himself: but then, he had always had that in him. The prowl of danger, the spice of perversity; incense of violence: all these things excited him. Bodie began to move, walk around him. Doyle circled as he did, to keep him in view, his hands tight, tight at his sides. He opened his mouth and began to talk.

"Whassamatter, Bodie? Oh, you're just about shittin' yourself, aren't you -- don't you just wish you'd never let it spill to me? Because you're damned right, I never guessed, hid it very well, you

did. Casts a new light entirely on all those shared showers: oh, and there was me thinkin' you were just Keen to be Clean."

"Shut up, Doyle," Bodie said, with a soft menace that thrilled him to the core. "And if you're wise, if you've got any intention at all to keep this partnership goin', then you'll drop the whole thing."

Doyle kicked the wooden stool between them out of the way. "And if I'm not?" Bodie stared at him in silence as the stool clattered away. Doyle looked back at him, eyes wide and very clear. "See, Bodie, you know me too well. Every way but one, you know me. And you *know* I'm not going to let this drop."

"Then we'd better split right now," Bodie said, and he turned for the door.

Christ, he was losing this; had to move fast. Doyle followed him. "There's an alternative."

"What's that? Blasting a fist through your teeth? Don't tempt me, Doyle, I'm seriously considerin' it as it is."

"You could make me pay up."

"I can't see how that would help. In fact," Bodie turned to look at him, and a slow, sarcastic smile slid across his lips, "I may just have lost my appetite. Pretty you may be, but I reckon you'd leave a nasty taste."

Doyle stood his ground. "Like the look of me, do you?" One-handed, he began to undo the buttons of his shirt. "Want to see more?"

"I've seen it before, Doyle. Managed to contain myself in the past."

Doyle grinned, a flash of white teeth. "Yeah, but you won't this time."

Bodie watched the slow play of Doyle's hands on his clothing, letting show an inch of skin here, a whorl of hair.

"I dunno what's the matter with you, Doyle. Born into the wrong profession, you were."

"Ah, come on, Bodie. I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Bodie smiled back, a smile which clashed vividly with the look in his eyes. "Beats me why you want it, Doyle. You won't like it."

"It's fair, that's why I want it," Doyle said. "It's what we agreed."

But in his secret heart of hearts he knew the truth: that he was looking for the ultimate thrill. The thrill he knew it would be to have Bodie play with him; and more than that and beyond it, the

subtler thrills of power play. He could make Bodie do just what he wanted: or maybe, just maybe, he could not.

He stripped, and watched Bodie do the same as he threw himself onto the bed. "Clean, are you?" he asked coolly. "Shower's in there if not."

"Come on, Ray," Bodie said unmoved, "next you'll be asking me to wear a rubber." But the sound of water pattering down followed; Doyle lay where he was, and considered what might happen. His hand lay lightly on his cock, stirring it gently.

The bed dipped beside him and he opened his eyes to look at Bodie; Bodie was not looking at him, but at the errant hand which he slipped his own fingers beneath and lifted gently away. The chance contact set pleasure rippling through Doyle's belly; holding on to Bodie's hand he tried to drag it back down again.

"Ang on a bit," Bodie said with amusement; Doyle opened his arms with enthusiasm, accepted Bodie into them and gave him a long hard hug. Bodie's skin was still wet, goose bumped. "Want to get in?" he offered, holding back the covers; but Bodie made no move to, looking him over.

Doyle closed his eyes under the inspection; he was excited, ready to be touched. "Come on then, what we gonna do?"

"Just give me time." Bodie traced a finger down his nose, dwelt it on his lips. Doyle nipped it between his teeth.

"Well, come on, Bodie. What do we usually do?"

Bodie's eyes turned opaque; then he laughed, not nicely. "You're a real thinker, aren't you, Doyle. You got it all worked out."

"I thought about it all the time," Doyle said. "Ever since I knew what you wanted."

Bodie considered him pensively. "And you like the idea."

"Yeah," Doyle said.

"But trouble is, Doyle," Bodie said, "the idea's one thing. It's a big step from there to reality."

"Same for you, innit? Worse, maybe. You've had longer to think about it. So, c'mon. Tell me what we get up to in these fantasies of yours." He stared up at Bodie, narrow-eyed and curious.

Bodie said, slowly, "Lie back and think of England, wasn't that what you said? Yeah, sometimes that's what you do. You owe me one and you're paying -- just like this, in fact. You don't want it, but you come round. All my dreams come true." He laughed. "Or maybe it's you who wants it -- desperate for it one night after some bird's left you in the lurch, an' you beg me to step in. Or you might fight me -- not meanin' it, just enough to get us both charged up, y'know -- ?"

He stopped, very abruptly. Doyle, hushed into silence, opened his eyes wide. "You really have gone into this, haven't you."

Bodie shrugged; he had turned distant, his eyes far away.

"What a game," Doyle said, shaking his head, "this double fantasy life I never knew I was leadin'."

"Yeah, what a game," Bodie echoed him softly, and then his eyes, restless, settled on Doyle's face and he smiled at him.

It was a strange smile; curious, dispassionate almost. As if he knew something Doyle did not. Doyle did not find it a comfortable scrutiny this time; but Bodie broke it soon enough, and leaned over him to kiss him. Doyle shut his eyes.

Bodie took his time over it, at first delicate, tender... so that he wanted more, deeper, to summon passion in a blaze. Stars whirled beneath Doyle's eyelids, a vista of erotic possibilities danced before him: his cock burned and lengthened and yearned for the other man's touch, which never came.

He felt the touch of lips at his throat, at his nipple; opened his eyes to see Bodie, unkempt, rakish, beautiful, his hair untidy and his mouth swelled a little from the kissing. Bodie stroked his curls back from his forehead, absorbed in the lie of them. Doyle stretched, languid, under his gaze, and Bodie's attention seemed to snap onto him again.

"That was nice," he said, quietly.

"Yeah," Doyle said, and grinned. Alarmed, however, in the next moment to see Bodie get up, stride across the room and glance out of the window. "Oi. Where you goin'?"

Bodie's body was powerful, richly muscled, biceps bunching unconsciously as he drew the curtain across. He said without turning around: "This isn't going to work, Ray."

Doyle looked askance. "What the hell d'you mean, 'not gonna work'?"

"I mean, that's enough. Consider it done. Debt paid."

"One bloody kiss?"

"It's just not a good idea. You and me -- it would never work out."

"Who's askin' it to?" Doyle tossed into the air. "C'mon, Bodie, don't make such heavy weather of it."

"Someone would get hurt."

Doyle laughed out loud at his partner's intensesness. "Don't be daft. No strings, Bodie... Just you and me comin' on to each other. How could anyone get hurt?"

There was a long silence, and then Bodie said slowly, "You do it without knowing, Ray, it isn't your fault."

Doyle was silent. "Don't worry about it," Bodie added, turning from the window at last. His thighs were muscular, darkly haired. He leaned over to pick up his briefs, stretched them automatically on his hands and stepped into them. Then his shirt, doing it up with quick fingers, straightening each cuff in turn and fastening the wrists.

Doyle propped himself up on his elbows. "Look, Bodie... did I do something wrong?"

Bodie regarded him from the darkness of over-long lashes: and smiled suddenly, a surprisingly sweet smile. "Not a thing, sweetheart, not a thing. It's me, not you." He pulled on his trousers, fastening them firmly. Sat down on the bed, to pull on his socks. All finished, he loomed in over Doyle lying naked, with crossed eyes and a slow, fatuous blink. "So ends our night of passion," he intoned.

But Ray Doyle was very far from being charmed.

"Oh, very nice, Bodie," he said, fierce and low. "You punishin' me for something, or what? First you won't, then you will, now you won't again."

Bodie's eyes hardened. "You'll get over it." He got up.

"Left me very disappointed, you 'ave." His body had caught on by now; it was not going to get what it wanted, and it tingled all over unpleasantly. He dropped his head back on the pillow and stared up at the ceiling. Then, against all expectation, he felt a hand fall onto his raised knee; slip down his thigh to the soft skin beyond, circling a little, stroking him.

His body perked up again and tingled more sweetly. Bodie's voice, when it came, was very low, the macho purr which he used to his girls. "And my beautiful Raymond should never be disappointed."

"Right," Doyle grumbled, but inside he turned light, inhabited by angels; because he knew after all he was going to get what he wanted.

Current girl on Sundays, Fridays; at rest on Tuesdays and Thursdays, thereby leaving Wednesdays free for new conquests; Bodie on Saturdays. This seemed to Ray Doyle an ideal schedule.

And he didn't see why it shouldn't be arranged, either, Bodie being hot for him as he was, and the art of seduction being one of Doyle's strengths. Why, these days he only had to walk across a room stripping his overalls back from his shoulders to get Bodie's full attention; one flirty

glance, a look tossed backwards, and Bodie would stand, drawn.

It was worth going for, too; what Bodie had done to him, assured and skilled, had been superb, one of his all-time erotic highs right up there with the girl who had dared to feel him up when they were fifteen; his first night with Kathy Mason (only too clear now why she'd done for him what she had); and a tender night once with a girl he'd loved, when he just could not quite believe that anyone so beautiful would do this ugly thing for him.

He started his campaign on Friday, to give Bodie time to adjust: and invited himself around to supper, bringing a bottle of wine.

All went as planned.

His Saturday affair. What could be better?

PART TWO – FLIPSIDE

Panting, Doyle hurtled around the corner and froze with his back to the wall, weapon whipped up and ready. A shot smacked into the brickwork and sprayed him with dust: already he was down flat, rolling, coming up in a crouch. Fighting, for his life, with every breath in his body.

He fired.

The target fell down flat, backwards. Being made of plywood, it rose again with rather less trouble than a human opponent; its crude wooden outline wobbled in the wind.

Doyle lowered his weapon with satisfaction. Around the corner of the building came Cowley, fixing him with an acute eye.

"Not bad, Doyle, not had at all."

Not bad! Bloody brilliant, was Doyle's rating. He adopted an insolent slouch. Cowley looked him over with something less than favour. "My office in twenty minutes, 4.5. Changed."

"Oi!" Doyle called after him, adding an unchastened: "Sir. What did I get?"

A steely glint flashed his way. "A-minus."

"Minus?" Doyle scowled. "Ah, come on, sir, that was an A-plus performance -- wasn't it?"

"Too much time rescuing your partner, Doyle. Bodie can look after himself."

Yeah, and the British Empire.

"Dunno why you need the rest of us at all," he muttered resentfully, but Cowley was well out of earshot. Not that he wouldn't have said it in Cowley's hearing, oh no. Not everyone around here

was all yes sir, no sir, three-bags-full-sir the way Bodie was.

And oh-ho, *hadn't* it just worked. Sun shone out of Bodie's arse where Cowley was concerned.

He squinted up at the cloudless sky, azure. He was so hot, sweating still. His T shirt was wringing wet, the sage of its green darkened to moss in huge patches. He stripped it over his head, the sun drying him as he jogged back towards the Portakabin.

His rescued partner was there already, having a vigorous wash in the sink.

"What d'you get?" Doyle asked him, balling the T-shirt and chucking it.

"What d'you think?" Bodie said smugly.

"My hero," Doyle said coolly.

"Bloody hot out there."

"You know, Bodie, the old man really rates you."

"Are you surprised? Knows a good thing when he sees it." He turned around from the sink, and began to dry his torso. Scowling, Doyle watched the brisk motions, the green towel flying over Bodie's skin. Bodie was humming cheerfully: old man's favourite, bloody A-plus, male beauty to its extreme.

Doyle felt hot, and scratchy, and irritable. "You didn't get overcome by your feelings, then."

"What?" Bodie leaned forward critically, rubbed Doyle's nose with his forefinger. "Sorry, mate, made it worse. Use the mirror."

"Me, I got docked for worrying too much about my partner. Not something you're guilty of, eh?" Doyle regarded him grimly, arms folded.

"Ah, Ray, " Bodie remarked, pulling on a pale blue shirt, "only you know where my true heart lies."

Bodie was lightly sarcastic, Doyle serious and becoming more so, hidden resentments flying up like jackdaws from the corn. "You comin' round tomorrow night?"

"Sorry, sunshine. Got something else on."

"It's Saturday," he said pointedly.

"I know that, mate," Bodie said patiently. "Got me CI5 diary, just the same as you 'ave.

"Ah, come on, Bodie. Got a nice steak to tempt you with," Doyle offered off the top of his head.

"Promise anything, you will. Then when I get there all there'll be is a mouldy loaf and half a cold sausage." Bodie loomed in and winked at him. "I know you, Doyle."

Unamused, Doyle stared at him. "What's the matter with you? Doesn't seem long since you were keen enough to come."

Bodie shrugged. "Well, where I'm keen to go now is Cowley's office, because that's where we're due." He pushed himself past Doyle without looking at him. Doyle's expression remained unsweet. He dragged a clean T-shirt on over his unclean skin and went after him.

"So you're not coming, then. Saturday."

"I told you," Bodie said, irritated. "No."

"Playing *so* hard to get, Bodie, aren't you," Doyle jeered.

"No," Bodie said mildly, "I've just got something else on."

Doyle took two extra strides to dance in front of Bodie and confront him, going backwards fast.

"Do you know how many weeks it's been?"

"Shut up, Ray," Bodie muttered; they were approaching the little cluster of agents waiting outside Cowley's temporary office. "Jax looks fed-up; he must have blown it. Anson's smilin', though -- watch out."

"*Bodie.*" Doyle planted himself and glared.

But Bodie just shoved him aside, joined the rabble without another glance at him.

But it wasn't that easy.

It was eleven, later, and Bodie loitered at Doyle's door, and could not decide.

What the hell am I doing here?

A pale moon shone; blown by a southerly wind clouds scudded across the sky and would not stay to make pictures: no omens there to help him.

He had done the right thing yesterday, held Doyle off; and to go back on it would be madness. The man was a leech, greedy for it all, uncaring of his host's decline.

So what point was there in letting himself listen to something which had been, at best, an echo; a long-ago dream which contemptuous reality had forced into the dust?

No point at all.

A sure man, confident in himself and unused to indecision, he stood there for too long. A discreet cough behind him made him act, more to show he was not lingering suspiciously than anything; he had a key to Doyle's flat and used it.

Inside all was quiet, very quiet. One glass on the drainer: all the plates on the rack. The bedroom was in darkness, but the air had that warm scent of occupancy; and Bodie heard as he came to the bedside the sound of light, even breathing.

Until that moment there had been nothing to it; he could as easily have slipped away and out into the dark again. But the moment passed, and it was too late; Doyle, always a sensitive sleeper, shifted in the bed and rolled onto his back.

Eyes flicked open, dark in the absence of light, and Bodie tensed, in case he would dive instinctively for his gun.

"What you doin' 'ere?" Doyle said indistinctly, but he was already moving over. The decision, for now, was out of his hands. Bodie began to undress, and slid under the duvet without saying a word. His hands reached out for the other man's body; they knew him, and the pattern of his responses, better than they had ever known anyone's. Doyle sighed and lay still for him. They made love with all the fierceness and sweetness of a farewell; and yet Bodie had not meant it that way, had meant to keep it from Doyle a little longer.

Afterwards Doyle lay open-eyed in the dark, loosely in his arms.

He had not spoken at all since the beginning; unusual for Doyle who fired off prayers and promises in the heat of the moment, along with hints as to his lust's current demands. None of that. Silence.

Bodie was almost asleep when at last Doyle's voice filtered out of the dark, but then he came awake immediately.

"Is it a girl?"

"Yes," Bodie answered him, and it was easy, after all.

He heard the swathe of Doyle's huge sigh cut a chill between them; the winds of change.

"It's serious then?"

"Yeah."

Doyle felt stupid with disbelief; as if something massive had slammed against his mind and stunned it.

"How serious?"

"Let's say exclusive," Bodie said starkly: there really was no kinder way.

Doyle stared at him. "Do I know her?"

"Nope."

Doyle made a vague gesture. "Well. What can I -- ?" He glanced at the bedside, back to Bodie again. Under the duvet their feet touched briefly and moved apart. "Well, good for you, mate," he said with an obvious effort. "Congratulations. I never thought -- Well."

Bodie thought, *No, you never did*. "You want a cup of tea or something?" he offered, stupidly.

"Yeah, that'd be -- "

Bodie pulled on his clothes and went out to the kitchen, winced as the bright light went on; put the kettle on, began arranging cups. His knees felt weak. Tea. He threw off lids. Here. He heard Doyle behind him.

"Sugar?"

"You know I do."

"Oh yeah."

What else. Milk. In the fridge -- ?

"When did you meet her?"

"Few weeks ago."

"You never said."

"Didn't know then it was going to be -- "

"So that's it then." In Doyle's soft, deceptive voice Bodie heard it: the first trace of anger, rising like heat through a storm. "Backs against the wall time, and I'm the first to go."

Bodie spooned tea desperately. "Well -- you know, Ray -- it just wouldn't -- "

"Oh no, I can see it wouldn't. Don't want any little bedroom secrets hanging around now Miss Right's turned up, do you?"

The kettle screeched, making Bodie jump. With shaking fingers -- ridiculous -- he poured it onto the tea in the cups. A scummy mess of leaves rose to the top: undrinkable. He threw it, steaming,

down the sink and began to start again.

"Don't bother," Doyle said huskily. "Tea and sympathy's likely to make me vomit at the moment."

The man's precious semen was at this moment cooling on his belly. Desperate, Bodie turned.

"Ray, don't be like this." Though he had known he would be.

"Don't be upset, you mean? Oh, that's a laugh."

"I thought you might even be -- relieved."

Doyle's eyes searched out his, dangerously. "Oh yeah. That's a good one. And just how'd you work that out, then?"

Doyle was so pale, delicate skin and looks for a man in some lights; yet brutish in others, and he was as tough as they came. Bodie took a deep breath, and said valiantly: "Look, Ray... We both know I had a bit of a thing about you one time. Now you don't have to worry any more." Stupid that: he nearly laughed with nerves and irony. Ray had never shown any signs of worrying; that was half the trouble, or all of it. Take what I can get, that was old Ray's determined policy: and Bodie had to admire it. In fact, he shared it.

"So, that's it," Doyle said. He folded his arms and leaned against a cupboard. "Not got a thing about me any more."

"You grow up, Ray. You change."

He was trying, quite desperately as it happened, to work his way through this with the least possible hurt for both of them; but he never had expected it to be easy. Doyle had his pride. Not only that, but he was quite and unreservedly unused to rejection.

"And now you're on your way. To a more grown-up relationship: is that it?"

"Ray, I'd better go." And he was on the move. But Doyle was there snapping at his heels, hounding him.

"Grown up so much you left me behind, have you, Bodie?"

Bodie turned around then, painful, angry. "Ray, you never wanted me. Don't -- "

"Don't what?" Shockingly, Bodie saw tears standing out in the proud green glitter of his eyes; but then Doyle had always come by tears easily, not for him the bitter, inward struggle. Bodie kept on, with dogged persistence.

" -- Don't make more of it than it was. I don't kid myself, Ray, I never did. You liked having me

around, good old Bodie handy for a quick thrill once a week, didn't even have to buy me dinner first. And that was *it*, Doyle. That was all there was to it." Dammit, dammit; and he had meant to be so cool.

"I'm goin', Ray. You're angry, and I -- look. Everything'll be the same. We'll still be friends."

"Oh yeah?" Doyle said bitterly, and Bodie reached blindly for the door. He was grabbed from behind.

Tense with anger, ready to fight, Bodie turned but Doyle's mood had changed. He shook his head, lifted both hands in a gesture of surrender, steadying himself with an obvious effort.

"Hell, Bodie... I'm sorry. Here you are tellin' me this, and I should be wishin' you the best, and instead here I am -- sorry. I'm sorry, mate."

As with all Doyle's moods it had the virtue of sincerity. Bodie gave him a cool nod, not trusting himself to speak.

"I'll see you in the mornin'," Doyle called after him, and Bodie made his escape.

"What's her name, then?" Doyle said, amiably enough. He was fiddling in the glove pocket, looking for something.

"Sally-Ann," Bodie said.

"Where'd you meet her?"

"Paul Ives' party."

Doyle frowned and extracted a packet of mints, shutting the pocket with a snap. "I didn't see you with a bird there."

"Probably because you left with Melissa from Accounts before 9 p.m."

Doyle sucked in his cheeks and popped in a Polo. "Did I? Yeah, maybe I did. Is she pretty?"

"What do you think?"

"Yeah," Doyle decided, "she's pretty."

"You comin' out for a drink tonight?" Bodie said, more to change the subject than anything; in the silence he sensed Doyle's surprise. "Look, I didn't say I was goin' into purdah, Doyle. Just -- "

Doyle rocked backwards in his seat. "Just. Yeah. I understand. So she'll let you have a drink with me, this Sally-Ann of yours, will she?"

Bodie did not bother to reply.

"Do I get to meet her?"

"Course." Bodie shrugged.

"You plannin' on marrying her?" Doyle was abrupt, looking not at Bodie but his own hand, clutching the dashboard as they took a fast corner.

"I dunno."

"Don't hold out on me."

"I'm not. Just haven't looked that far ahead."

Doyle's moods were erratic; he had, to all appearances, settled, adopted this air of semi-polite interest: yet every now and then something else would flare up through the calm. Bodie could see that hell, whatever he tried to do or say, lay on the horizon.

"Would she have you?" Doyle said, and chuckled suddenly, breaking it off at once. "Does she know you snore -- ? What your breath's like first thing in the morning?" He reached out and patted Bodie's knee solemnly. "Only joking, old son. Only jokin'."

"What time tonight, then?" Bodie said, dogged, resolute.

"What -- ? Oh, time. Say eight? Dog and Duck? -- Does she know about your thing for leather?"

"Knock it off, Ray." Bodie let fly, goaded out of all patience. "D'you wanna walk home?"

Doyle twisted to look at the sign they were passing. "Not from 'ere, no. Sorry, mate. Didn't know you were so sensitive."

Catching a glimpse of his profile, Bodie saw something beyond malice: a calmness, clear as glass over water, and a chill rippled through him, to the very bone.

He drove on, to Doyle's flat.

8.10 p.m. Doyle downed lager with a cheerful disregard for the Government's Recommended Safe Drinking Levels, and was much his usual self for a while. Bodie began to be lulled; worse, he caught himself eyeing the eggshell skin at Doyle's temples, the dusky points of his nipples through his thin shirt, the line of his thigh in blue jeans as he leaned to help himself from a packet of crisps open on the table. And his eyes: Doyle had particularly lucid eyes, wide and so clear you felt you could see right through to the heart of him; misleading.

And tonight he could see that Doyle was not going to let it rest: clearly it tormented him like a harrowing ache he could not ignore.

" -- brunette, blonde, redhead?"

"Dark."

"Eyes?"

"Blue."

"Mmm." Doyle made a little, considering face. "Small, tall, fat?"

"Tallish. Well-built."

Now Doyle laughed. "Bodie, she sounds just like you. Narcissus meets his match, eh?" He took a drink of his beer, smacked his lips, shaking his head. "You wanna watch it, mate. She could be a sister. One your mum didn't tell you about, by-blow from the milkman or summat. Happens all the time."

The pub was one of their regulars; on certain summer's nights Bodie had decided that it was a good place for him, a happy place: they had had some good times, in here. Eat at Ray's flat, or his own maybe, then come on here for a pint or two, sit outside on the pavement under a parasol, talk of nothing, or not at all. Relaxed, no need to begin the hunt; because they were going home.

Tonight, when outside it was cold, the harsh lights shone on dark green Victorian tiles like a public lavatory; the little booths were filling up fast and the air was blue with smoke. The jukebox played a sentimental song of longing; and tonight they would be going home alone.

"*It was just like this,*" Doyle sang, lashes downcast as he studied his pint, "*behind the kisses you so soon swept away* -- " He caught Bodie's eyes on him, stopped abruptly. "Ah, 's bloody rubbish, this. Never get any decent music in 'ere. Have one of these." Doyle fished in his pocket and slapped two cigars on the table; huge brown things, torpedoes. Bodie stared at them. "Since we're celebratin'." Doyle stuffed one between his own pursed lips and flicked a lighter like a pro.

"Cigars are for a birth, Doyle." But he took it up with something like alacrity; the dulling of alcohol was making him lazy and unwise, when he had to keep sharp. He poised the tip over Doyle's proffered flame, dragging in a dizzying burst of nicotine, felt nausea for a moment, then forgot it in the glory of the rush to his brain.

"Well, that'll be next, Bodie. Want kids, does she?" Again Doyle took a deep suck on his cigar, eyes wide and cool; he removed it swiftly and blew out a thin fast stream of smoke.

"Haven't asked."

He wanted to get Doyle off the subject, pass on and away from it once and for all; and yet he knew sinkingly that Doyle, eyes bright and set and wild, was going to thrash it out till it died a screaming death: and sure enough it came.

"Good in bed, is she?"

Bodie gave him a cold and quelling stare, and swallowed beer. "Isn't like you to be nosy, Ray."

Cooler still, Doyle faced him out. "Ah, c'mon. You can tell me. We always have."

"This is different."

"Oh yeah. I forgot. Exclusive, didn't you say." He picked up the glasses. "Same again?" Without waiting for a reply he was off, threading his way through hordes: the pub was opposite a theatre, one of the reasons they had liked it, watching toffs and tourists all with a common purpose, getting a few in before the arid stretch between curtain-up and interval. Bodie breathed out, carefully, and relaxed the tense muscles of rib and chest. He kept on smoking. It seemed to help.

A few minutes passed before Doyle was back with two brimming pints. Sitting down he drained about half of his in one go. Bodie knew better than to comment. Saturdays, it had been their custom to drink a fair bit: relaxed the inhibitions wonderfully, and there had been one night when Doyle had wanted him to --

Bodie stubbed out the cigar in the tin ashtray with swift, jabbing motions.

Doyle watched him. He was wearing a short brown leather blouson which suited his angel-hustler's looks to perfection: so soft it didn't creak when he moved. Had style, old Doyle. Everything he wore looked good. His eyes, vast and greyish-green, had a dark ring around the pupil, his mouth was pretty. Bodie watched him, and did not smile, and lifted his glass.

Doyle's cheek creased; a flash of a chuckle. "What's the matter, Bodie -- don't like the taste?" He thrust his glass to Bodie's, clinked it hard. "To you. And your lady. Congratulations."

"Save 'em till they're needed: I told you, nothing's settled."

Doyle made a dismissive face. He seemed constantly amused, by some joke Bodie did not see. "A small detail. Because you're pretty damn serious about her, aren't you." The joke fled; ice sheered across. It was coming. "Serious enough to break this up?"

Here it was. "Break what up?" Bodie asked neutrally, looking across the table, not precisely at Doyle; instead, he kept him in the fringes of his vision.

Doyle leaned nearer him. "Us."

"Us. What, you mean the quick screw we used to have of a Saturday? Oh dear, Doyle, and you will miss it, won't you. Shall I give you some numbers to call?"

Doyle just stared at him, the cigar smoked down to the last wet, chewed inch. He pinched it, redly glowing, between his fingers.

"Nothing else will change, I promise you," Bodie said quickly, urgently. "Still partners. Still friends."

Friends! He nearly laughed as he said it. He got on better with Murph than Doyle when it came down to it; and Doyle was a loner, who didn't seem to need friends. People to knock around with, yes. To open his heart to, no.

Doyle flicked the stub into the ashtray where it lay across Bodie's, and shed glowing ash for a while. "Why are you doing this, Bodie?"

Bodie stared at him. "You know why."

"Wasn't I good with you?" Doyle asked with a kind of introspective hatred.

Good? -- startled into nostalgia, Bodie remembered the sight of him, the look in his eyes as he drew closer, the scent of his skin. A glow chased the chill in his belly away; he was conscious that he had flushed.

"Of course you were -- " he dropped his voice " -- good. We were good together."

"Not good enough, obviously," Doyle said viciously. He drained his glass.

"Look, the sex was great. You know it was."

Doyle lifted his chin, stared him full in the face. "Not always."

"It was great, Doyle," Bodie insisted. Their voices, keeping low beneath the babble, were beginning to raise: they'd have to leave. The slanging match was coming next, and he'd just prefer not to have it all dragged out here: though the playgoers, no doubt, would find the secrets of their bedroom more compelling than Act One of *Daisy Pulls It Off*.

Doyle gave him a very deliberate glance.

"I know you wanted to lay me. And I never let you."

Bodie set down his glass on the table and looked around casually. No-one seemed to be looking their way, but he sensed a certain stillness here and there. "Let's go."

"But I was working up to it, I swear it, Bodie."

Not that it mattered. But Bodie felt a shiver pass down his spine. As he led the way out, he felt Doyle's murmur against his ear: "I'd've let you if I'd've known it was that important to you."

"It wasn't. Shut up about it."

"I reckon it was," Doyle persisted. "Reckon it must have been."

The door swung open and then shut behind them; and they were out in the cool night air. The car was nearby, down a side-street. A large white square was fixed to the windscreen, firmly taped on all sides with Sellotape.

"Bloody ticket!" Bodie exclaimed, incensed. He strode around to the front of the car and tore the offending object off. "Christ, how do they expect you to get around these days?"

Doyle stayed by the passenger door, tapping his fingers on the roof. "Beam us up, Scotty," he said.

"I'm not paying it," Bodie decided, unlocking the door and hurling the ticket onto the back seat. "Take a Kalashnikov round there if I have to, but I -- am -- not -- paying a bloody parking fine. Fuck it, Doyle, I *know* some of those guys and I'm *not paying it*."

"Not above the law," Doyle intoned, "inside it."

"Yeah, well we deserve some bloody perks. Apart, of course, from the enhanced life insurance in case we die in the line of duty."

Doyle cackled. "And who collects that? Not us."

"I'll drop you off at your place," Bodie said abruptly.

"You goin' on to Aunt Sally's?"

Bodie didn't answer; put the car into gear and drove off.

"All right then," Doyle said, examining his fingernails, "we'll talk 'ere. Okay, so I never let you fuck me. Sucked you off though, didn't I?"

Bodie jolted violently in his seat. "*Christ, Ray.*" Hadn't seen that coming.

"Remember?"

Himself lying down in a darkened room, too tense to enjoy it lest Doyle throw up or something: fear in his belly, Doyle's mouth --

Bodie said, spurred by Doyle's bitterness into his own, "Yeah, and you hated it. You made that very clear."

"Never let me get close enough to try again, did you?"

Bodie's smile was gay and violent. "Can't force a man to eat against his religion."

"I suppose Aunt Sally sucks like a sword swallower."

"Ray, change the tune will you? Give it a bloody rest."

Although Bodie had pulled up outside his flat, Doyle made no move to get out. The engine cut: the lights from the dashboard died. Doyle half-turned to face him, and his eyes were glittering points of light.

"Okay, so I wasn't good enough. Didn't fuck, didn't suck. I thought you seemed 'appy enough, at the time."

"I was. Look, Ray," Bodie said, with desperate reason, "you're not being very gracious about this... dammit, when it was you with the Holly woman I backed off, let you run."

"Yeah, but you still came round Saturday night."

"It was Friday that week," Bodie said, dragged into bitter memory. "She couldn't make it, so you wanted me to instead." And it had been one of the best nights; tinged, perhaps, with the knowledge it would end. Ray wild, fighting like a tiger, all claws and teeth; and soft, soft lips as he succumbed.

And he knew what was coming next. *Shut up Doyle, shut up, shut up.*

Doyle fidgeted, and stared out of the window. "Is it because of that night I made you -- "

"No," Bodie said harshly, pushing the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "It wasn't because of that. You wanted it and I did it."

Now Bodie was angry Doyle was calm, staring at him with cool eyes. "But you thought I was sick to like it."

"No, I didn't." Sick? Doyle had been beautiful, caught on an extremity of pleasure, quivering; Bodie had loved him more, and deeper, at that moment than he had ever done. Still, it was not an easy memory, laced with guilt and tension; Bodie leaned his arm on the steering wheel and his head on his arm, and wished for this to be over. Doyle watched him, with cold appraising eyes.

"Don't suppose Aunt Sally'll want any of that kinky stuff. Strictly up-and-down missionary stuff for you from now on." He laughed. "Maybe a blow-job on your birthday if you're lucky." He reached out, flipped Bodie on the arm. "Hey, pity, innit? Pity your birthday never fell on a Saturday, all the years we been at it."

Bodie resisted with great and complex difficulty the urge to hit him, either with physical force or a bitter barrage of rhetoric.

"I told you: will you listen? Look, get it out of your head once and for all, *forever*, dammit, that this has got anything to do with anything we did, or didn't, do in bed."

Doyle was silent; then he laughed. "Hasn't it? What is it, then, she cook a better lasagne than me?"

"Ray," Bodie said in despair, because he had never got this across before and never would now: "the sex was great. I never in my life got so high as I did with you. *Especially* on that night, believe it or not. " And at this peculiar moment, of all things he wanted nothing more than to take Ray into his arms, because he was brave, fighting on with that terrible bright courage: such despair, beneath the rage.

Of all things...

He said, struggling on with his own battle: "But -- I need more than that, Ray: there comes a time when -- it just isn't enough. You do *know* what I mean. It's time for us to move on, that's all. Try and find something -- that'll last."

Doyle's eyes engaged his boldly, dangerously. "And that's what you've done, is it? Oh, a quick worker."

"I'm trying, that's all I can say."

"And that's it, then," Doyle said, and he laughed unpleasantly. "End of ride: you want me to get out of the car."

Bodie let out a long, long, slow breath. "Yeah."

"All right. I'm going."

But he didn't stir: moved by something probably unwise Bodie leaned over and kissed his mouth.

He discovered that it was all a myth put about by the anti-smoking lobby; the smokiness lingering about Doyle tasted nothing but exotic. His pulse raced and his heart hammered and he took Doyle's tongue in his mouth with a tenderness he had thought beyond them. But that was all; because it was over. Ended.

And that sleepless night there came to Bodie words whose source he had forgotten but which rang in his mind over and over: *We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and left undone those things which we ought to have done. And there is no health in us.*

Doyle paced around, spun on one foot, began to whistle. Bodie's flat was military neat -- just as usual, Bodie kept it that way. No little feminising touches -- no bunch of flowers on the dining table, no pretty little bottles in the bathroom, just Bodie's usual array of manly toiletries. Doyle used to share them, on the occasions when he had stayed the night.

He wasn't meaning to pry. Bodie was supposed to meet him here and Bodie was late, it was as

simple as that. Uneasy looking around as he once had never been, Doyle sank into a striped armchair and eyed the files he had brought, without enthusiasm. Couldn't be bothered. Let Bodie get stuck into 'em.

His eyes flicked up to the mantelpiece, automatically scanned the poster of naked girls in suspenders Bodie had there; now *that* would have to go once Little Miss Prim got herself installed. Firm and strong like a games' mistress, that was how Doyle saw her; fed on milk and butter and clean Irish air.

His gaze travelled on, around the room. Something had changed, but what it was --

His eyelids creased in a sudden frown. Goddammit, the bastard had --

He jumped to his feet to confirm his guess; it took only a selective glance around to see what Bodie had done.

Yeah: the photo which lived on the mantelpiece of Bodie, Doyle beside him, holding the CI5 pairs shooting trophy, both of them sweaty and grinning and muddy. Gone. The little beer mug beside it, the one he'd presented to Bodie after winning it at the fair shooting ducks with an air rifle: *Forever Yours*, it said. Gone. The programme for the Albert Hall concert he'd dragged Bodie to once -- all classical lollipops, Rossini, Vivaldi, the Water Music.

"Oh yeah, I know this," Bodie'd announced loudly, and crunched on a nut chocolate. "Andrex loo rolls, innit?"

Gone. Torn up and chucked in the bin, most likely. Like their relationship.

But they weren't in the bin: Doyle checked, rifling the flat like the expert he was, lifting everything then settling it so it seemed untouched. He found them, finally, in Bodie's desk, shoved into a side drawer: all the little things, valueless, memorabilia of things only the two of them would know about, or care.

For example: a huge and useless pencil brightly adorned with animal pictures; the little plastic grinning camel. *What d you call a camel with three humps? -- dunno, a -- lemme see, not a dromedary, a tertiary? Nope. Humphrey. Not funny, Bodie, not funny.* Yet they had fallen to the floor laughing.

Doyle closed Humphrey in his hand and remembered too well: a hot day, a haze in the air, a visit to Regent's Park for the zoo. A stupid idea, of course; very many of Bodie's ideas for leisure were stupid, paintgun battles for example, a day at Alton Towers riding the worst and the nastiest: but the strange thing was that Doyle always enjoyed himself as never before, put CI5 behind him whatever the latest deadly news, on a high of excitement only Bodie's particular outlook inspired in him: Bodie didn't see anything immature about playing the games of children when they had graduated, too soon and too much, as men.

The zoo...

... had been a perfect day; warm sun on their backs, families and kids milling all around them, a thrill in the air. Rude comments about the blue-bottomed monkeys, egg sandwiches at a picnic table. They had ridden in the llama-cart eating ice-cream in a cone; Doyle had perched for a circuit on a camel, but Bodie refused, claiming exemption as the photographer. Doyle's camel-ride remained, however, unpreserved on celluloid; Bodie had been convulsed with laughter as he returned with great dignity, and quite unable to stand, much less speak.

They had been so happy. Doyle could taste the echoes of it now, felt the sun on his skin, the warmth of Bodie's smile; the arm slung around his back as the cart jolted and children screamed. And the night still to come.

Here were the remnants of the day: the happiness folded in on it and crammed into a drawer.

Doyle knelt where he was, and considered what he had lost: because he knew now that he had lost it. In Bodie he had had it all, or as good as he was likely to get: companion, lover, friend; and now he had blown it, and that was that.

Well, of course. Of course he had taken Bodie for granted, because he had never had any reason not to: Bodie was always there. Secure of his place (first) in Bodie's heart, and always, always finely conscious that he was doling out favours: just fancy, how funny, he had never seen the moment when the tables had turned.

And now it was too late. Bodie was breaking away, and it was always too late to rewind your life and stop it at some crossroads: that day at the zoo, perhaps, when he should have turned in the crook of Bodie's arm, and said -- something. Some litany to set the locks on Bodie's heart. He could have done it. He knew he could: at that time Bodie had been his for the asking.

After a while he rose to his feet: there was no point in brooding. A handful of paper and plastic, after all. He left them there.

Wandered back to the living-room. The files were waiting. It was an unpleasant case. Did Susan Cheng, the personable drug-dealer, know what she'd been doing when she sold the very young and now very dead girl two grams of heroin laced with caustic soda -- ? or was she simply part of a longer and more sinister chain? Because the young girl's father was a highly-placed Tory minister and there was going to be one hell of a stink.

Doyle, an expert in drugs and people's various twists on unscrupulousness in the face of profit, put the file down, yawned. Maybe Bodie would have some insight, spot some linking factor. He himself did not have the heart for it right now.

Where the hell *was* Bodie?

He got up and wandered round again, scratching one armpit, staring out of the window. No pretty views here. Just London chimney pots. Still, they had their own charm.

His restless feet took him to the bedroom; standing in the doorway he looked at the bed, its duvet neatly, freshly laid. It looked different in the daylight. He had always taken the pillows to be white; now he saw they were in fact pale blue. Just a detail, but it hurt him unaccountably: even his memories were false. And would grow falser, no doubt: nothing fades so quickly as reality.

How long, for instance, since Bodie had lain here with him, and for the first time realised that the magic had gone?

"I used to have a bit of a thing about you..."

Had Bodie been relieved to find the longing purged?

And how had he kept that disenchantment from his partner...

Doyle positively shivered, thinking of Bodie; here with him a thousand times in the night, dark and tender fire between them. Bodie going with his whims, gentle or rough as Doyle pleased: Doyle the capricious one, the attention-seeker. But of all things, he had never for one moment guessed that Bodie was tiring.

And not when he himself was growing into it, like a pair of old shoes that you did not feel on your feet, so right for you that you began to want nothing else.

Well. That was life, and no mistake.

Nothing so dead as an old love, so they said.

Bodie was right: it was time to move on.

He left the room, and just in time too, because Bodie was there at the door, he heard the key turn. He slouched in the kitchen door-arch and watched him heft in groceries with a hard eye.

"You're late."

Bodie shrugged. "Stopped off for a few things." He handed Doyle a laden carrier. "Ta." Larger than life, cheerful and handsome in black leather jacket and cords, Bodie smelt of crisp autumn air; he unpacked provisions rapidly and stacked them on the kitchen table in three piles - Freezer (peas, ice-cream cake), Fridge (cheese, eggs), Cupboard (beans, bleach and toilet paper).

There was also a double pack of boneless chicken breasts, a pallid sight so untypical of Bodie's roast beef tastes that Doyle stared at it.

"Sally-up-your-alley coming to dinner tonight, is she?"

"Yep." Bodie had ceased to be fazed in the face of Doyle's rudeness, remained calm in the face of all things. "Shove that in the fridge door, will you?"

A bottle of wine -- white. Doyle stuffed it into the fridge next to the apple juice: revolting stuff. They both loathed it. He stared at it with dislike, a knocking sensation in his stomach. Gradually, she was seeping into every corner of Bodie's life, taking it over from within.

You know, he had never quite believed in her. Until this.

Unsettled, Doyle felt the pangs of homesickness, as if he did not belong here and should be getting home; a trespasser suffered by Bodie to encroach on the territory that was Sally-Ann's. Soon Bodie would be looking covertly at his watch, hoping he would be gone in time.

He straightened. "Better go," and he went.

Bodie caught him by the arm before he'd gone two paces. "Oi, you," he said good-humouredly. "Files -- ?"

"*You* read the bloody things," Doyle snapped.

"Cowley wanted us both to read 'em." His gaze, inexorable, crept over Doyle's face. "You okay?"

Doyle glared at him. "Of course I'm bloodywell okay. You can see I'm okay. Two arms, two legs. Upright."

"Look as if you're getting a cold."

"Ah, *sod off, Bodie*," Doyle hurled at him, and the moment was far more intense than it should have been.

Two beats of silence: Bodie stared at him, dark eyebrows arched in a quizzical line. "All right, Ray." Doyle shouldered past him again, making brutishly for the door. "I just want to say, before you dash off as if your tail's on fire, why not drop in later on? !f you're passing. Come in, say hello. About time you met her, isn't it?"

Doyle took a deep breath, kicked one foot against the ground. "No," he said.

"Ah, come on," Bodie said, mildly enough. "Only got enough for two or you could stay. But join us for the pud, eh?"

Doyle's gaze fixed on him with as much insolence as he could muster. "No thanks. Can't stand gateau, it cloys. You two lovebirds enjoy it together."

And for the second time he was off, heading for the door. Behind him, Bodie said: "Look. We've got to talk, Ray."

"What is it, Bodie, you want me as bridesmaid?" Doyle drawled through gritted teeth. "Sorry,

mate, all that orange blossom makes me sneeze."

"What's the *matter* with you?"

Doyle froze where he stood, his head cocked in disbelief.

"All right, all right. I do know what the bloody matter is... " Bodie's tone took on a sharp note of mockery: "Poor old Ray, given the elbow, and you think I should be a damn sight more sensitive about it. But the truth is, Ray," he took a step forward, grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him, "you're not *jealous*. Oh no. What you are is -- piqued." Bodie's eyes bored into his, a dark-blue glaze. "Because you think you're so damned pretty it should be you calling the shots: you signin' the start date and pulling the ripcord at the end. I got there first, and you don't like that one little bit. But," he moved in closer, touched Doyle's cheek, brushed back the curls over his ear, savage and tender, "believe me. You'll get over it."

Doyle threw back his head and laughed. "Find myself a nice girl?"

Bodie stopped touching him then, turned away. His voice sounded weary suddenly, a little dispirited. "Don't think it's been easy, Ray, because it hasn't."

Despite his self-preoccupation Doyle heard a real, untold story there: beneath the quietness and the calm, the chaos of a struggle he would never know about. But his own bitterness carried him on: "What wasn't easy? Droppin' me -- or having to bed me when urge went cold on you?"

Bodie swung round and looked at him, unfathomable.

"Urge never went cold on me, Doyle. Don't put yourself down for the sake of it."

But Doyle would: it was one of his things. Turned too easily onto a track of self-pity, did Ray Doyle; slugged along in the Despond with his head down, feeling unworthy on a cosmic scale.

Until he bounced back again, all his perky male pride restored by a good night's sleep.

Doyle said, with unpleasant calm, "I wanna know when you realised."

"Realised what?"

"You didn't fancy me any more."

Bodie made a helpless gesture, exasperated. "*It wasn't like that.*" He gazed at Doyle. "The whole thing was going nowhere, Doyle. We had to split up; give us a chance to find, I dunno, something else. Something which might -- grow a bit; you -- " he fell silent, looking askance. "You were too close to me. I couldn't see past you..."

"Goin' nowhere?" Doyle said, fast, snapping it out. "How did you feel when I met Ann, Bodie? Relieved?"

Bodie stood his ground in the face of all that furious energy, flying sparks.

"I was wiped out," he said simply.

There was a little silence. Somewhere a clock was chiming; the same one Doyle had often heard from Bodie's bed, counting out the hours before dawn.

All his anger focussed; he exploded. "But you -- 'got over it' . Got any tips for me, Bodie. Meditation help? Running? C'mon, Bodie, *get me through this.*"

Bodie was shaking him now, hard and fast. "Shut up, Ray. *Shut up.* It wasn't the same, can't you understand that? I -- " he looked, unflinching, into Doyle's eyes " -- *loved you*, for chrissake." Deep breath. "You knew it was more than a quick tumble for me, right from the start you knew that. Christ!" He threw back his head and laughed, bitterly. "I thought it was my lucky day that first time, when you lay down for me and let me do it. Like fallin' into heaven when you didn't know you'd died." His eyes trailed consideringly over Doyle's battered, tough face. "So beautiful, aren't you, every now and then? But it wasn't the same for you, and I never kidded myself. Just marginally better than a solo flight, far as you were concerned, isn't that right, Ray?"

Now it was Doyle who was calm, as he stood still and Bodie's squeezing hands hurt him; he stared back with eyes of stone. "You never asked me."

"Asked you what?" Bodie said with a kind of anguish; his thumbs pressed hard into Doyle's biceps, springing bruises to the fore, yet he did not seem aware that he was touching the other man. Doyle never moved.

"Making some pretty broad assumptions, aren't you? How d'you know, how are you so damn sure, it wasn't more than that for me too? Because you sure as hell didn't have a quorum on it, Bodie, whatever happened to democracy?" Savage and mocking, his lip curled. "Have to get rid of old Ray, won't I, he's standing between me and something *real.*"

The doorbell rang.

"I love you, you pillock," Doyle said, eyes wide and clear.

Bodie hit him.

Light as he was and not expecting it, the weight of Bodie's fist knocked him flying across the kitchen; he crashed into the cupboards, slid down to the floor, jarring his back, his spine, his coccyx. Stars danced before his eyes and his head rang with explosions of pain. A warm wet salt stuff filled his mouth and Ray Doyle swallowed blood.

Through a film of fog he could see Bodie standing there. He spat, wiped his mouth with his hand. A wide red smear ran from his wrist to his knuckles. Gingerly, he dabbled his tongue against his lip. Split. Welling.

The doorbell rang again, excited and insistent.

"Be'er ge' that, 'adn't you?" he said thickly, and without a word Bodie left him. Very, very carefully, Doyle eased himself to his feet, his face twisting through a variety of expressions. His back hurt and his elbow stung fiercely; he pulled it around to examine it. Raw. Sick to the stomach he bent over the sink and ran cold, cold water, dowsing his face thoroughly. Voices behind him: grabbing a tea towel and pressing it to his lip, he turned. And there she was.

A dark girl with dimples, red blouse and skirt, blue eyes dwelling doubtfully on him from the doorway.

"It's all right," Bodie said easily, behind her. "It's only Ray. He won't bite."

"Can't, as of now," Doyle said through the tea towel; *christ*, everything hurt.

"Has there been an accident?" she asked him forthrightly; pretty, yes, she was almost as he'd imagined her but more vivid. Her scent filled the room as she moved: Opium. Bodie liked Opium. He'd almost considered buying some himself: who'd care? Call it perfume, aftershave, as you would, it was all just sexless scent.

"He walked into a door," Bodie was saying smoothly. "Very careless, Ray." And the smile which shot his way was dangerous, a knife in the glare of the sun.

Ray Doyle looked into the hard dark eyes of his partner, and began to laugh. "Oh, ho-ho; I can see this is going to be a relationship founded on mutual trust." He chucked the streaked tea towel to the floor and pushed past them, one fist punched into the air. "Honesty Rules, O.K."

He turned at the last moment and stuck out a hand. "Excuse me. Very remiss of me. Ray Doyle." He shook her hand then dropped it. "Nice to meet you. I'll leave you to it."

"That lip looks -- " she said, peering, and he ducked away from her gaze. As he did so a splash of blood dropped to the parquet floor, and then another.

"Sorry," Doyle said to no-one in particular, and dived back to the sink. Dammit: now his nose was bleeding. No chance now of a fast exit; not knowing whether to laugh or to cry he stood there, head down, and watched the blood splatter wetly and redly onto the stainless steel.

"He'd be better off putting his head back," Sally-Ann was saying behind him just as Bodie said, tentatively, "Ray," very close to him.

"Oh, fuck off," he snapped, past caring, on edge, right on the very edge; every facial extremity throbbed with an ache like an unburst boil, and then there was the little matter of his nosebleed: on and on it went.

"Here." Another towel was pressed into his hand. He rinsed the bright blood away, swirling

down the drainhole. He was beginning to feel dizzy.

"Sit down," the girl was saying, quiet and insistent.

"Just leave me alone," he said without turning, "do you mind?"

At last, at last, they left, and he was free to concentrate on the various indignities his body was serving him with: but after a few short moments Bodie was back.

"Are you okay?"

Oh, really.

"Yeah, bloody fantastic. And now sod off so I can enjoy it uninterrupted."

"Could lend you the doorkey," Bodie offered gently, watching the steady drip of blood into the sink.

Doyle heaved a sigh and turned around, propping himself against the sink and tipping his head back. In this position the blood ran coolly down the back of his throat instead. Delightful. "Don't let me stop you getting the dinner on," he said to the ceiling.

"You okay, I said?" Bodie asked him brusquely, and came over to him, peering into his face. Doyle sniffed, coughed, and swallowed.

"Yeah, I enjoyed it," he said sarcastically, "it's just the afterglow provin' a bit troublesome." He stuck his head under the tap and rinsed out his mouth, spitting copper. "I'll be off in a sec."

"You can't drive like that. I'd better take you home."

"No!" Doyle held up one hand. "Can't have whatsername, Pally-Ann, deserted." He swung away from Bodie and snatched up the towel. "I'm okay now, it's stopping."

"Want a clean shirt?" Doyle looked down at his own, saw it damp and patched with crimson. He stripped it off, dropped it on the floor and began to flood his skin again with cold water. Anything to get this numb, dazed feeling out of his head.

Sally-Ann Tierney, twenty-six years old and mildly confused, walked into the kitchen where her lover's friend still leaned over the sink, spitting, and now half-naked.

He turned at her approach, and eyed her insolently: narrow but strong-looking, skin a honeyed brown. Trying to avoid navel or nipples her eyes settled instead on his arms: "You didn't do *that* when you fell?"

He barely glanced at himself, saw red marks beginning to purple in a quite spectacular way. Bodie entered at that moment, and threw him a shirt. Doyle shrugged it on, wincing as the pain

in his back caught him unawares. Ignoring their eyes on him and their silence he felt once again that eerie gripe of homesickness, an urgency that he shouldn't be here, he didn't belong.

"You never introduced us, Bodie," he said, head down to button his over-large shirt. At least the nose had stopped, all but a trickle. His mouth had a foul tang: iron predominated.

Bodie was responding to him with grim economy of expression. "Ray Doyle, my partner. Sally-Ann Tierney."

Blue eyes dwelt on his face. "I've heard a lot about you, Ray. Nice to meet you at last."

His swollen lip sketched a sarky grin. "Yeah, well, sorry I ruined the aperitifs." Head tilted, he appraised her better and liked what he saw. Opium hit him in a warm wave: sultry stuff. He took her arm. "Tell you what. Why don't you come and look after me, let the chef here get on with the job?" And without a glance at Bodie he collected her arm and swept her off with him into the lounge, leaning on her more than he needed to to get into a chair, "Aah! -- " as he eased himself down.

"That was quite some fall," she said, looking at him; strangely, for he was not a big man, he looked tougher than Bodie did: with the broken tooth, the flawed cheek, he looked as if people had been chipping away at him for years without ever getting very far. And she had felt the strength of him in that one brief contact; not a spare ounce of flesh, all sinew and bone like the best of runners.

Under her scrutiny he smiled, guessing. "You're not seein' me at my finest, believe me.

"It's not bad as it is," she assured him, because his eyes were beautiful though absolutely cold, and the sight of his body had left its imprint on her mind.

He stretched, very carefully. "I reckon a whisky might help -- strictly medicinal, of course."

"I was just going to suggest that myself," she said, and went to Bodie's bar to pour them both one. Doyle appraised her backside: rounded and real, a good handful of flesh. Bodie liked bums, and thighs -- and breasts; had a wholehearted appreciation of things feminine, did Bodie. Things which Fanny-Ann here had in spades.

"So, you work with Bodie, do you?"

"That's right, love," he said, and took the glass from her hand, raising it in a toast of mockery. "Cheers."

"Why did he hit you?"

Doyle swallowed warm fire and felt magically improved from within. "Walked into a door, didn't I -- wasn't that what Bodie said?"

She regarded him sceptically and perched on the edge of his chair. "Look, lovey, I'm a copper. You've been beaten up, not done a tango with a piece of wood."

Doyle spluttered with laughter. A policewoman! Obviously Bodie had a taste for coppers. Catching her eye he pulled his features back into solemnity and found his lip was bleeding again. "What division, love?" he asked her, pulling out a handkerchief from his pocket to staunch the trickle. "Used to walk the old beat meself."

"So Bodie told me. But we wouldn't have met. I was in Manchester, then Durham till I was posted here four months ago."

"I'd have remembered." His eyes paid her the compliment his heart didn't feel: because in fact he was not all that taken with her. Pretty enough, yes: nice enough, maybe: but nothing special. If Bodie was going to throw him over it ought to be for something special. Certainly not just for two tits and a big bum.

Bodie must be desperate, if this was the best he thought he could do. He and Doyle had had countless girls just like this one; so why the sudden call to permanence?

And she had a hardness about her typical of the ladies of the Metropolitan Police: Bodie didn't need somebody hard.

"I still want to know why he hit you."

Still, what did he know. Maybe she softened, alone in Bodie's arms; maybe she had the bedroom skills of the lushest courtesan. One of her legs swung beside him, a nice ankle but a too-solid calf. Too much pounding the beat.

"Are you going to tell me?"

Persistent. Doyle leaned forward a little, as if ready to confide; the whisky had done him a hell of a lot of good, dulling his pain and sending him flying free. "Told him I didn't like his colour scheme. Old Bodie!" he laughed, shaking his head. "Never knew he was so touchy."

She eyed him, unamused, and he became instantly sober. After all, Bodie was the man she was (presumably) trying flat out to hook: must be disconcerting to discover he was so very capable of domestic violence.

"Truth is, darlin' -- " he held out his glass suggestively and lowered his voice " -- I made a pass at him. He didn't fancy it."

She halted where she was with the bottle and stared at him: he winked, swung himself to his feet and grabbed it. "One for the road for me, sweetheart, then I'll be off."

"Hope you're not over the limit," she said coolly.

Doyle leaned in nearer. "Breathalyse me," he suggested.

She grinned, showing dimples, and became all at once rather prettier than he had realised; he poured another tot of whisky and drank it in one gulp. "Aren't you staying for dinner?" she asked.

"Only two breasts," Doyle explained, delighted with himself. The doorbell rang. "Excuse me."

In the hall he bumped into Bodie, who looked at him strangely. Floating at present one dimension away from reality, Doyle looked back without speaking; the doorbell rang again.

Doyle swung away from Bodie and applied himself to the spyhole. "Milkman, looks like," he announced, seeing a flat cap, overalls, leather collecting-pouch. "I'll see to 'im. You get back to the Cock O-Van." A scent was drifting out of the kitchen, onions and meaty juices.

"Oh yeah, pay 'im, will you?" Bodie extracted his wallet and thrust it into his hand, vanishing.

Doyle unset the locks and opened the door, nodding briefly at the man there. "'Ow much?" He snapped open the leather wallet, riffled through the notes.

The man consulted his book. "Extra pint silver top Monday, litre of fresh orange juice Tuesday -
- "

Doyle shifted impatiently. "Yeah, yeah, just tell me how much." This was life all over: surreal. Still, you could hardly expect the milkmen of the world, going about their daily business like snails under the sun, never to intrude on the high dramas played out behind locked doors.

"Two pound eighty," the man told him.

Doyle extracted a fiver, handed it over, watched the man slowly jingling his pouch in search of change. Then he shut the door, set the locks, fiddled around with the wallet to stash the notes away. Lot of cash Bodie had in here, fifty, sixty --

He stopped, arrested: there in the little leather corner meant for your book of stamps was a photograph of himself. He took it out, held it in his fingers and looked at it.

He remembered this photograph being taken, and it had captured the flavour of the moment well. It was a flattering snap, too; the thing had a dreamy, soft-focus feel, though his eyes looked forth with impure intent; his mouth was just parted, his nipples alert, waiting for a finger to stir them. The snap ended at the navel which, he fancied, was just as well.

He closed the photograph within his palm. The smile lingered on his lips.

Funny old Bodie; exorcising all the rest, ruthless and clean. But he could not bear to part with this one. Looking at it from a new angle Doyle thought that maybe, just maybe, the magic never had gone. Maybe Bodie had shut the door on it himself.

His hands tightened as he thought; then he went to the kitchen. Bodie and the girl were there, not close, not even touching, yet he stopped when he saw them. Various cooking operations were going on; whatever it was smelt good.

"Bodie -- " he said, and stopped as a wave of acid lurched upwards from his stomach. Dammit: should never have had two large whiskies on top of shock and pain. He swallowed down firmly on nausea. "Bodie, I'm goin' now."

"No, don't, Ray," Bodie said, urgent.

Doyle tossed him a fleeting grin, arching his back in the doorway: christ, but he was going to be stiff in the morning. "Think it's best. You know where to find me."

Bodie was there in front of him. For a big man, he moved superbly. "I said, don't go."

Did Bodie, too, sense that this was it? For there would be no more chances. Doyle stared into Bodie's eyes, but he could not read a future there.

Help came from the least likely quarter: "I was just saying to Bodie," Sally-Ann Tierney said, clearing her throat in a tactful kind of way, "that I can see you two've got something to discuss. I can always come another night."

Doyle wasn't going to argue with that: it was Bodie's choice. And after a moment Bodie walked with her to the door and Doyle closed his ears to the sound of their voices, pottering round the kitchen, lifting lids, setting steam escaping; he stuck his finger in the sauce and discovered that part, at least, of his nausea might be hunger in disguise.

Bodie came back and stood in the doorway.

"Smells good, this," Doyle said, and prodded a potato with a knife -- not done.

"Ray."

Bodie sounded tense, preoccupied. Doyle turned and Bodie took two steps towards him. Doyle eyed him, light and hard and fast. "Look, I'm sorry to mess up your dinner party, mate. Bleedin' all over the sink, and all. It's enough to put you off red meat, innit?"

"Are you okay?" Bodie said with grim unsmilingness, his eyes roving from the blood-encrusted nostril to the swelled lip.

Doyle put a hand to his back and straightened, experimentally. "Few aches and pains. Apart from the mess you've made of me beauty, that is. Sorry I drove Aunt Sally away." He didn't know what else to say, what line to take; with Bodie looking like this, dark-eyed and unreachable as Mars, too far out to everything he said. He shrugged, slipped one hand into his pocket and brought out the little photo. He held it out to Bodie. "You'll be wanting to lock this away with the

others, then."

Bodie stared at the little snap, but he didn't take it. Some change filtered into the tension; for good or bad, something was going to happen now. Bodie dropped his head back and sighed. "Ray..."

"She's okay, Bodie -- pretty," Doyle said rapidly, "but to be honest, if there was anything else, I missed it."

Bodie just brought his gaze down from the ceiling and regarded him seriously. Doyle changed his position with care; stiffening up fast now.

"Okay, Bodie, this is it. I think we need the truth now," he said, and his heart was pounding terribly fast, "I know you've already told me it's over -- but somehow I can't quite believe it. Don't want to believe it, I suppose: you know me, never lets go of anything." He tried to grin but his lip wouldn't let him, splitting smartly and painfully; and Bodie was giving him no help at all. But he struggled on: "I keep feelin' that, I dunno, maybe you've got it wrong. Maybe things could be the same -- better. See, Bodie --" he looked at him, conscious that at the moment he was far from beautiful and there Bodie was on the other hand, broad and dangerous, beautiful blue-dark eyes, looking at him with a brooding stillness while he struggled on like a wounded scruff yelping in the dark -- what can she give you that I can't?"

Bodie made a sweeping gesture, his voice low and uncompromising: "Plenty of things, Doyle, if you think about it. Try loyalty, for a start. Stability. Kids."

It hurt him, but even if it was over, even if he had lost this, he wanted Bodie to remember him like this: fighting till the last. Not lying down and weeping like a baby. "Kids -- no way. Sorry. I've had the op," and he saw Bodie's unwilling smile.

"All right," Doyle decided, rock-steady, "you've made up your mind. I just thought -- it was worth a try." He turned to check on the state of the meal. His stomach churned.

"You just used me, Ray." Bodie's low voice came to him. "I got sick of being one of your toss-off fantasies come to life, that's all."

Tense, strung-up, Doyle threw up his hands. "Okay, okay. I get the message. Not wanted on voyage." There was a bird outside the window, sitting on the branch with its black eye winking, blinking. Blackbird. Nothing interesting. Once he'd seen a Green Woodpecker, believe it or not. A woodpecker! in the middle of Clapham. He blinked his eyes to clear them; steam from the bubbling pots seemed to be affecting his vision. He really ought to go now, but it was going to be difficult. Not to look as if he was stalking off in a huff. Better wait a minute -- Bodie said just behind him, "But I do still want you: that's just the problem."

His heart beat once, then slipped in his chest; he realised, out of the blue, that he wasn't feeling at all well, held up by tension alone. His head throbbed and every bone and muscle in his back was strained and sore. So it was with blessed, blessed relief that he felt Bodie's arm slip around

him; he just leaned there, amid the warmth of Bodie's care. Of all things, it was what he needed.

And what he needed was also just this: that Bodie, in the midst of everything, should see him first and always.

Warm lips nuzzled his ear, said softly: "Oh, I want you all right. God help me."

"I've got it," Doyle said, twisting his head to squint into Bodie's open eyes. "You want Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays too, is that what all this's been about?"

He heard the beginnings of a smile in Bodie's voice. "That's about it, yeah."

"Well, that's easy," Doyle said, and he closed his eyes again, leaning his head on Bodie's shoulder.

Bodie's lips mouthed his hair. "Don't rush into this, Doyle. I don't think you know what you're saying."

A little spark of impatience inflamed Doyle; they weren't children, or virgins. "Ah, don't give me that. Of course I do. You don't think I 'aven't thought about this as much as you? Last few days I haven't thought about much else; god knows what's happened to my reaction times." Bodie smiled a little but his eyes remained serious. Doyle grimaced at him. "Ah Bodie, you *know*. Think about it and you'll know." He dropped Bodie's arms. "Feed me. I'm starving. I think."

The chicken was done to a turn in its sauce (white wine and mushrooms), Bodie mashed up the potatoes, brawny arms beating them into lightness, and Doyle ate hungrily, and said: "About Sally-Ann."

"Look, Doyle -- "

"You don't have to tell me," Doyle hastened to say.

"-- you asked," Bodie said, "if there was a girl. There was, but -- "

Bodie had grasped it like a rope in the pit. A way out. Only fair: how many women had dropped him, once they sensed he was not after anything with a seed of permanence? Doyle understood that perfectly; and in the light of his own behaviour afterwards Bodie's seemed hardly worse.

More than that: he remembered his own regrets, the things he knew he should have said. He put down his spoon, the cake untasted on his plate.

"What is it you want, Bodie?"

Bodie's eyes looked, suddenly, very blue. He smiled at Doyle, suave and charming. "What are you offering?"

"Don't tell me you want to marry me."

Bodie growled: "You'd look cute in a white dress, Doyle."

But Doyle was annoyed with himself for missing the moment. He snatched Bodie's hand across the table and held it, rough in his own roughened one; daily gun-practice wore callouses across the palms they were never free of.

"Look at me, Bodie." And Bodie did, vivid and attentive; the look in his eyes took Doyle's breath away; but not before he remembered the truth of the matter, when Bodie had told him as clearly as it was possible exactly what it was that he wanted.

No kids. But the rest.

His eyes distant, absorbed, he met Bodie's gaze. "Well, let's go for it. Why not?" Instead of saying any more, he leaned across the table to engage Bodie's mouth in a kiss. Then he stood up, still holding Bodie's hand.

"You'll 'ave to be -- very -- gentle with me."

In bed Doyle took Bodie's mouth and tasted the truth in the way Bodie kissed him, as if he were trying to suck the soul out of him and merge it with his own. When Bodie left his mouth he offered up his cock in both hands with eagerness; Bodie was gentler here but wicked; when the point of his tongue flicked an invasion Doyle gasped, thrashing, pushing Bodie's head away.

"Matter?" Bodie asked him softly.

"You know what that does to me."

Bodie smiled. "Yeah," he said wryly.

Some nights they had done some pretty wild things, experimented. Remembering that one night: the night which they had never forgotten. He wondered if Doyle wanted him to do it again: he would, and more than willingly, it had been one hell of a turn-on to see Doyle that way, opening him up, to cause not pain but the bitterest, most exquisite delight.

Doyle had come almost at once, in great white flying spurts; the thought of it, the anticipation, almost more than the thing itself, though not quite. And Bodie had known, fired by some inner intuition, just how to draw it out, create such a pitch that Doyle could bear it no longer... Bodie shivered at the memory, a thrill of cold and fear and excitement rippling over all of his skin. Doyle met his eyes, wide open.

"Bodie, my back hurts like hell. I don't think tonight's the night for anythin' fancy. Unless you can think of anythin' to do with me like this?" And he rolled onto his stomach, pillowed his head on his arms. Of all the things Bodie had wanted -- loyalty, stability -- commitment -- this seemed

the least of it. Yet it too was something he wanted Bodie to have.

Bodie's heart plunged dramatically; the sight of Doyle's reddened spine, tracing down to the milky, muscular globes of his buttocks, parted a little to show a glimpse of what lay within. His hands were drawn to soothe the marks on his back; then he bent to kiss them, lower still, dipping his tongue into dark and secret pleasure. Doyle shivered and pressed his cheek against the pillow.

"You sure, Doyle," Bodie asked him, low and quiet.

"Yeah, go on."

Bodie looked down at himself: ready, no doubt about it. He gave himself a few long, hard strokes anyway. Doyle turned his cheek to watch, vaguely stirred by the sight of such blatant self-abuse.

"*Bodie*," he said in mild alarm, "don't make it any bigger."

Bodie grinned at him, breathless. "Be quicker this way. Okay. Prepared to think of England, are you?"

"Can't see how that'll help."

"You ever done this before?"

"Would I be makin' all this fuss if I 'ad?"

"With a bird I mean?"

"Oh, with a bird, yeah." Doyle closed his eyes and remembered the illicit pleasure of it, the thrill even of talking them into it: the shock as they realised what you wanted. And the beauty of the honeyed bottom before you, parting it to glimpse the entrance; how it had to be forced (gently): the tight, slick grip of it all along the length of his cock. No doubt about it, it felt fantastic and the sense of power was intoxicating.

Good on you, Bodie. Have it. I want you to.

He said acidly: "I suppose *you've* been up every arse from here to Angola."

"Not quite." Bodie kissed the nape of his neck, brushing the curls away. "Think you're going to like it?"

"I dunno, do I? Yeah, probably." Bodie's lips brushed his spine. He said without moving: "Innocent I may be, but I reckon rather a lot of lubrication might be a good idea."

"Oh yeah," Bodie remarked softly, "knew I'd forgotten something."

He was gone and back in an instant. "What you using, gun oil?" Doyle tossed over his shoulder.

"You deserve the best, Doyle."

"Call me Ray," Doyle said, closing his eyes again as something slick and wet on the point of Bodie's finger invaded his anus. "Or do you think it's too familiar?"

And, "Tell me a fantasy," he said a moment later, to distract himself. "What's your secret wish, eh Bodie? Not pretty needles down your cock, not your style at all. So what is it?"

"I haven't got your exotic tastes. Meat-and-two-veg. man, I am, Ray. Nothin' fancy. Layin' you'll do for me."

Bodie's weight settled on top of him, his cock lodging its way between his buttocks and slipped about there. Doyle breathed slowly and consciously relaxed.

"You got nothing to prove to me, Ray," Bodie whispered into his ear, thrusting easily and rhythmically. "We don't have to go the whole way. I can come off here, no problem."

Nothing to prove but something to give. Doyle bit down on a last shrinking and concentrated on curiosity. "Ah, stick it in." He tilted his buttocks up, luring Bodie's cock to probe: and there it was, slipping inside him with an ease he found sensuous: but trailing in its wake a knife of pain.

He winced; fought with himself not to tense up, not to whimper. In a moment Bodie had eased him open all the way. And it meant something, after all, this surrendering of self: he had known it would. He was giving himself to Bodie in the truest of senses. Pressed beneath Bodie, entrusting his fragile insides to Bodie's sexual power, which Bodie might control or might not be able to, Doyle felt enraptured by his own helplessness; and now they could not be closer.

He gathered himself up, on his elbows and knees, began to thrust back at Bodie. He could imagine the view Bodie had, his big cock stretching him wide, and he liked that thought, and also Bodie's panting breaths and the slick sounds of sex. He bit the pillow, quivering, because it was coming: transfixed inside by a sudden flower of delight, blossoming at Bodie's every thrust deep within. He threw his head back, panting, felt Bodie's sweat drip onto his forehead, Bodie's tender lips touch his skin. And Bodie's hand reached under him, brushed his nipples lingeringly, took hold of his cock: he thrust into Bodie's hand as Bodie thrust into him, with blessed relief: coming across Bodie's fingers in seconds as the high, delicious pleasure streamed away from him. Still throbbing with the bliss of it he felt Bodie's fingers touch his mouth, letting him taste himself, and then Bodie tensed violently inside him, and he knew it was over, they had done it and survived, and become something new.

Afterwards they lay for a long time quietly; kissing -- with passion, or idly; it was getting late.

"So? Did you like it?"

"So much you're stuck with me."

" -- Stuck to you?"

"That too. No, don't -- Christ, Bodie -- ! that was the worst part of the whole thing."

Waiting silence. Not quite ready to sleep.

"What shall we do this weekend?"

And a drowsy reply.

"I fancy the zoo."

"I read this thing about adventure gaming. Out in the forest, you know, Epping way? Role-playing, dungeons and dragons stuff."

"No thanks, Bodie."

"Make a good elf you would, ears like you got. I'd be a Mercenary. Or do I fancy the Warrior -- "

"*No thanks, Bodie.*" Aggrieved silence.

"I fancied that."

Yawn. "I want the -- " yawn " -- zoo."

"Zoo it is, then. Bloody hell, Doyle. Get everything you want, don't you? Every bloody thing."

"Feed the -- you know, the -- "

"Doyle. *Doyle*. Don't go to sleep now! The bloody files, dammit! We've got to read them tonight. . . "

No reply.

Resigned.

Silence.

Settled.

-- THE END --

May 1991
For EW - remembering Regent's Park 1984

and also for Meg, who started it all

Zeropanic

Plain Sailing *Part 4 of the Adagio series*

Sebastian

This story ends abruptly. It was intended to wrap up the Adagio series and point our boys towards a happy future. But at the time I was at the height of my Pros passion, there were a thousand stories whirling around in my head just bursting to be written, and I put Adagio to one side, knowing they were together now, and on course for happiness. I never came back to set that down in print... but think of it this way: every story ends midway. There is always more to come.

=====///=====

"How would you like to go away?" said Bodie, over the toast.

They still had nearly two weeks of their New Year holiday to go.

"Why, you bored?"

"No," said Bodie, and slid him a look.

"Then why?" Doyle considered the idea, not overly enthusiastic. He still lacked energy.

Bodie shrugged, wiping his buttery fingers. "Thought it might be easier. More restful," he said quickly.

Doyle picked up on it, instantly. "Easier?" he demanded. He considered Bodie with watchful eyes, over his glass of juice.

"Well, you know." Bodie made a gesture, embarrassed, but wanting to be honest. "Here, I'm on edge all the time, waiting for the bloody phone to go, or the door, and Cowley's sweet face coming round it."

"I didn't know you felt like that," said Doyle, thoughtful. He slowly pushed his sleeves up, out of habit, wincing as the pain in his left arm took him by surprise. God damn it. He knew what Bodie needed, what they both needed, but he wasn't going to chance trying for it until he was fitter and there was less risk that he'd panic Bodie out of it with an untimely screech of pain. On the other hand, it had been a long time, too long... a little shiver ran through him suddenly, and he looked at Bodie, eyes bright.

His mate had noticed both the wince and the shiver, and was concerned. "You'd better lie down for a bit." Expecting resistance he added as he got up, "They said at the hospital you needed plenty of rest, and you don't want me lynched by that -- mmph --"

Doyle had risen to his feet and put his hand across Bodie's mouth. "All right, all right, you talked me into it. Come on." He pulled Bodie after him, beginning to strip off clothes he'd had on all of half an hour.

"I'm not the one with a week-old bullet wound," muttered Bodie, standing at the bedroom door watching garments -- shirt, t-shirt, socks, jeans, pants -- flying in all directions.

"Come on," commanded Doyle again, sliding into bed. He gave a luxurious stretch, each limb uncurling and flexing, pressing his body upwards, liking the contact of the cool sheet. He was hard, and ready, and he let Bodie know it with a little, sly glance. Bodie still hesitated.

"I really feel like it, Bodie," said Doyle with just a touch of wistfulness. "And if you won't --" he made a pause, and gave Bodie a little provocative flash of his eyes -- "I'll have to come all by myself." And he ran a slow reflective hand down his chest, his lashes closing luxuriously over dreamy green.

Bodie's voice, in his ear: "You wouldn't."

Doyle said softly, "Oh, but I would." He continued the gentle downward slide of his fingers, in earnest now, drawing a long breath in as he tipped his head back, pointed tongue flickering around parted lips.

He heard movements, half-opened his eyes, his hand resting lightly on his lower belly; to see Bodie with his sweater half over his head, pulling off his clothes in haste. He chuckled to himself, low: and made Bodie welcome as his naked mate came into the bed.

Bodie touched his mouth onto Doyle's warm lips, sucking the soft flesh gently before trailing round to his ear, whispering, "Do you do that?"

He was rigid with tension; not fear this time, something else. Another of Bodie's well-hidden fantasies? He'd win them all, in the end, he promised himself, every one. He said, "Yeah, course I do. Want to watch?" His palms against Bodie's cheek he tried to turn his face, but Bodie wouldn't look at him. "What do you think about?" Once he'd asked the question he instantly wished it unsaid, and buried his face into the cool skin of Doyle's shoulder.

Doyle thought, with fond astonishment, that anyone would think Bodie considered it a shameful sin to have sexual fantasies. He wanted to change all that, wanted Bodie to feel free of restraint with him. Pulling himself up, he slid his fingers into Bodie's hair and leaned over him, ignoring the ache in his arm which was not one bit so urgent as the sweet ache in his groin; looking down into the well-beloved face.

"I'll tell you. Shall I tell you?" he murmured, a profane sparkle of sensuous delight informing every feature. "See if it turns you on too." He wanted to excite him, make him feel good; he'd do anything Bodie wanted. Anything. And, dropping his head very close, he whispered to Bodie as he moved against him, weaving inspired fantasies for him, his voice a lilting drone as he felt the other man's increasingly urgent response to the things he was saying, the images he was building; his own growing to match it; and his voice acquired a harsh jerky sound, eroticism turned to crudity which fired them on still further into a sudden long and violent pleasure that exploded over them both; and Doyle was quiet at last, but for the sound of rushed breathing, thudding hearts.

They lay in a warm, sticky tangle, Bodie's head laid face-down on Doyle's outflung arm. Just about recovered from the fireworks, Doyle looked down at his mate and wondered what Bodie was thinking. He tugged at a curl of dark hair and said gently, "You shocked at me?"

Blue eyes came open and focussed on him, playing over his face, searching. Then they lit with laughter, and Doyle relaxed, grinning back, relieved. He had taken a chance -- that had been a pretty animalistic performance by any standards, and Bodie had a surprising streak of conventionality that often made him draw back from Doyle's more way-out ideas; he had known to go easy with him. But Bodie would learn. He smiled to himself. Oh yes, he'd learn.

"Not shocked, mate," said Bodie thoughtfully. "It's just -- big eyes and an angel face like yours don't seem to fit with the depths of your imagination."

"You mean, I look so sweet you never expected me to have a mind like a sewer?" asked Doyle facetiously.

"Something like that. Not that I mind. Hey --" He stopped.

Doyle reached out with the point of his tongue, flicked Bodie's cheek. "Yeah?"

"You really turned me on just then, you know that?" muttered Bodie in a rush, and ducked his head, embarrassed.

Doyle chuckled and lay back, releasing him. "Me too." He stretched. "Do it again sometime, yeah? You can tell the story. Amaze me..."

"You have a very evil laugh, Raymond my boy," commented Bodie and then he too lay back, curling close to him, contented and peaceful and in love. He wouldn't change places with anyone in the world.

When he felt the warm, heavily relaxed body of his partner move he was awakened from his semi-doze in an instant. It was mid-morning, and time, more than time, to get up. Again. "Arm all right?" he said as he prepared to throw back the covers and swing his legs out.

Doyle kept him there. "Yeah." It was aching, a dull low throb he lived with these days, but he was ignoring it as best he could.

"Better get up, sweetheart."

Doyle only tightened his hold. "Don't want to let you go," he murmured, eyes shut, "not yet."

Bodie was touched, and warmed, and happy.

"Besides," Doyle continued, eyes springing wide open, "bit pointless gettin' up and going through the shower and clothes routine again -- when I'm in the mood to make up for lost time."

He moved suddenly and Bodie felt him warm and hard against his thigh, and his own body lifted in response.

"That happened fast," he murmured on a note of respect. "And you lying there so quiet..."

"Ah. But what was I thinking about, that's the question."

Bodie's eyes travelled over the languid sprawled figure. "What were you thinking about?"

"You, fucking me." Before Bodie could react, Doyle had sprung into action, on his hands and knees, kissing him with gentle thoroughness. No words were spoken as they made love gently; no fireworks this time, just a sweet building of sensation, drawing their response from the other, and they were good for each other, with each other.

"Bed's awash," mentioned Bodie, but he didn't move.

"Lovegift," came the dreamy answer.

"What?" He opened an eye.

Doyle reached down, slipped his hand between close-nestled bellies, rubbed his fingers through their mingled wetness. "'S precious stuff, that. I only give it to someone I love. Therefore, lovegift."

Bodie snorted derisively. "Go on. Don't tell me you didn't waste it on plenty of occasions when love wasn't even mentioned."

"Well," said Doyle, settling down, comfortably in Bodie's arms, "not any more."

"I thought I was the romantic one."

"You've made a convert of me."

Bodie was drifting, his mind reviewing the events of the last hour. "You must've been wasted on women," he muttered, "you're a little animal."

"Always knew I had what it took to swing both ways," was the drowsy reply.

There was a silence. He stretched. The doorbell rang.

"Oh shit," muttered Bodie, lifting his face from Doyle's armpit -- he had just been drifting off to sleep. "This is what I mean. You see? Doorbells..."

Doyle leaned over him to look at the clock. "Time we were gettin' up anyway. Can't lie around in bed all day, lover," he said in mock reproof. "Much as you'd like me to."

"You --" growled Bodie and made as if to hit him, stilling the blow at the last possible second so that his fist just gently touched the full lips of his partner. Doyle opened his mouth and bit him lazily, eyes wide.

They looked at one another. Doyle grinned, a little unsteadily; the rush of unfamiliar tenderness had taken him by surprise. "Made for each other," he said roughly, with an odd catch in his voice.

And when Bodie looked inclined to respond to that, he pushed at him. "Go for that door."

Bodie answered it, in a bathrobe. It was Murph; big, easy-going Murph, dressed in the usual CI5 gear -- jacket and jeans. Bodie felt at a definite disadvantage, being both undressed, and several inches smaller in bare feet.

Murphy swept a meaningful eye over him. "Not up yet? Tut tut, 3.7."

"I was," Bodie was about to say; and shut his mouth on it rather quickly.

Murphy grinned at him. "Are you going to invite me in? Or would the lady object?"

Bodie made a face of exasperation. "No birds, mate -- I'm a clean-living man. Come on in."

He led him through into the untidy kitchen, the remains of breakfast still littered over the table. "Coffee?"

"Wouldn't mind. Thought you might fancy a day on the range," he added as he swung himself into a chair and watched the other man spooning coffee into mugs. Three of them. "Contest on."

"Shooting?" Bodie considered, only vaguely tempted. "Don't you get enough of that on the job, Murph?"

"Ah, c'mon, Bodie," Murphy said easily. "There's a few of us going. Morning at the butts, lunch at the pub--"

"Yeah, and after that you'll have to move the targets in ten yards." He poured on the boiling water, passed over the mug.

"You got something better to do?" Murph was asking, when Ray Doyle, having hastily showered, appeared at the door to see who the caller was.

He was barefoot, in jeans, a towel slung around his bare shoulders, and he was in the act of fastening his belt. He pulled the loop through the buckle and looked up.

He acknowledged his colleague unsmilingly and took the mug of coffee Bodie held out. "Come to call him back on the job, have you?"

"Unconditional," Bodie reminded his partner.

Murphy had been surprised by the appearance of Doyle and wasn't hiding it well. Casting around for something to say, he caught sight of the bandage on Doyle's forearm and remembered the bullet wound. "You getting better, Ray?"

"Oh, all the time," said Doyle, expressionless. "Get plenty of practice, that's the secret."

Bodie grinned at that, and killed it quickly.

"I was trying to talk your partner into going shooting," said Murphy, vaguely uncomfortable though he didn't know why, other than that Bodie's partner always made him feel that way. "You too, if you're interested. And fit enough. The two of you'd probably clean up."

"I've seen enough flying bullets for a while. You?" He flicked a glance up at his bathrobed mate.

Bodie shook his head. "You'll have to manage without us, Murph old son."

Murphy grinned, to cover his unease. "You're playing full-time nurse, then?"

Bodie had one of his unpredictable changes of attitude. "Yeah," he snapped, eyes flashing. "Any objections?"

Murphy stared. Doyle made a little cool-it gesture. "Okay, okay, don't bite his head off. Hangover," he explained coolly to Murphy.

"Yeah," muttered Bodie, "sorry. See you then Murph." He disappeared in the direction of the bathroom.

Doyle took a clean shirt off the airer and began to put it on, wincing involuntarily as he grazed

the sore arm, and did the buttons up one-handed. "What's the news then, Murph? Who's up to what?"

Murph shrugged, dragging his eyes away and resting them on his mug instead. "Sammy Harding's on the run. The Lemming Road lot are under twenty-four hour eyeballs -- do you really want to hear any more?"

"Nope."

"Must be off, any case." He drank the last of his coffee and rose. Doyle went with him, to see him out. When through the door Murph, being Murph, couldn't resist popping his dark head around, a spark of good-humoured heckling in the blue eyes. "Enjoy your billet doux," he said in an atrocious accent, and hared off down the stairs at top speed.

Doyle just stared after him for a moment, then shut the door firmly and went to find Bodie.

He was in the bedroom, half-dressed, and he turned his head and smiled when he saw Doyle.

"It'll be all around CI5 by lunchtime," Doyle said. He dropped down onto the bed, pushing Bodie's laid-out pile of clothes to one side.

Bodie's smile disappeared. "Murph won't talk."

Doyle snorted. "Everyone talks, mate." He leant back on his elbows, thought better of it, and shoved a pillow behind his head.

Bodie looked serious; he reached out one absent hand for his shirt. Doyle picked it up and tossed it to him. "Bother you?" Bodie asked thoughtfully, shrugging into it.

"No," Doyle said, with truth.

Bodie gave him a sudden dazzling smile, leaning nearer. "No problem then, is it?"

Doyle reached out one lazy hand, caught the open collar of Bodie's shirt and twined his fingers in it so they were very close, looking directly into each other's eyes. Bodie waited, breath held, expecting some important confession, ready to promise he'd swear blind they weren't lovers if that was the way Doyle wanted it --

"Bodie...what does billet doux mean to you?"

"Love letter," answered Bodie without hesitation, responding manfully to the unexpected change of subject.

"S what I thought." Doyle watched his thumb move slowly along the ridge of Bodie's collar-bone. "Murph thinks it's some kind of soft camp-bed..."

Bodie was highly amused, but he kept his face deadpan. "For two, no doubt."

"Or one. You could lie on top of me, be nice."

Tired with crouching over him, Bodie sat down beside the relaxed body of his mate, traced an absorbed finger around his face. Doyle shut his eyes, his mind wandering away from Murphy.

"You gonna write me any?" He opened his mouth, softly bit the wandering finger.

"Ouch, nipper. Write you what?"

"Billets doux," said Doyle, pronouncing it beautifully.

"If you want me to... Dear Ray, you are the sunshine of my life, yours ever, B..."

Doyle grimaced. "Hardly Shakespeare, is it? I mean, in later life, no one's gonna be interested in the publication rights. Heard it somewhere before, too," he added, disgruntled.

Bodie grinned down at him, half thankful that Ray had his eyes shut; he knew his own eyes were too soft, his face helplessly set into a dopey tender look as he surveyed the love of his life.

"I could possibly do better," he murmured, "given more time to think."

Doyle gave a tiny nod of approval. "But they'd have to be written on rice paper," concluded Bodie.

Doyle's eyes flew open. "Rice paper?"

"You'd have to eat 'em after. Destroy the evidence."

"I've heard of people eating their words, but--"

Bodie silenced him with his mouth, one hand running up his side to tangle on the silver chain that lay on the soft pelt of dark hair.

When he finally drew away he was still holding it, and he glanced at the silvery links that lay across his fingers thoughtfully. "Must get you a lead for this," he commented, getting up.

For once Doyle was short of a comeback; and he didn't care. He lay and watched Bodie through half-closed eyes.

Bodie was pulling on a jacket. "Think you can manage to stay out of trouble for an hour or so?"

"What?"

"Going out," said Bodie shortly; he was combing his hair, squinting into the mirror. "And what I

don't want to find when I get back is you in a relapse, or you under fire from a marksman, or you making it with some passing bird, understand?"

He could even joke about it now, Doyle noted with some satisfaction. "Twice in one morning, mate...I couldn't get hard on Cowley's orders. Nah, I won't be any trouble. Feel sleepy, anyway." That was true. Bodie leant forward for one final kiss.

"Where you goin'?" Doyle stared up with drowsy green eyes. The drugs he was on were really knocking him out.

Bodie winked at him, lecherously. "I'm going to visit your nearest rival," he whispered, wickedly, and tugged a curl in farewell.

"No problems, I hope, Bodie?" Cowley looked at his off-duty agent with a distinctly edgy eye. Having granted the man something he'd moaned about needing for years -- fourteen days of unconditional leave -- he hadn't expected to find him here in the office, demanding an interview.

Bodie grinned at him cheerfully. "Not so far, sir... 4.5's being a good boy and getting plenty of rest." He went on hurriedly, "The thing is, I was thinking of taking him away for a few days." He waited.

Cowley waited too. But he was the one to give in first, that bright hopeful look on 3.7's face creeping past his defences despite himself. "I see. And it would need to be somewhere well away from CI5 and your colleagues --"

"That's right, sir. But somewhere pleasant -- he needs cossetting a bit --" agreed Bodie.

"But, bearing in mind the pittance of your combined salaries, you aren't in the position of being able to afford the necessary degree of comfort, solitude, and scenery --"

"It's unfortunate, that, sir --"

"-- so you want to borrow the Rosings," completed Cowley neatly. Bodie grinned at him, confident. He was impossible to resist. Cowley gave the matter a bare moment's consideration. Then he pulled open a drawer and took out a key which he handed to Bodie.

"Thank you, sir," said Bodie, sincere gratitude in his voice.

Cowley glared. "Any breakages -- and it'll be docked from your salary."

"Yes sir. I'll tie him down if 'e looks like getting violent."

Cowley made a face to indicate that the humour was not appreciated. "Get along with you before I change my mind."

Bodie stopped at the door. "And you sir? No problems either?"

And if I had, thought Cowley wearily, if I said I needed you here, now, asked you to cancel your leave, give up the time you so badly need with him, would you come?

The answer came straight away; yes, Bodie would come. He was a good man, loyal. His loyalties might be shared now; but he had chosen for a mate someone who had the same priorities, lived under the same pressures, and who would therefore always understand.

"No problems, Bodie."

As Bodie went through the door, Cowley added, "Remember me to 4.5."

Bodie answered without turning. "I'm sure he won't have forgotten you sir."

It was a pretty little house; Cowley had chosen it for its isolation. Such was his commitment to CI5, believing as he did that the whole organisation would collapse if he were absent for more than a day or so, that he rarely used it. Few people even knew about it; Bodie was one of the exceptions. Cowley had brought him here after Marikka's death, when Cowley had been, he had found with surprise, the only person he could bear to have around. He had never told anyone, not even Ray Doyle, about that maudlin drunken night when he had gone through the gamut of embarrassing emotion, and Cowley had just been Cowley, looked him in the eye the next day without less respect, and never referred to it after.

Doyle was lying on the couch, a can of beer in one hand, watching the television with an idle eye. Bodie, having unpacked for them both, came in and sat down beside him with a fresh can. He gave a little sigh.

"Matter?" Doyle asked lazily.

"Just tired."

It had been a long drive. Bodie did look tired, not tense, just weary, dark lashes closing over his eyes as Doyle watched him. His partner had been carrying the can for both of them for long enough.

"Come here."

In answer Bodie set the can aside and put his arms around him, settling them together, holding Doyle close.

"I love you." Stupid, but he couldn't stop saying it.

Doyle responded, "And I love you. Best in the world..." He smiled as he said it, remembering the childhood phrase, intense nursery promises whispered at dark secret times, to someone so beloved you couldn't imagine a time when their love would not be the most important thing in the world to you...

"Uh?"

Bodie was looking at him. "Didn't you ever say that?"

"No?" said Bodie on a note of questioning blankness; and a totally overwhelming rush of sentimentality threatened at Doyle. Not for Bodie, the cosy childhood intimacy with a parent, the loving bedtime phrase. Whatever hell he had grown up in, unlike Doyle, there had been no-one to love him there.

He hugged Bodie to him, fiercely. Bodie didn't know why, but he submitted to it contentedly enough. "I love you," Doyle murmured harshly, "an' I'll love you forever. I'm gonna make it all up to you, lover. I never loved anyone like this an' I never will, d'you hear me Bodie?" And he held him tight, in fingers that bruised.

Bodie rested against him, quiet, not questioning what had prompted all this, only knowing that he was happy. "This is what matters," said Doyle low, staring down at the dark head resting on his chest. "This." And he gave Bodie another hug. "Us together. Loving..."

Not the sex. That didn't matter, and it never should have done in the first place. But it had acquired a disproportionate importance, at least in Bodie's mind, and Doyle hadn't helped. Christ, Bodie'd had a rough few months. They had wanted to make each other happy, and been deluded by that into believing it would work. Like fools, Doyle could see that now. He had foreseen some of the problems that might come up for them if they were serious about making such an unlikely relationship work, and tried to lay in safeguards. He had failed there, and learnt along the way that love would have to be enough. He was happy, now, to settle for that. But Bodie had had a bad time of it...it had shaken him, made him lose his way; he had gone into this at the start expecting to have the upper hand; he was used, no doubt, to nothing less. But neither was Doyle, and it had been he who won out, rocked Bodie's world, his fantasy of how things would be between them; played ruthlessly on Bodie's weaknesses, over-ridden and outthought him at every turn. No wonder the poor guy, confused by the depths of his own feelings and fazed by his own lack of ability to hold the reins of the relationship, had not found it easy to deal with.

In fact, Bodie had been left in a position where he could only drift along, blindly following Doyle's lead, and he had come to believe he had no free will, no rights to exert his own personality, his own wants. Then Doyle had compounded that, unwittingly making Bodie feel sexually inadequate beside his own free-spirited sensuality. They had both made mistakes; Doyle was not idealistic enough to believe they could all be wiped out just by persuading Bodie to take the dominant role in bed. But that would be part of the healing process. No rules, not any more; and they no longer needed promises.

He held Bodie close against him, not speaking, his heart oddly full. Strange thoughts, emotions he was unused to, but he didn't mind them. He had been given so much, and nearly thrown it away. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, for who knew how much they had left?

Bodie was there, patient and still; Doyle drew back a little so he could look into his face.

"You're quiet," said Bodie softly; his breath on Doyle's face was sweet.

"Thinking," responded Doyle; he slid his hands into Bodie's hair.

Bodie's lips curved in a little rueful smile. "The same as last time I asked you?"

Doyle shook his head, very serious. "How much I love you. More important."

Bodie shut his eyes. Watching him, Doyle said, a little unsteadily: "You know how they say 'love you so much it hurts'?" He continued before Bodie had the chance to reply. "That's how I feel about you."

"What's happened to you," Bodie accused gently, "you've gone all soft?" But his arms wrapped tighter around the smaller man, his heart so full he was stupidly afraid he might be going to cry.

Doyle, watching him, was threatened anew by a rush of emotion. "Cry and I'll bloody kill you," he murmured on an indrawn breath; but it was too late, he was weeping himself.

"What is it? Ray?"

He clung to Bodie, taking in the low reassuring voice without hearing the words, his wet face turning into Bodie's broad shoulder.

Bodie stroked his hair and talked to him; he did not quite know how to deal with this. He turned to instinct, and just held him close, feeling the warmth of the other man's tears soaking through his shirt, his own eyes wet.

"What's the matter?" he finally risked saying again, choked. "For godsake, Ray--?"

Doyle gave a sound between a laugh and a sob, and wiped his nose on Bodie's shirt. "I'm happy, you daft sod. Just happy."

"Happy?" said Bodie, incredulous, the beginnings of a vast hysterical relief sweeping through him. "You lie on top of me sobbing like I've just died or something, and you tell me that really you're happy?"

Doyle snorted, and sniffed. "Yeah." The curly head tipped back. Bright tear-wet eyes peered up. "Yeah, I'm happy. You love me, so I'm happy. Very."

In answer, Bodie threaded a hand through soft hair and brought him close to kiss him, his insides clenching into a hard knot of desire, passion, pleasure, as he tenderly took Doyle's willing mouth with his tongue, drinking him in, hungry for the taste of him. A terrible, wonderful surge of need made him want to explore the lean male body thrusting against his thoroughly, seek out every entrance with gentle probing fingers, make it his, and the old fear was rising too, but Doyle, expecting it, met it and turned it away.

"Oh, Bodie," he whispered, sliding one hand shakily up to pull loose the buttons of the other man's shirt. "I want you so bad, fella. Please..."

Bodie, dazed, gently pushed his hands aside and undressed, fingers fumbling with the suddenly unwieldy buttons. Doyle wrenched his own clothes off with far less ceremony, and they fell together, naked at last, on Cowley's velvet couch. Bodie, every sense alive and throbbing and utterly enchanted with the feel of the warm softly-furred body heavily sprawled on his, the hard probing evidence of Doyle's excitement pressing like a snub lance into his own belly, began to think in a semi-coherent way that, after all, he would, could do whatever Doyle wanted...

Hands gripping Bodie's upper arms, Doyle knelt over him and kissed him with loving, avid care, never pausing long, mouth, throat, eyes, light fleeting caresses of lips, tongue, and teeth that had Bodie writhing; the slim strong hands moving too, flying over warm skin, leaving a trail of sensitive stimulated skin. Finally Bodie captured the slender wrists, in agony, ecstasy, and pulled his restless partner close with a hand at the nape of his neck.

"Don't," he whispered painfully. "You'll make me come...please, Ray, not yet."

Doyle lifted his head and Bodie caught the gleam of his eyes in the half light as he too whispered, "Don't worry, mate, think I'd let you go too far? Not -- bloody -- likely --" He sat up, pushing one hand through his hair. The other he trailed on Bodie, from root to tip. "When this shoots off," he promised, very low, very intense, "it's gonna be inside me."

The words and the idea made Bodie shiver.

As they stood up, with less than perfect composure, Doyle moved into the protective warmth of Bodie's encircling arm, and they stayed that way, leaning against each other, until they reached the bedroom. Bodie would have gone straight for the bed, but Doyle stopped him with a hand. "Look."

There was a full-length mirror on one wall and Doyle moved to stand in front of it, drawing Bodie with him. They made an abandoned picture, tousleheaded and naked; Doyle leant back against Bodie and considered himself gravely in the mirror. Bodie was looking over his shoulder, all but obscured, eyes very dark, no reflection in them. Doyle saw himself naked, semi-erect; and smiled, involuntarily amused by the obscene beauty, the hopeful unknowing vulnerability of the aroused male body. He took one of Bodie's hands from his hip and slid it around and down himself, his eyes closing luxuriously as the warm fingers touched his swollen flesh, watching through half-closed lids the movements of Bodie's clever fingers exciting him, rubbing through the slick moisture dribbling from him. Bodie's lips moved round to nibble his earlobe. "It's a two-way mirror, Ray," Bodie murmured, tongue tickling against the shell of his ear, and he choked on laughter and flaunted himself, turning this way and that in Bodie's hands for the benefit of the mythical voyeur, and it was beautiful to watch, exciting for him. He wanted to come, badly, felt the rising tide gather, and pause, and he wanted to push Bodie's hands tighter against himself so he could let it go, spurt wantonly far and high onto the surface of the mirror, watch it happen in seeming duality...

He caught Bodie's hands, swept them aside and safely away from himself; and Bodie, understanding, was laughing -- so good, to hear Bodie laugh, and he knew everything was going to be all right. Bodie tumbled him on the bed and stood over him, unconsciously menacing, a tall, phallic figure, and he shivered and pretended to be frightened, curling into a ball and having to be coaxed forth and then he exploded out of it and fastened around Bodie like a leech. The discreet murmur into his ear "Would Cowley have any KY?" he answered with something crude, delighted by the picture, and then they were laughing again, and they settled for something soft and creamy Bodie unearthed from somewhere, and he shivered as Bodie smoothed it into him carefully, making it a sensual delight in itself, not wanting the slippery-fingered touch invading him to end, his body melting, opening out. He spread his thighs to welcome his lover, pulling him close with desperate hands, wriggling and shifting his hips, tantalised and frustrated by the teasing friction of Bodie's cock playing with the entrance to his body; until Bodie, exasperated, caught his hands and pinioned them high above his head -- "If you don't lie still I'm gonna have to tie you to the bed" -- and that idea made him laugh and shiver and throb with wild crazy desire. When Bodie, serious now, his face laid on Doyle's, finally pierced him it was sweet, bitter-fierce pleasure; and with Bodie filling him right to the very heart, his heavy body pressing him deep into the bed, pushing deep inside him, his panting breath close to Doyle's ear, it was all more wonderful and more terrible than he'd imagined. He wanted them to come together, but he couldn't wait, he'd waited too long already, and he dug his fingers into Bodie's back and came in great beautiful straining pulses, his body stretched wide by Bodie's, his eyes open, lustily yelling his ecstasy to the universe; and the involuntary closing and unclosing of his body's delight in the final spasms around Bodie sucked forth his pleasure in turn. So, sweating and spent and panting Doyle felt Bodie's seed spurt forth deep inside him, giving him one last throb of pleasure, and his arm curled tight around Bodie's neck so he was holding him, kissing the side of his face as his lover came.

"I always thought it was a joke."

"Uh?" Bodie wiped his mouth on Doyle's cheek, opened one sleepy eye to look at him.

"The earth moved --" explained Doyle, with a languid wave of his hand.

"Oh." Bodie tried to be cool about it, to carry it off with nonchalance, but it was no good. His lip wavered, and an expression of bashful self-satisfied delight spread across his face. "Good, was it?" He knew it was.

Doyle punched him. "Smug bastard." And he added: "If only you cooked like you fuck, darlin' --"

Bodie grabbed him and he shut up. Not for long. "You're good at that."

"Yeah?"

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Pleasure Bent

Sebastian

Plot? what Plot? Light, frothy, and a little bit kinky. Don't read while eating. Especially not sausages.

=====|||=====

"Bodie."

"Yeh?" Bodie lifted his head from surveillance of the frying pan and its spitting cantankerous occupants to see Doyle ornamenting the doorway. From one lean-fingered hand dangled a curio Bodie would far have preferred him not to disinter. His stomach jolted. Hunger, he told himself, and jabbed a sausage, cruelly.

"What the 'ell are these? Never figured you were into jewellery." Doyle draped the polished wooden beads across his chest and offered himself for inspection. Actually, lying over dishevelled cotton and negligently revealed chest hair, they rather suited him. Roughly jewelled, Doyle looked unrespectable and pagan, up for grabs in any fertility rite.

"Decoration," Bodie told him, bending once more over the furiously spitting sausages to account for his heated skin, "is not what they're for. Do I need decoration?" He shot Doyle an 'I'm-beautiful' grin and continued: "'Ave you been hunting round my bloody bedroom again? Nothing's safe when you're around, is it?"

"Was hopin' to find a Mayfair I 'adn't read."

"Not a chance, mate. I'm having a whirl on the other side, any case." Bodie put a hand on one hip and winked, outrageously. As intended, this diverted Doyle.

"Realised that when I saw the Zipper on the bedside table." Doyle moved nearer, slanted green eyes sly, a little provocative. "Big cocks turn you on then, do they?" he tempted.

Bodie refused to be fazed. "Sometimes, yeah." Impatient, he teased a fork through a sausage. It was a mistake. It spat back fat hotly at him.

"Me too," admitted Doyle; and then wondered too late if that was wise, too over the limit, even for a mate as close as this one. Then, fatalistic, he mentally shrugged it off. He'd bet most men had at least some curiosity in that direction; not odd to admit it; honest. He fondled the beads absently, remembered them and looked down at what he held. "Not meant for decoration, eh? Come off it, Bodie, what the 'ell can you do with beads other than - oh, I get it. Lights's dawned. They're worry beads, that it?"

"You can," agreed Bodie, "experience a moment or two of worry with 'em it's true, but no, they're not worry beads. What the heck would I need worry beads for - " longarmed, he made a grab for Doyle, ran his fingers quickly through silken tangles " - when I can play with your 'air instead?"

Doyle pulled himself free, shook his head like a dog, leaned around Bodie and pinched a sausage from the pan, juggling it hastily from hand to hand when it proved, inevitably, agonisingly hot. "Come on then," he said between gasps of pain, "what are they, Tantalus?"

"Tantalus is your role," said Bodie with lofty intellectualism, "not mine. To put you out of your misery, though, sunshine, those are pleasure beads."

He turned off the gas and tipped the remaining sausages onto the plate. He was waiting for the penny to drop. Five, six - ten -

"I get it."

Bodie's stomach knotted again.

Doyle was still looking at him most unintelligently. "You in the flesh, and the ladies still need these? I dunno. I'm disappointed in you," he jibed and opened his mouth wide to sink his teeth into his stolen sausage.

"Not for ladies, dumbo," Bodie told him with gentle, pleasurable condescension. "Men."

The sausage got swallowed.

Bodie dealt with that by the simple expedient of pounding Doyle on the back until it flew out again. "Messy little bugger," he observed, bending resignedly to dispose of the shredded evidence. "Bloody good job you weren't born royal."

Doyle had abandoned all interest in sausages. "You mean - " His eyes were huge, his mouth a

round O of shock. He was still coughing, spasmodically, but seemed unaware of this.

Bodie met his gaze. "Yeah."

"But - where do you - " he said, delicately.

Bodie gave him a straight look. "Doyle, nobody's this thick."

Doyle exhaled long and loud, through pursed lips. "Bit kinky, innit?" He eyed the objects in a totally new light; wary fascination. Then, slyly eyeing Bodie: "What does it feel like?"

Bodie shrugged. He extended a plate of sausages and a doorstep of bread and butter to his partner. Doyle evaded it.

"Ah, cmon, Bodie, I wanna know. You can't tell me 'alf the story in that tantalising fashion and then duck out of it just when I'm gettin' interested."

Bodie sighed. No escape. Putting down the plate he took the string of smooth beads, now warmed by the touch of Doyle's hands, and ran them absently, quickly, between his fingers. "It's not something you'd want every time." He met Doyle's eyes in rueful acknowledgement of the weirdness of human sexuality, knowing that he and Doyle were close enough to share such a damning fact about human nature. I dunno, Bodie thought, there isn't much I can think of wouldn't turn most people on, given the right circumstances... we're funny, us humans....

Doyle nodded, slowly, whether to the unspoken thought transmitted by rapport or to Bodie's words, Bodie didn't know. Hands placed behind him on the breakfast bar, his lithe partner hoisted himself up to sit on it without looking. "What I wanna know is - "

" - where I got them from," completed Bodie, resigned; but Doyle shook his head, a flash of laughter in his eyes.

"Nah. Why haven't I 'eard of 'em before, is what I wanna know."

"You probably came across 'em in a book," offered Bodie kindly, "but were too innocent to know what it was all about. Me, I had a decadent oriental upbringing."

"Really," mocked Doyle, and went quickly back to this entrancing subject before Bodie could regale him with tales of the said upbringing. "Give 'em 'ere a minute."

Bodie passed them over. "Sausages are getting cold," he said without any hope at all.

"Not hungry," Doyle said absently, curly head bowed in concentration over the string of beads as if considering the exciting life they must have led. "So, you do what with 'em? You - "

"*One*," corrected Bodie gently, but firmly; the less personal the pronoun the more he felt he could stand to discuss this without blushing again: "*one* slides them in, or, has them slid in, and

then, just when the moment of glory approaches - "

" - you have them pulled out," said Doyle, cottoning on with no trouble at all; his voice fell to a lush murmur. "one by one. Slowly." His head tipped back, eyes falling shut; his hand gripped the beads tightly. He was sweating.

It was then Bodie knew he was in deep trouble.

He gazed compelled at Doyle's flushed, wicked-cherub face, knowing that any moment Doyle was about to open his eyes, and in them, the light of mischief, and command.

"No," Bodie said, and turned away with an effort.

The whisper in his ear made him jump: "Why not?"

He hadn't heard Doyle's approach, nor been prepared for the warm hands that touched the sides of his throat, holding him in a relaxed, gentle way. The scent of him so close made it difficult to think.

"Just no," he managed, staring furiously ahead while gentle thumbs traced pleasure on the delicate skin behind his ears, "Not a good idea, Ray."

"Oh, you'll have to do better than that," the enchanter's voice whispered. "Why not?"

Bodie set himself free then, with care, and turned to face him, his mouth twisted with determination. "Because it might mean too much," he said, "And you know it."

Doyle understood that. Emotions known through centuries flickered through him; Bodie too knew them. Doyle was steady. "Let it, then. Let it. I'll stand the cost," he said softly, "if you will."

It would have happened anyway, sometime, if not tonight; they had been charting the path out this way for years.

It wasn't the first time he had kissed Ray, but it was almost as sweet as that first flying touch of mouth to warm mouth, shared at the end of a close, drunken evening when they had turned mellow, and tender with red wine and amity.

Once done, no way to have it undone, and so it had happened again; it was their secret, one exciting, dark, forbidden - warm... they never spoke of it.

Nor had they ever taken it any further - at least, in reality.

Almost as sweet, now, here on Bodie's wide bed in the near dark; and also sweeter: drowning in the nearness of him, the new freedom to explore him with every sense Bodie wondered dizzily if they weren't going in too fast, streaking on comet-like to a fast finish, and the beads still

clenched, forgotten, in his hand.

He let them fall.

His hand found and curled around Doyle's erect, throbbing cock, half-accessible from clothing hastily pushed aside, his other arm sliding beneath Doyle to roll him closer, cradle him in the lee of his shoulder as he had done so many times in fantasy; Doyle's warm breath sobbed into his throat, catching spasmodically, jerky, his fingers caught and dug into Bodie's arm.

He's - thought Bodie in amazement, just as Doyle's whole body convulsed on an arch of ecstasy; a second of frozen stillness and then the rhythmic, silent pulsing under his incredulous fingers, his thumb wet and sticky, warm.

When Doyle lay still and quiet again, only the odd catch marking out his breathing now, Bodie trailed his hand up to find the precious viscous puddlings marking out Doyle's naked chest. His seed, wasted on infertile ground. Bodie wished he could see it, admire the pearly texture. As he moved to settle more comfortably against him, his hand encountered something hard.

He picked up the forgotten beads and smiled, unseen. "You got it all wrong," he whispered into Doyle's hair, hand circling sensuously on the silky moist skin, lit by the sex-rich scent of it as it arose. "All wrong, sunshine. Too late now, isn't it?" He looped the artefact around Doyle's wrist.

A ripple beside him, and Doyle moved.

Light flashed into the room, making Doyle blink.

"Let's see if you do any better," said Doyle with a flawed smile; Lucifer with angel-hair. He lay still under Bodie's scrutiny. Staring down at Doyle's dishevelled looselimbed figure, eyes slitted over dream-chased green, shirt unbuttoned and pushed open, trousers undone, belly sticky and lush with sweat and sex, desire surged through Bodie, unstoppable, and he wondered whyever they had waited so long.

"Here," came Doyle's insistent voice into his ear, "Do it here, with mine," and obedient, Bodie surged strongly over slick skin, pressing his cock sweetly into Doyle's silken welcome, hands tangling in his hair, cradling his head, as he gasped and came, spurting warmly between their closepressed bodies; hearing as if in the distance the murmur of Doyle's voice encouraging him, telling him things hard to say except into the dark, and it was only later when his world had righted itself that he was able to do the same.

" - dunno why. Just did. Like you said, it crept up on me, same as it did you. Always was a sucker for curls and an angel face." His finger trailed idly, tenderly down Doyle's damp cheek. "Love you," he said, very soft.

But Doyle was already asleep, lulled in a new security.

Tell him tomorrow.

"Oi."

Bodie juddered awake with a shock.

"Woke me up," he grumbled unnecessarily, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

Doyle seemed disgustingly lively. He plunged down onto the settee where Bodie had been taking a crafty nap, and bounced.

Bodie shuddered. "Whaddyou want then," he enquired, gathering a lazy handful of Doyle's sweatshirt. He pulled. Doyle collapsed across his lap. Bodie slid an arm around him, rocked him a little, shutting his eyes again as Doyle relaxed into him. There was a chance, a small one, that he might be able to get back to sleep - drowsing together this way in the afternoon was characteristic of their Sundays.

Doyle rested against Bodie a moment, thinking his own thoughts, idly playing with the treasure he held. All was peaceful. Bodie drifted, his head beginning to slip to one side.

A skinny elbow connected harshly with his ribs. Bodie yowled, and shot up.

"I don't feel sleepy," Doyle explained.

"Oh that's great that is. *You* don't feel sleepy, so *I've* got to be awake," said Bodie bitterly. Abandoning all hope of a doze, he struggled upright, wistfully weighing up his chances of getting Doyle to make a cup of tea. His hand stroked up and down Doyle's arm, absently; Doyle was fiddling with something. Bodie looked down to see what it was.

"Bloody hell, Doyle," he exclaimed, more resigned than anything, "what'd you get those things out for?"

Doyle slanted up a glance. "Just came across 'em. Worry beads, aren't they?" He sounded totally unconcerned, running the curio through his fingers.

Bodie stared at him, unable to decide whether Doyle was setting him up, or not.

"You can't have forgotten," he said in disbelief.

"Can't have forgotten what?" Doyle turned his face up to him; it was one of his more guilefree days. Doyle always was dopey on a Sunday; trailed around in a trance, sweet-tempered and easily led. Nevertheless, Bodie eyed him with suspicion.

"I don't believe you've forgotten."

Doyle's brow furrowed in trouble. "I dunno what you're on about. Honest," he added, and leaned his head back on Bodie's shoulder, dismissing the subject. His fingers twiddled, idly.

Bodie swooped in and relieved him of the beads. "Mind like a bloody tea strainer," he muttered disgustedly. "You tellin' me, you don't remember how all this began?"

"All what?"

Bodie kissed him on the mouth, hard. At the same time his free hand travelled down Doyle, to cup the soft press of his genitals. "This," he said against Doyle's mouth.

"Of course I do," Doyle said affronted. His hand went down, covered Bodie's, pressing the fingers harder onto himself, one by one. Silence.

Bodie waited.

"Well?" he said, finally.

"S on the tip of my tongue," Doyle said dreamily; waif-whore, he made it sound charged with sexual enchantment.

Deciding to be appeased, Bodie drew one finger around the denim-covered groin. "I'm very hurt," he said, "Only two, three years ago and you don't remember how it all started?"

"Something to do with sausages?" Doyle hazarded, snatching at a hazy bit of memory, stretching out, encouraging Bodie to explore him further with an upward movement of his hips.

"On the right track," Bodie agreed, undoing his belt buckle and zip one-handed, sliding a careful hand inside to find Doyle warm and fully hard. He erected faster than anyone Bodie knew; sometimes at a look, or a scent. "Well? Any more trickling back, is it?" he enquired with a hint of sarcasm.

Doyle smiled, lower lip caught between his teeth as Bodie's thumb brushed as if casually over the tip of him. "Nah, 's slipping further away if anything." His eyes fell shut.

"Don't get too comfy, mate," Bodie warned, watching him: he added, "'cause in another minute you're either going to be in bed, or on the floor - depending on my whim." His voice had dropped to a low, very macho purr. "Ray - " his hand stilled, " - don't you really remember? Straight up?"

Doyle's eyes flashed open; he was making a serious effort this time, staring into space, brows drawn together. "I remember you fuckin' me for the first time and me dashin' off to -"

"All right, all right," Bodie interrupted hurriedly; they had discovered that some things took some getting used to but fortunately in this case, practice had proved to make perfect.

" - an' I remember, long before that, you used to kiss me. Dark nights when you thought I'd be too pissed to notice, you used to get closer and closer and finally you'd kiss me. Then you'd go away happy."

"All my doing?" Bodie said in disbelief at this biased view of events.

Doyle smiled briefly, caught up in his memory trip, eyes hazy. "Nah, I loved it, used to plan to get you nice and mellow so maybe you'd do it again."

Bodie kissed him for that, one hand lacing through apple fresh curls to bring him close. Warm, he was thinking that they were very lucky; that what they had bound them closer, and more lastingly, than any formal tie.

Doyle said against his ear, "But, 's like that old song. I can't remember exactly how it all started, you know, I'd probably swear blind I was wearing a blue shirt and you'd say it was a green one, that kind of thing. As for how those bloody worry beads come into it, well, that's way out of my orbit, mate."

He was grinning.

"Right," said Bodie, "That's it."

He hauled his mate to his feet, beads in one hand, a fistful of Doyle in the other, and set off for the bedroom, Doyle chuckling, wriggling, and protesting all the way.

"What the 'ell - ?"

Bodie dropped him onto the bed. "I," he said with great deliberation, "am going to *show* you what these are for. Since you don't seem able to take it in verbally, I'm going to get it across another way. Or," he noted Doyle's faint apprehension, laughing though he was, with satisfaction. "I can just see it, every five years when we springclean or something, when you come across 'em, it'll be the same old thing. 'Bodie,' it'll be, 'what are these for?'" he mimicked Doyle's sweet-rough voice, "'Worry beads are they Bodie?' I can't stand it, mate, so get ready. Say your last prayer, or whatever."

"No don't," Doyle pleaded, partly going along with the game, part genuinely wary as Bodie advanced on him, nightblue eyes gleaming, beads in hand - "Bodie," he yelled, backing across the bed in an undignified shuffle, "Wait, just wait, I wanna know what the hell I'm in for."

Bodie stopped. He was still undecided as to whether Doyle was having him on in the matter of his supposed amnesia, but it no longer seemed to matter, either way.

He got onto the bed, gathered Doyle from where he was hunched against the headboard, and held him close.

"You know I'd never hurt you," he said into Doyle's ear; from the heart.

Doyle agreed, without equivocation. He watched Bodie, curious only now, all uncertainty gone and forgotten.

"You'll like it."

Doyle relaxed slowly under the caressing voice and hands stroking pleasure over him; when he was alight with it, shivering with tension, every nerve sweet, he suddenly remembered on another distant plane exactly what the beads were for, but there was no resistance in him, he trusted Bodie, Bodie could do anything with him, anything at all. And when it happened, when he was drawn to the peak by Bodie's subtle skill with him, it was, god so beautiful, like he was some great flower unfolding slowly from the very centre of himself, every blossoming a stronger sweeter pulse than the last.

The world took time to right itself.

He opened his eyes, lazily; looked into dark blue.

He smiled.

"*Now* do you get it?" Bodie asked.

"Yeaahh." He invested the syllable with rich meaning. There was silence.

"Good, was it?" Bodie said softly, knowing how it had been.

"I felt like a flower," Doyle said unexpectedly; and grinned whitetoothed at the absurdity of it.

"You felt like a flower?" Bodie repeated, amazed; and he loved Doyle very much at that moment for the sheer, tender unconventionality of him; he could make Bodie laugh, and cry in the same breath...

They lay very close, understanding perfectly.

Doyle yawned, turned on his side. He trailed a hand down the smooth silken skin of Bodie's chest. Bodie was patient, waiting for him; only the feral glint of his eyes, the slight disorder of his breathing, betraying the effort patience was costing him. Doyle's fingers found him, squeezed him gently.

"I'll tell you something."

"Yeah," agreed Bodie, eyes shutting.

"Was a great feeling. Yeah... But, you know," mused Doyle, cradling Bodie's hardness between his palms, "if I'm gonna have anything inside me, I'd just as soon it was part of you."

Rigid with banked erotic need, Bodie still took care to be gentle as he responded to that invitation, submerging all his desire in Doyle's open welcome.

They always slept after making love on Sunday afternoons.

The last thing Bodie heard as he drifted off to sleep was an irritated, hotbreathed whisper in his ear.

"M lying on these bloody worry beads."

He fell asleep laughing.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Shooting to kill

Sebastian

I was seeing a lot of Helen Raven, that prodigiously gifted writer and fascinating intellect, at the time I wrote this. I even like it, as a sort of alternate-universe chapter, a what-if-they-liked-being-bad' scenario. HR's genius could not fail to inspire, and it has some lines I'm rather pleased with; but she is and will always remain the Master.

=====|||=====

Heartbeat thumping hugely in his ears, painful in his chest as he took the stairs three at a time to the top. First floor—perfumery, leather goods and jewellery—and if the fuzz had done their job the building would have cleared; safe by now to shoot at anything which moved. Unless it was Bodie, of course. His lips shaped out a quick, ironic smile. Not that it would be. Bodie knew better than to get across the line of his gun.

A shadow moved in front of him, or seemed as if it did. His feet skidded on the lino as he dived behind cover. Cautious—very, very cautious—he inched forward—and leaped around the corner into a kneeling pose, his gun whipped up and steady and ready to fire.

Nothing.

Fuck you, prick.

Arrogant mad bastard, trying to take him and Bodie on. Given them quite a bit of grief, bastard had. Chased him for five miles in the car; seen him knock over a pedestrian and carry on in headlong flight as if nothing mattered except to save his own skin.

Doyle's lip curled. Waste of effort. *Me and Bodie are on you, mate.*

Shoot to kill, Cowley had said. We'll see.

He carried on sprinting, up more stairs, feet pattering on lino, no carpets, government offices didn't run to luxury on the stairwells. Next corner: same routine. Wait: Gun: whip around in firing stance, eyes narrowed in to kill: gun up, run on.

Taking no chances. This guy was good. Shot and wounded four CI5 marksmen surprising him in the act of making his political statement, the old bomb-in-shopping-mall routine: bomb never went off but his gun had, over and over: five shoppers dead, one of them a mother, one an infant schoolchild in brand new uniform, room for growth which was not now going to be needed: horribly affecting, haunting.

Doyle, who had been first to the bodies, winced as he ran and made a silent promise: *gonna get you, scum*. Four men down. Cowley was going to be mad. He and Bodie on overtime for weeks. *Your number's up, mate. Beg for mercy: be my guest.* The thought lifted him and he fairly flew up the last flight of stairs.

The last room. No sign of Bodie, checking out the other route. Doyle hesitated for no more than a second: drew up his gun in both hands, and drove a huge kick into the door. It flew open with a bang.

Instantly Doyle was diving to one side, dropping to one knee, gun high and steady—Only to let it fall slackly, with a sigh. Bodie, a familiar sight in brown leather jacket, was rising to his feet, giving him a clap, surveying this performance with a glint of humour. “Took your time, didn't you?”

Adrenalin flooding through him, fear and effort and arousal. His heart was kicking violently as he rose to his feet, grumbling, “Broke a record getting up those stairs, mate. I suppose you took the lift?”

“Damn right,” Bodie agreed. “Trouble with you, Doyle, you like to do things the hard way. Get a kick out of it, do you?”

“I get a kick out of a lot of things,” Doyle said shortly. “Running up the bloody stairs not one of them.” Cream shirt fresh, black trousers with knife-edge creases, Bodie was looking pretty damn pleased with himself, as well he might. Their murderer was sitting right here in the room with them in a chair: possibly not of his own volition, since he seemed to be tied to it at ankle and wrist. A piece of sticky tape affixed across his mouth accounted for his relative silence, though what sounds did emerge were not indicative of serenity.

Doyle made a slow motion gesture of turning. “Don't need me, do you mate? I dunno why you don't work solo, it's a waste, innit?” He spoke sarcastically, shoving his Browning down the front of his white jeans.

Dark brows quirked, Bodie watched him with amusement. “Livin' dangerously, yeah?”

“You know me,” Doyle remarked, “No thrill too small.” He wandered over to the captive, saw into the angry, violent eyes, no remorse there, only fury at the loss of freedom. “Pleased with yourself?” Doyle asked of him rhetorically, anger building anew in him—etched in his mind was the woman, sprawled on the road, badged here and there with red; christ, how Bodie had had to swerve to avoid the body, his neck still ached with whiplash. Now he looked down into the killer’s eyes with great care and attention: “Caused a lot of trouble, you ’ave, ’aven’t you?” and his voice was quite soft, quite tender.

“Oh, come on Doyle, be fair,” Bodie objected, eyes heavenward, “Anyone can have an off day.”

Doyle counted them off on his fingers: “Three more widows out there now, all wanting their pension — ’s a drain on the nation, innit? Four mates of mine stretchered out with an extra hole or two more than they had this morning. The orphaned kiddie. Wonder if he’s still shriekin’ for ’is mum? —was when I left. Oh, and the mother whose eyes I ’ad to cover back there in case she saw the mess you made with her kid’s brains: very pretty, if you like that sort of thing.”

“All part of the plan, was it?” Bodie asked, moving in on him, suddenly hard, threatening, eyes as chill as morning frost.

“Did you get off on it?” Doyle said to the man in the chair, gentle, uninflected: and then he smiled, just a little movement of his facial muscles, could almost be a tic. Without turning his head he said softly, “And Bodie didn’t kill you when he had the chance. Now, I call that real self-control.”

Saintly, Bodie shook his head. “I waited for you, Doyle,” he said, soft and sweet and low.

“He waited for me because — it’s more fun together,” Doyle said, still gentle as a lover, without lifting his eyes from the man’s face, and there it was, what he had been waiting for: the first sign of fear. Only a quick sharp spark in his eyes, but it was there; and Doyle got a rush from it, the first, a warmth inside him beginning to spread—

Had your fun. Now you pay for it.

“Well, and here we all are,” Doyle said, amiably, squatting on his haunches, “And what are we gonna do with you? Got any idea?”

Now their victim twigged it. It was real: he was going to die. There really wasn’t going to be a way out. This horrible understanding flashed up starkly in his eyes again, and seeing it, Doyle smiled, quick, feral.

Well. You think death’s the worst thing there could be, do you?

He asked, serene, lucid: “You getting off on this too, sunshine? Or isn’t it quite so good for you this way around?”

“Shoot to kill, didn’t the Cow say?” Bodie murmured, softly, clearly, feet planted squarely apart.

“Yeah, but then Cowley always was too forgiving.” Doyle’s head was down, he withdrew the gun from his waistband, began to stroke the warm barrel off with his fingertips, obsessive; Doyle liked his weapons clean.

Then he reached out to slip loose the ties on the man’s ankles. Bodie watched him indulgently, ankles crossed, gun resting negligently on his folded arms.

Another tie came loose, worked on by Doyle’s lean strong fingers. Doyle wasn’t in any hurry. The man’s eyes darted about this way and that. You could see the confusion, the doubt: *what the hell are they up to?*

And then he was free: “Gonna run?” Doyle asked him, almost smiling, head cocked to one side.

Well, you would have to try for it. You could see how the choice would look—any chance, you would reason, was better than no chance.

Just an illusion, mind you, that there was any chance at all.

In the blink of an eye he was up from the chair, making a last, desperate bid for his life. And just for a moment it looked as if he might make it: freedom was there, just on the other side of the door, just out of reach of his clawing hand—

Almost casually, Bodie unpropped his gun and raised it to shoot.

In that one split second he glanced at Doyle, read the inclination mirrored there, bright and clear and twisted as his own.

The barrel dropped down. He aimed the shot low.

So there they were, alone together with the creature they had made. Bodie crossed his arms, leaned back against the desk behind him. Doyle turned his head, smiled at him peacefully. He smiled back. There was no need to say anything. It was a curiously intimate moment, private for the two of them, special. Very special indeed: reserved for initiates of a very particular taste.

The writhings of the man on the floor had taken him quite half across the room, an involuntary lashing, like a broken snake on the road. Arms folded, watching with a desultory eye, Doyle withdrew the toe of his leather boot; blood was hard to remove from clothing, though it washed off naked skin easily enough. Together they waited; there was no hurry. And eventually the man’s desperate movements ceased, the first driving agony dealt with by the brain so that thought could return and bid again for survival, and you could see, there in the bloodshot eyes, the black spiral of despair; anyone would feel it, alone in a room nursed by two men without limits. Their victim began to moan, a long loud animal noise. Doyle’s eyes, lushly closed, flicked wide open.

Bodie kicked something aside and looked down dispassionately. “Put a sock in it sunshine, or you’ll get another one.” And when the noise did not abate, knelt down swiftly, savagely. “I said, turn down the volume, cunt, or we’ll have to think of something else to do to you.”

“Don’t tempt us,” Doyle said, breathing fast, looking down. And Bodie swooped in to whisper:

“Ever been gutshot, sunshine?”

“Now that always looks to me like it really hurts.”

“Takes a while to die.”

“Bullet up the back passage—? Keeps it nice and tidy.”

“Get an exit hole about—here—” He gently placed his hand on the spot, rubbed it with his palm “—if you get the angle of entry right, of course.”

Doyle leaned in, curious, intense, eyes dwelling here and there: “Tell me something. Did it make you come when you watched ’em all die—?”

“Did you know what a charge it was gonna give you? Or did it take you by surprise?”

Doyle was struck by a sudden thought, snapping his fingers: “Hey Bodie, we should’ve brought the video. Good market for snuff movies these days, int there?”

They loomed in on him where he cringed on the floor, looking at him, interested, delighted, as if he were a new growth in a tube. Nightblue devil’s eyes gleaming, narrowed as if looking through a visor, mirth and malevolence. And his accomplice, stone-eyed, alert, breathing fast with the kick of it all, on a roll. This excited them. It was their kind of fun.

With enormous effort, the last and greatest he would ever make, the man’s sobs melted into a harrowing wheeze as he found the strength from somewhere to plead for his life and Bodie ripped the tape off his mouth to hear it: “I’ve got money —”

“Money, eh?” Bodie remarked, unmoved, chucking the wrinkled bit of tape behind him. “Nice... but I’m afraid our boss isn’t too keen on undeclared income, int that right, Doyle?”

Doyle was shaking his head and tutting. “Do we look corruptible? Got anything else on offer?” he added, for the hell of it.

“Women... I could fix you up, easy—” One look at the two of them, brutish, solid, unmovable, made him change the angle, to plead instead: “I’ve got a kid at home—”

“Kid, eh? Don’t reckon he’s much cop as a dad though, do you, Doyle? Poor little bugger’s probably better off without you, mate. Mum’ll soon get in a replacement,” Bodie comforted, and dug Doyle in the ribs. “Oi. What you snorting about?”

Doyle was chuckling, head shaking from side to side. “For a minute there I got the wrong end of the stick — thought he was offering us a kid instead of the women — !”

Fiends at play. You could see from his eyes that he had begun to understand, just whose hands he had fallen into; abandoning hope and speech together he began to moan again, blood running from the shattered knee through vainly clutching fingers.

Doyle was looking at the window, attention caught by something he had seen there, a small sandy man in a beige raincoat, coming this way fast—

“Cowley.”

Suddenly all business Bodie spun his gun in automatic reflex, knelt down by the man’s side.

“We’ve got to go now. But thank you for having us.”

The mouth of the gun, still warm, just touched the clammy skin, then settled in there, ready, rocksteady.

Doyle came to stand nearby looking down, playtime over, absolutely cold: “That’s it, mate: this is where it all ends for you.”

“Unless there’s a hell, anyway,” Bodie said, and let that get home, sick horror twisting blackly in their victim’s eyes, before he shot him in the head.

=====|||=====

Cowley took one look, then turned away in distaste.

“Made a mess of him, didn’t you?”

“Sorry, sir.” Following their boss cheerfully on light feet down the stairs, Bodie got out a tube of Polos from his pocket, tore back the wrapper and offered them to Doyle, pushing the top one up with his thumbnail. “He moved the wrong way.”

“Made a break for it,” was Doyle’s offering, taking the mint. “Ta.”

“Well, so long as you stopped him: that was quite some spree. Four men down! Extra shifts for you two, and you’ll not be the only ones.”

Doyle took a close look at Bodie’s hand. “Blood all over you,” he noted sotto voce as he tossed the mint into his mouth and stuck the point of his tongue through the hole.

“So long as it’s not mine.” Bodie bowed to him elaborately: “Or yours.” Cowley was moving at

quite a lick for an old man or they would have stopped. Hurrying along, Bodie tossed a sideways glance at his partner. And Doyle looked back at him, eyes bright, curious, excited: for a moment they were alone again, back there together in some private place far, far away from the world.

“Wanna come round to my place tonight?” Bodie said, and gulped down the last of his sweet.

“Yeah, okay.”

“I gotta video we can watch.”

“Something educational, I hope, Bodie?” Cowley rapped back at them.

Bodie smiled at Doyle as he answered Cowley: “Only type there is, isn’t it, Sir?”

Cowley turned around to look at them—cheeky, irrepressible pair! Doyle was leaning artistically on the roof of the car while Bodie, clowning around as usual, knelt to him, Doyle a paper king, knighting the top of Bodie’s bowed dark head with one swipe of his sword.

Cowley let the pride swell: they had not let him or the nation down; they had done their duty, just as he had known and trusted that they would. It had been the dirtiest sort of job, the sort of job no-one should have to do. But these two were strong enough. No shadows on their souls to bring them nightmares: they could handle it. Cowley settled back in his seat for the ride back to HQ, making himself comfortable as Bodie took the wheel and swung the car off into the road.

Good men. His best.

Zeroplanic

Siren

Sebastian

This is a dark series, full of torment, and did not go down too well with some readers, particularly Bodie fans, who felt he had to put up with too much and was not loved enough. The first I agree with, the second, never. In my B and D universe, there is never a lack of love.. these men are bound together, forever, however much they beautifully suffer along the way. It's seldom picked out as a favourite of my stories by readers, but still, there are things I love about it - particularly the shootout with the young recruit where I tried to capture, for once, some life-or-death struggle outside the bedroom, the knife-edge danger and excitement of CI5 we see onscreen, which drew me to the series in the first place.

It also contains the worst line written by any slash writer ever, in the history of fandom. I've left it in, for nostalgia. I hope you spot it, and smile...

=====////=====

" - you fancy one?"

"Nah, you go ahead." Bodie put down his pen, slowly; leaned back in his chair.

"So bloody stuffy in 'ere," Doyle said briefly, loping through the restroom en route for the small shower cubicle. "Needs a fan installed - gonna write the Cow a memo about it - " The brown tousled head disappeared momentarily around the thin plastic wall of the shower, then re-emerged. Inside the cubicle a trickle of water began, faltered, then gathered into a steady rhythm as it pattered hissing down onto the plastic floor.

Doyle was still complaining as he began to strip. The holster was the first thing to go, draped over the back of a chair - Bodie noted abstractly that it was faintly grubby; and had, at one time, frayed and been mended - "Takes ages for it to run hot. It's something to do with the pipes

runnin' so close to the drawer where the ol' man keeps our expense chits - temperature's freezing in there, too - "

For once, Doyle was wearing a tie. Bodie watched as his partner's thin fingers plucked speedily at the drooping knot, effecting a magical release; then Doyle yanked it around so it flew and danced like a flat dun snake, dropping it carelessly to the couch in one corner where it lay instantly still, divested of its feigned animation.

"ow long d'you think we'll be tied up here?" He was starting on his shirt buttons now, standing squarely in front of the desk Bodie occupied, feet planted apart, watching him with thoughtful green eyes.

"Oh, I dunno. All night, probably."

Doyle grimaced, undoing the last button and pushing the pale shirt back off his slender shoulders; his skin looked nicely tanned in comparison to the pastel beige cotton disarranged over it. Apparently arrested by a sudden thought, he froze in the position and gazed down at his partner.

"Maybe I better not shower. Say 'e wants us in a hurry - "

"Nah, you got time," Bodie assured him too quickly, "he's gone out to see the Commissioner - be at least an hour, 'e said -"

And if Doyle didn't know that perfectly well, if he had forgotten the message relayed to them not ten minutes ago, then he had no place in this job.

Bodie's hands were sweating as he clenched them tightly together beneath the desk - oh Christ... He ought to stop this, now, but -

Doyle had resumed undressing, wriggling out of his shirt, holding it between finger and thumb for a moment before throwing it at Bodie, an accurate toss which took the other man thoroughly by surprise.

"Should've brought fresh clothes. Next time we're on one of these all-night jobs, remind me, will you? Nothin' worse than putting the same ones back on when you're all clean - "

Bodie had extricated himself by now from the folds of Doyle's shirt: still warm from its recent contact with Doyle's skin the scent of it filled Bodie's senses, sweat and radiant Doyle-musk. It was, touchingly, wet beneath the armpits. Bodie folded it carefully in hands that were not quite steady; laid it on the desk.

Doyle had swung away from him now, was studying the pinboard on the wall; it was studded with lurid holiday postcards. His back to Bodie, he whistled, hands stilling on the belt-buckle which he had begun to unfasten. "Murph's in Barbados? Christ, he must've found a rich woman." Head tilted back so the curls fanned out over his shoulders, his fingers began to work at the

buckle. Bodie watched the ripple of delicate shoulderblade beneath honey skin; the indentation of the flexing spine, pricked out down the tapering length of his narrow back.

Anger shot through him, like an arrow coldly flensed with steel; anger at Doyle's blatant exhibitionism - for he knew all too well Doyle did it out of a very calculated purpose indeed - and anger at his own helpless desire, the shaming lust that led him, every bloody time they played one of these very private little games instigated by Doyle, to gorge his eyes on Ray while he had the chance, greedily feeding on the sight of him, stashing impressions away in his memory with indecent haste, piling small detail on small detail, to be brought out at leisure, and alone...

... but even anger could do nothing to quell the growing, insistent excitement as he watched Ray undress, the intensely heightened sexual awareness, the tense alertness of anticipation...

If he stops now - oh God, don't let him stop now...

As if he had been waiting for that silent plea, there was the rasp of a zip and Doyle began sliding his jeans down over his thighs, still continuing to talk seemingly unaware that it had been a monologue for a minute or more -

" - bring us a souvenir. Somethin' in a grass skirt would be nice - "

He kicked his feet free of the jeans; they flew into the air and landed on top of the tie. He wore small green briefs beneath, the material of which had been caught in the cleft between his neat round buttocks so that each was clearly defined and separated; it was perhaps uncomfortable, for as Bodie watched Doyle reached behind, inserted a finger beneath the elastic and ran it along to lift the material, an automatic, unplanned gesture.

- so - bloody - beautiful -

Oh Christ. Bodie blinked, winded, and found that he was pinching a portion of his own upper thigh between finger and thumb, a desperate gripping assertion of tension barely held in check. He let it go, massaged the abused flesh with disinterest - have a bruise there tomorrow, mate - then, inexorable, demanding, almost against his own will his fingers drifted across his thigh to the hard knot of flesh trapped alongside it. He was sweating. He drew in a ragged, quiet breath as his fingertips made little, swirling motions on the sorely stretched fabric of his cords, barely brushing over his aching, pulsing cock; the other hand lifted nervously to wipe a trickle of sweat from his forehead. God, but it was hot in here.

The noise of water showering down somewhere close at hand had long since ceased to impress itself on the senses other than as a background noise, easily ignored, but now Bodie could see a cloud of steam beginning to curl around the plastic cubicle, misting the walls. "You better get a move on, sunshine," he said in a voice that was tight with need, husky with sexual tension; but there was only Doyle to hear, Doyle the wicked provocative author of it -

"water's getting hot - "

Ohgod, mourned a little, keening voice deep within; want him so much, so goddamn much; Christ but I want him...

It happened so often.

Crying inside, he needed massive self-control to hold off, stay where he was, the diffuse help of his own hand now pressed open-palmed to his groin assuaging the ache a little; but not enough.

Doyle didn't move for a moment, still seemingly absorbed in his perusal of the noticeboard - oh, far too long Doyle: you're pushing realism way out the window, mocked the little cynical corner of Bodie's mind, even as the rest of him ached and yearned for touch as he watched Doyle standing there, legs apart, skinny, muscular thighs downed with dark hair - and Doyle stretched, hands knotted behind his head, long and luxurious, his compact body a study in sinuous sculpture.

Then he dropped his head, plucked off the pants in one swift, sure movement, and tossed those too towards the couch; he went to the door and snapped off the main overhead light.

Naked, eyes dark and shining with his own excitement - for Doyle too got off on this game - he came and stood in front of the desk. "Yeah, you're right," he said, but Bodie, slumped back in his chair, had long since lost the conversation and was past caring in any case, "mustn't waste Cowley's water, must we? Put CI5's bills up no end..." His voice was very soft, very intense, and he watched Bodie all the time: a skinny naked sprite with glowing green eyes and an angel's mouth; haloed with brown curls, staring at Bodie very deliberately.

Bodie's hand had left himself with reluctance, come to rest harmlessly on the desktop as Ray came even nearer, so close that Bodie's hypersensitive nerves were flooded with the scent of him,

first hand now, warm and living and so - bloody - desirable - that Bodie wanted to seize him, bury his nose all over him, rubbing at him, frenzied as a dog on mindless heat... Voiceless, he stared up at Doyle, eyes dark with need, and despair; saw the answering, glittering excitement clear in Doyle's own eyes, in the fast rate of his breathing, lifting and dropping the ribbed convexity of his thin chest. They were not even touching.

If anyone walked in on this scene, what would they think, Bodie found himself crazily wondering; what would they see? Ray Doyle, CI5, about to take a shower to while away the time of a sitting job, wash away the day's sweat; and his partner, bored, sitting at the desk idly waiting for the phone to ring, everything usual, normal, half-alert in the dead of night...

It's only us that knows about this, knows what it means - our secret, never spoken, how he turns the situation like this, so the whole room's tense with the atmosphere of a sparking powdercellar; and a lit match on a very short fuse...

His heart was pounding so fast, as fast as Doyle's - he could see the leap and flutter of the other man's pulse clearly beneath translucent brown skin, so close to him -

He met Doyle's eyes again, fierce and sad and desperate all at once, saw twin emotions in Doyle's absorbed, excited fallen-angel's face. Watching him all the time, Doyle lifted the back of one hand to his mouth, pink lips parting so Bodie heard him swallow, caught a glimpse of his flicking tongue, before it slipped out from beneath the chipped white tooth; and licked over the narrow wrist.

Bodie drew in a sharp, hissing breath, and nearly, so nearly, orgasmed there and then. Only the tight, almost painful hold he had on the corner of the desk served to distract his delirious, fiery delight at the wanton, erotic sight of Ray Doyle naked, perched in front of him, one knee casually drawn up; head tipped dreamily back as he savoured the taste of his own skin, that wrist still artistically pressed to the full mouth...

Then he opened his eyes, looked straight at Bodie, his hand falling carelessly away. "Mmm - I definitely need a shower," he said distantly, thus passing off the extraordinary, unnecessary action; "won't be long, okay mate?" And with a suddenly sharp, measuring glance over Bodie's body, taking in the straining press of flesh at its centre, he slipped off the desk, balanced on the balls of his feet for a bare second, watching the direction of Bodie's gaze with brightly sensual, knowing eyes, totally satisfied with what he saw.

Then he was gone, a scant whisk of blurry naked flesh, yelping with surprise as the rush of drenching water first hit him.

Past anything but the need that gripped him, clawed at his vitals, with a little whimper Bodie wrenched at his trousers, scrambling the belt and zip clear with furious haste. He leaned back in the chair as far as he could, spreading his thighs as far as was possible given the restriction of encumbering corduroy, and slid his hand down into his pants, fingers seeking out and curling at last - oh god, at last - around the hot distended flesh, freeing it from throbbing discomfort. His cool palm pressed down over the slippery engorged head; and with a sigh of relief, of need, he rubbed the flat of his hand sensuously down its length, spreading the slickness, his palm working gently, sweetly. Looking down, he could see the rosy tip standing out and up from his briefs, arching over his belly; a single, silvery trail of moisture drooping to fill the shallow cup of his navel: his left hand impatiently pulled his shirt up and out of the way.

Doyle had started to sing as he soaped himself, soft and lilting in his not-unattractive voice; the song of Bodie's personal Siren. So Bodie listened to that, shutting out all else, eyes dwelling hazily on the smoky plastic screen, searching desperately for the scant glimpses he was afforded of moving, clouded flesh; and as his hand moved on himself, pressed his moist hard sex down into the welcoming softness of his belly, ground it around, half-opened unfocussed eyes caught a glint of white. His free hand went out, grasped Doyle's discarded shirt, fingers twining helplessly, lovingly in the material; he brought it up to his face, breathed in Doyle's lingering scent all over again. The shock to his dazed, overloaded senses drove him over the edge, his cheek rubbing blindly over the soft cotton, and he was filling with a sweet lush yearning spreading outwards from his groin, right up to his heart, almost unbearable in its poignancy because he loved Ray, loved him, loved him, and it was all so sweet and so exciting and so desperately, hopelessly sad...

Oblivious to the fact that Doyle's voice had long ago faltered and ceased, Bodie's eyes fell shut, a small helpless whimper and then another leaving him as his fingers clutched convulsively on himself, and his sex pulsed strong warm spurts of ecstasy over his hand, his belly, his clothing... and his lips formed the single word 'Ray', but did not let it fall...

When Doyle, gasping and dripping, finally turned off the taps with swift, sure twists, stepping out and reaching for a towel, Bodie, immaculately attired and very pale, rose from the desk.

"Think I will have a bloody shower after all," he commented roughly, pushing past him; and did not even know that tears, shining evidence of his betrayal, stood out clearly on his face.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

The Smallest Room

Sebastian

*Another story in which plot is merely sketched in with a brushstroke to draw in my obsessions,
Guns and Death. And Sex, of course.*

I love the last line.

=====|||=====

Silence.

The dark man sat at ease against the wall, his fingers busy with the buckle of his holster, flicking the metal catch into every notch in turn.

Beside him crouched his curlyheaded partner, seriously trying out his draw, over and over and over. His hand darted into his armpit, seized the butt of the Magnum, flipped it out, the whole movement swift, very swift, his hand a blur until the black circlet steadied: aimed. Over it frowned the twin green focus of his eyes, narrowed in exactitude.

Then he would break the forced pose, and try again. Each sequence took him slightly less than two seconds. Still he kept trying. Looking for that elusive 1.5.

Eventually the bigger man, who watched him on and off, stirred and said mildly:

"Oh, give it a rest, Ray."

The room was very small, with one tiny window; the smallest room in the house, in fact, and right at the top of it, under the eaves and warm, stuffy. Bare boards were beneath their feet and the sole piece of furniture was one tall cupboard. Doyle pulled out the heavy gun again with one

hand and dragged a rag out of his pocket with the other. He began to polish the barrel, slowly and precisely. No speck of dust was going to friction-drag on Ray Doyle's draw.

Bodie patted his hand kindly. "Your draw's fine." His own was, in fact, a fraction slower, Doyle being probably the best small-arms shot in CI-5: but Bodie wasn't going to raise a sweat on last-minute practice. 1.8, 1.6, what did it matter? The guy was just as dead either way.

Drawing the holster on at last and buckling it beneath his arm, Bodie thus watched Doyle's preparations with an amused, tolerant eye.

He was just as obsessive in his way, no doubt about it. But it suited him, even, perhaps especially, here alone with his partner, to look as if it all came about by natural-born talent.

"Look at this," Doyle said, frowning. Bodie cast a glance over his way. Doyle lifted away his gun hand and displayed it to Bodie. It was shaking, a small, consistent tremor. Bodie watched Doyle try to quell it, fail, try again.

Today looked like being tough: the two of them policing a reception where Cowley suspected an assassination attempt on one of the diplomat guests. The tipoff had been vague in the extreme, but no one wanted to take any chances; so the event was going ahead as planned, with two extra attendees. Who, while they might be required to stay alive as long as possible in order to fulfill their conditions of duty, were most definitely expendable.

And Ray Doyle, as courageous a man as any Bodie had worked with, had a gun hand which shook. Bodie looked sideways at him, silent.

"It's okay when I get there," Doyle was explaining seriously. "Don't have to think about it when I get there."

Bodie dismissed it, a quick wave of his hand. "Ah, s'just adrenalin, mate."

Doyle's lip curled away from his teeth in exasperation. "I know what it is. Just, I could do without it minutes before the bullets start flyin'. Does wonders for my confidence, y'know?"

But as they both knew, there would be no time to worry--about shaky gun hands, too-tight holsters, or the like: instincts would come into play at the first flash of trouble, and training would take over from there.

"Look on the bright side, Doyle," Bodie drawled. "I hear the catering's on the cheapskate, more lumpfish than Beluga. Maybe they won't think it's worth turning up for."

"Yeah, and just maybe it's bigger fish altogether they got on their minds," Doyle said gloomily, and shifted to a more comfortable position, shoving his Magnum away. He turned his attention now to his jacket, pulling it on over his denim shirt: soft, scuffed leather, it fit him closely and looked good. He looked exactly what he was: a young, tough fighter. No chance anyone was going to mistake him for one of the guests. Bodie now, in dark cords instead of worn blue jeans,

had rather more chance of being offered the canapes.

"Scared?" he asked of his partner now, offhand.

Doyle flicked his eyes up to meet Bodie's blue-blaze stare. He snapped, aggressive and defensive, "I'm always bloody scared. And don't try tellin' me you're not."

"Be mad not to be," Bodie agreed lightly, his eyes travelling over his companion. "Doesn't make my gun-hand shake though--and nor will yours when it matters so stop worrying."

"I hate caviar anyway," Doyle muttered. He hunched himself into his jacket, and stared moodily at his nails. "Why'd anyone want to eat all those little black fishy balls?" Waiting. Hanging around. He hated it.

About to pass some crudity on the subject of fishes' balls, or their lack thereof, Bodie saw the creased brow, the angry eye, and said instead:

"'S the tension. Gets to you."

"Yeah, too right." He'd feel a hell of a lot better when they were out there in the thick of it; prowling among people, suspicious, sharpeyed, alert--the adrenalin rush pounding through his veins, ready, ready, ready.

Bodie stretched out, and sat more comfortably. "What you need's a good screw, sunshine."

"A pee's more what I feel like," Doyle grumbled, an eerie twingeing in the pit of his belly.

Bodie smacked his thigh smartly. "Naughty boy, Raymond. I told you to go before you came out."

"Didn't want to then," Doyle whined in true infant fashion.

"There's a cupboard over there," Bodie indulged him. "Might be a bucket or something."

"No thanks," Doyle declined swiftly. "It'll have to wait." He shifted restlessly again. Waiting!

"Worst part of this, innit?" Bodie understood all too well, shared very precisely what Doyle was going through. The awkward twilight hours before an ambush: reminded him--

"Course, in the Mercs--" Doyle yawned widely and inelegantly--didn't stop Bodie at all--"night before we had a big job coming off, we'd get to the town, or what passed for it, pick up a woman--or what passed for 'em--"

"Yeah--?" Doyle said, semi-interested: the scoffing--"Lead to some memorable encounters, did it?" Fed on a diet of Western romance he could see in his mind's eye some scratch frontier town, swinging saloon doors, a low, red-lit room: a shadowy female with black suspenders on white

thighs, frilly red garters: and Bodie. Lounging at ease. Watching her with a hard and hungry eye.

"I'm just sayin', that's the trick the Mercs use," Bodie said distantly. "Kills the tension, see? Steadies the gun hand, sights in the eye."

"Does it really?" Doyle jeered. "Well, I'll keep that in mind next time the cow sends us up for anythin' dodgy."

"You mean Jackie didn't come across last night?" Bodie leaned his head nearer to grin, flicking off the safety of his gun to test it, flicking it on again.

It was news to Doyle that Bodie knew he'd been seeing the redheaded waitress at the wine bar; he simply grimaced.

"And you couldn't get 'round her?" Bodie marvelled. "Raymond, my boy! Losing your touch?"

"No," Doyle snapped irritably, and Bodie grinned down at his feet. "She had a--"

"--headache? Oldest one in the book. Next time, you give her two aspirin and tell her to lie down for a bit."

"And?"

"You lie down and *give* her a bit, of course," Bodie said smoothly. "Never fails. But I was telling you about the Mercs."

Doyle groaned, both at the joke and the prospect. "Yeah, well I can live without your shagging-and-fagging tales."

"Sometimes we weren't near a town. Or there weren't any women, or no money to pay 'em--"

"Bodie, I don't want to hear this."

"But the tension's sill running high, job's got to be done. All those suicidal desperadoes," Bodie said, gaining enthusiasm for his tale, "to face in the bush tomorrow. What do you do? No war, no money: *and* you've got to live to get paid."

"So?"

Bodie broke his gun in half to inspect the chamber, whirled the cartridge around, apparently losing interest in the conversation. "So, what?"

"Bodie, I thought this was the whole point," Doyle said patiently. "What did you do?"

Bodie raised his head, a devilish glint in his eye. "*Not* what you're thinking."

"What was I thinkin'?" Doyle defended, grinning suddenly.

"What everyone thinks. No, why bother with all the limp wrist and fairy frolics stuff, when your old right hand's just as good to yourself?"

"Borin', Bodie. Borin'." Doyle slid down the wall, hands behind his head.

"Seriously." A bird dive bombed the roof above their heads; Doyle jumped a mile, hand flying for his gun; Bodie intercepted the hand calmly. "Look at you, see? Nerves in tatters. Another time, you take a tip from me. Make a date with yourself." He shook the hand he still held. "Steady as a rock, after, I guarantee it."

So good humoured was the lecture and so much did Bodie sound like a proud housewife showing Doyle his clean sheets: Doyle had to laugh. He flicked a wide grin Bodie's way. "A'right, Bodie: next time pick me up ten minutes later."

There might be something in it, at that. After a few moments Doyle closed his eyes and listened to the thud of blood in his veins and imagined the afterglow of orgasm, self-induced or otherwise: his heartbeat slowing sweetly, a rosy flush spreading on his skin, relaxed, soft, floating down slowly on a pleasure-cloud.

Sunlight shafted across the room and dust danced in its beam. Bodie watched Doyle's hair catch fire beneath it and said casually:

"Not too late, is it? Half an hour to go yet, more." He reached over to the Thermos in his kitbag and pulled it out.

Doyle, dreaming, opened his eyes at the sound of liquid glugging out of the flask. "What?" He accepted the small plastic cup and took an incautious sip of something lukewarm and too sweet, nearly spitting it out. Hardly worth making Bodie take his turn if this was the result.

"Look, if it doesn't work, I'll consider scratching that fiver you owe me," Bodie said reasonably. "Can't say fairer than that, can I?"

Sipping slowly and steadily, Doyle gazed at him.

"Come on," Bodie encouraged. "Get on with it." And he threw Doyle's hand lightly towards his faded denim lap.

"Oh very funny," Doyle said, giving him a hard stare.

Bodie shrugged. "What's funny? You consult me about a problem--the jitters. I give you my considered advice. And I shall certainly," he loomed in, gave Doyle a dazzling smile which left his eyes cold, "be highly offended if you don't take it. Court-martial offence."

Doyle handed the empty cup back in silence. Bodie did this to him so often: teamed for less than

a year they were (and guessed it) a brilliant pairing, sharing some off-key harmony of attitude and intuition. A perfect team. Everybody said so.

Yet they were not close, and not even friends.

Bodie was affable enough, mostly: good enough company for a quick off-duty drink: but it didn't go very deep. And any glimpses Doyle had had of what *deep* might be only tended to rock him on his heels.

Bodie was a weird one, all right.

Doyle supposed it was the life he'd led: being planted out in the city streets, perhaps, when his heart lay still in the jungle; that Bodie occasionally came out with something so way-out, so at odds with the niceties of social intercourse, and never seemed to know that Doyle might find it strange.

And it would do Doyle no good to act the outraged moralist: not when he spent every moment of every day competing with some hidden attitude of Bodie's: that Doyle was (so far) proving himself very nicely, but that Bodie, biding his time, was sure it couldn't last. Convinced of his own superiority against a one-time copper's, Bodie was always looking to find him wanting. That he had not done so yet only made the chase the sweeter. *Pin you down one day, old son*, Bodie's slatey cynic's eye said.

But not today.

So he favoured Bodie with a wide-eyed stare, lying back at his ease.

"That's what you'd do in my place, is it?"

Bodie's lip wrinkled smugly. "Not my gunhand with the trembles, sunshine."

"No, and it never was, right? Come off it, Bodie," Doyle said in unfeigned disgust. "Stop playing Mr. Cool. I'm your partner, for fuck's sake."

Bodie ducked out of this with grace. "I'm not saying it never gets to me. It does, course it does."

"And so there you all were," Doyle cast his hands behind his head and mused, "all in your tents, walls shakin', everyone on compulsory wankin' detail...."

Bodie gave an enigmatic smile and didn't answer.

"Somehow I can't picture it," Doyle decided, derisive.

Bodie lifted his head and stared at him, not particularly friendly. He had, Doyle had noticed before, some bond of extreme loyalty to his former life which surfaced at odd moments, mostly when anyone looked like to criticise it. "What do you want me to say, Doyle, 'No, we were too

shy?" he mimicked hands-in-the-air horror. "Use your imagination, Ray. Six months before you got a sight of anything female, on two legs anyway; three score men with their brains in their bollocks, what'd you expect? Yeh, some of them screw each other. But not so many as you might think. For most of 'em it's a quick wank in the bushes or go mad. And ten to one there's another bloke in the bushes right next to you."

"I knew it," Doyle said with satisfaction, and gave a long, slow whistle. "I knew it. Kinky stuff."

Bodie considered him long and hard for a moment. Then a little smile wandered across his lips, breaking the ice of his expression.

"Tell you the truth, it does add an edge to it, yes."

Doyle pursed his lips, and exhaled. He shook his head. "Sick," he said happily. Yet, in a funny kind of way he knew exactly what Bodie meant, had felt the instant thrill of it leap like a spark inside him.

"Oh come on Ray, don't give me that," Bodie said with a blue-eyed flash of anger, "all very well being holier-than-thou when the furthest you've ever been from the nearest available cunt is a ten-minute tube ride."

Doyle cast a sidelong glance at Bodie: a dark fringe of lashes shading the midnight of his eyes, his profile set and determinedly handsome as he did something to the barrel of his gun with a tiny scraper. He looked, not brooding exactly, but distant. Closedoff. End of story.

That was a pity, because the last thing Doyle had intended to do was come across too naive to be favored with more fascinating nuggets of Bodie's vivid past.

He edged closer to him and dug an elbow in his ribs.

"Tell me more."

"More what?" Bodie didn't look up. Scrape, scrape.

"About what you got up to in the Mercs."

"Maybe one day."

Doyle sighed and subsided into silence. You couldn't win, you really couldn't. He checked his watch. Forty minutes to go.

"Want to go down? Another look around wouldn't go amiss."

Bodie twisted to look out of the tiny window behind his right shoulder. It looked down onto a wide sweep of yellow-gravelled drive, on which a large van and several cars were parked.

"Caterers are here. Not to mention those pert little French maids."

"Now there's a thought," Doyle said, and grinned through a lusty yawn. "What are my chances there, d'you reckon? Save all that wankin' in the bushes, very messy I should think."

And like a flash from nowhere the potential of the situation whacked him between the ribs and took his breath away.

Bodie was answering him, cheerful, "Not a hope, mate. Even your big eyes couldn't charm that frilly apron off in time."

Wicked, Doyle. Wicked.

But what fun.

His heart seemed to be lodged in his throat and in distress. Ignoring it, ignoring the wild throbbings of the blood in his veins, Doyle heard himself say softly, "That so? Well, thassit then, innit?"

And the changed tone of his voice, some quality of stillness, made Bodie look at him, arrested.

Doyle stood up, with the slow control of an athlete. He flexed his hands, and his limbs, stretching each in turn. He eased himself out of his jacket, slung it over his shoulder dangled on one finger. His eyes met Bodie's, and creased with a smile, sweet and fleeting.

"You want to watch, do you?"

Bodie stared at him, head tilted back. Doyle gazed back serenely. He said in the same, smiling voice:

"You said it, mate. What's the point of you sparin' me all this good advice if I never take it? Nah, it's good sense. I can see it now. You knew what I needed better than I did meself."

Chucking the jacket Bodie's way he leaned back against the wall, facing him, arms folded in a casual, relaxed stance. Bodie's eyes narrowed briefly. Doyle tossed him a grin. He pulled up each sleeve in turn, folded it back midway to his elbow, precisely, like an artist working on a delicate sculpture.

"So, you gonna watch? Or look tactfully out of the window?" Bodie didn't reply. "I don't mind either way," he added. "Always fancied meself on the stage."

He saw he had really caught Bodie's attention, saw it frozen onto himself, and it made him dance in secret glee. "Only trouble is," he said, "can't say I feel exactly in the mood." And his hand went to the tab of his zipper as he added, dark and soft, "Got any ideas?"

Head down to watch what he was doing he drew down the zip, began to unbuckle his belt. He

was aware, too aware, of how Bodie watched him narrowly, tensely. He changed his position again, settling back against the wall, finding a comfortable pose.

"Come on, Bodie," he said. "Tell me a story. All in a good cause."

"Story?" Bodie stared.

"Yeah, a story. Somethin' good. Get me goin', right?"

For the first time, Bodie showed a restlessness, looking at his watch again, saying, "Not much time."

A wicked delight flitted through Doyle: triumph hovered, a mocking gleam lit his eye. "C'mon Bodie, how long d'you think it takes?"

"You tell me."

Doyle grinned, playful now, running with ease. "Depends how good your story is, dunnit?"

Oh nice one, Doyle. But Bodie cleared his throat, said huskily: "What sort of story d'you want?"

"Oh, I dunno," Doyle said, settling himself, closing his eyes; but he did know. Had known since the chance comment had sent a ghosted finger brushing sweetly down his spine: casually enough he said, "How about you and the Mexican whores, then? What did they wear, what did they say, what did you do?"

But the fun vanished: suddenly it was working too well.

His eyes shot open: Bodie was there watching him with that hazed, distracted stare.

Time to put an end to this.

He stared back at Bodie, brazen.

"Nah, I don't think so after all," he remarked with intrepid calm. "Just can't seem to work up the interest."

Anyone else would know when to back down, meet him half-way, honours and dishonours even.

Instead, Bodie's expression flickered and reformed, a perverse bitter smile crossing his lips.

"Want," Bodie said, "a hand?"

"Yeah," he drawled, watching Bodie through heavy, slitted eyes. His breath sang in his ears and his heart thumped skittishly in his chest. Bodie would never dare. Would never. Would never.

But he watched Bodie rise to his feet and stalk him, and there was nowhere to run.

He closed his eyes as Bodie crossed the space between them; opened them in time to glance a challenge right into the glitter of Bodie's.

Well, they were both caught in it now.

Without any pause Bodie took hold of him, easily, as if he had done it many times before, unbuttoning then pushing his shirt aside and off his shoulders. He slid one arm around him and held him, hard and close; with the other hand he dragged loose the bottom of Doyle's shirt and touched him with astonishing arrogance. Warmer fingers than his own slipped across his chest, a brief sensation of peculiar delight at each nipple, and Doyle shuddered. Bodie closed in then and took his mouth, as if he had every right to, kissing him roughly, wetly.

No. In revolt, Doyle twisted, trying to turn his head away: Bodie's lips moved hotly down his throat instead, brushed his adam's apple, nuzzled his ear till he shivered. Fear, anger, excitement stirred his cock, made it rise and stick out and yet he was still sure in some inner place that Bodie would not have the guts to do it.

But he had misjudged this; Bodie did not hesitate, not even at the last step, the irrevocable.

And so, dazed, enchanted, he stared out, over Bodie's shoulder to the small window slanting a view of the gardens below; a van, tiny and shining like a matchbox model, drew up the gravel and came to a stop. Even up here, through glass, you could hear the crunch of the stones beneath its tyres, the jerky ratchet of the handbrake, the sound of tiny voices far-off. But it seemed like a miniature world in a different time zone, one dimension removed from this close little room up here where sweet and terrible things were happening, where Bodie's breath warmly brushed his cheek and the scent of his own sweat and musk rose up around him, where there was silence but for the sound of brisk fingers and his own little gasps for breath.

Unable to bear the look in Bodie's eyes he closed his own.

It was better than doing it himself. The tight, tight knot of tension in the pit of his belly eased; it hurt him with pleasure.

"Bodie don't," he whispered, lostly, but Bodie heard him, knew the score all right, when to listen: when to stop, when to quicken the pace. And it was out of his reach before he knew it; the sharp sweet feelings as Bodie said soft and wicked things to him, the liquid, sticky language of sex; on Bodie's silver tongue he tasted the best, worst thrill of his life.

His fickle cock throbbed in Bodie's hand, romanced and entranced by this stranger's touch: and now it was going to happen--

His legs gave way but Bodie was holding him, pressed him to lie on the bare boards and he dragged Bodie's head towards his own to be kissed, because he needed it as much as he had rejected it before. And as his hungry mouth opened to Bodie's he was struck by a sadness which

cut a fragile wound inside him; the image flashed into his mind again of Bodie and the whore in the saloon and as he watched them something peculiar was happening to him; in his mind's eye he became the whore himself.

For a second it was there: flashpoint. He felt orgasm draw up and poise for its violent strike, his heart thundering in his ears, a hot sweat prickling all over his body: his eyes flew open and locked with Bodie's and he knocked Bodie's hand away, just in time.

"Take your clothes off," he said harshly.

Bodie's eyes met his, darkly glazed. He could see himself in Bodie's eyes: he could read Bodie's mind--*Hardly worth it, it is?* But Bodie did what he wanted him to do: and, finishing first, Doyle lounged back on his elbows and watched Bodie, stirred in a peculiar, not quite comfortable way, by the sights of Bodie naked, the strength and power of him, the knit of muscle, the proud thrust of his cock. And then, as Bodie came into his arms, stirred more sweetly by the satin warmth of touch, by Bodie's clever hands skimming his skin. Bodie's cock pressed down on his own, rubbed hard and slick with sweat and silk; and soon, before he himself had made it Bodie moaned into his ear, a shocking sound after his utter and determined silence.

"Oh Ray please--"

The cry was torn out of him; quieted, thrilled, Doyle felt the convulsive stream over his belly, and with it an impossible hunger surged between them, electric longing. He trembled, empty inside, hollow. Lost in his own world Bodie ground him down onto the floor; Doyle's cock slipped through something warm and wet.

Oh, yes....

Something too exquisite to bear flowered in him and fled away at once, violent with sweetness: and it was beautiful, yet he knew all the time and with every precious pulse that he had left the real gift behind, unmarked, lost it; he snatched, but too late....

Bodie was still holding him afterwards; but when Doyle stirred, languid, in his arms he let him go.

He heard the sounds of Bodie dressing, but he didn't open his eyes. Not yet.

"Ray? Ray. "

After a moment Doyle exhaled, long and low, a tremendous sigh. He could scarcely believe what they had done: but they had.

He opened his eyes to see Bodie with his back to him, shrugging his broad beige-shirted shoulders into his holster.

"What?" His voice sounded odd to his own ears.

"Better get ready, ten minutes to go."

"That all you've got to say?" he said biting, and then regretted saying even that. But he turned over; balanced himself on his palms, then jumped to his feet slowly. Bodie did not say anything more; a bleak and shuttered silence.

Doyle dragged his clothes on over drying sweat and sweat that broke out anew at the enormity of it, waiting just around the corner to hit him. Christ. Sex with Bodie. *Trouble*.

As if with intimacy had come sensitivity, Bodie turned from the window to stare at his partner standing there disconsolate, his lower lip caught between his teeth. He looked at him, said quietly,

"Don't worry, Ray."

The light behind made a silhouette of Bodie; gave a darkness to his eye which hid him perfectly from view. *Don 't worry*. The odd gentleness of it slipped through Doyle like a knife, a sear in his wound he could well do without and he turned away with a shaky laugh, stuffing a hand through his curls. "Didn't even lock the bloody door.... Look good on our records, this would." And he took a deep, shuddery breath.

"No one will know."

Doyle laughed again, caught between despair and the shameful secret of euphoria: for even now his nerve-ends flared with echoes of what Bodie had known too well how to wring from him. And Bodie, too, had his burns to bear: trapped into a brief betraying tenderness, sighing out an unguessed vulnerability against Doyle's throat. What did it matter that no one would know? He and Bodie would know: they would never forget. They would never talk about it, but it would be with them always; spicing every secret look, every occasion they should be alone.

He faced the door, straightened his clothing, buckled on his gun, took more deep breaths. In less than ten minutes he would be on guard, fighting for his own life and others', down among a crowd of strangers, victims, and killers.

But not alone. The thought came to him that whatever happened, now or then or in the future, he trusted Bodie with his life: absolutely and unconditionally.

"Ray."

He turned, surprised, so deep had his thoughts sunk. Bodie looked at him without speaking.

"What?"

After a moment, Bodie turned away, began to sort out and fill his pockets with ammo clips. "How about coming round to my flat one night? When you've nothing better to do. Have a beer

or two."

Casual, offhand. But Doyle, winded with surprise, heard the strain in it, felt the tension which strung out the silence. Clunk, clunk went the ammo going into Bodie's pockets: far too much. He imagined himself, climbing the steps to Bodie's flat, combing his hair with his fingers perhaps as he waited for Bodie to answer his ring: the door opening, Bodie letting him in.

He gathered himself.

"All right. Yeah. Maybe."

As they turned together for the door and the unimaginable, Doyle dropped to one knee, tried out his draw one last time and the gun whipped out and centred in, unwavering, on Bodie's vulnerable spine. Perfect. 1.6. Maybe even 1.5.

"Thank you," he said to Bodie's back, pulling his weapon up, reholstering it. Bodie turned around in time to catch his eye; unexpectedly, a charming smile lit his face.

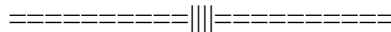
"Thank *you*," Bodie said with exaggerated courtesy, making him a sweeping bow: and Doyle could see how it was going to be. He followed him, down the stairs, no longer afraid of what lay below.

The real threat was closer to home.

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Stultiloquy



Doyle was considering a faint bleeping noise, the source of which was not immediately evident. Then he gave up on the problem. "No doubt the universe was unfolding - as it should," he thought solemnly to himself, in his usual concerned way. He glanced over at Bodie, who was immersed in a newspaper. The sports page. Poor old Bodie, thought Doyle fondly, embroiled in fantasies of light, controlled movement, the disciplines of bodily fluidity - how must it feel to be built like a tank?

Nevertheless, the large body of his partner sent a shiver through him, and something moved him to say: "Bodie."

"Hmmm?"

Doyle slipped to his knees, his wrists circled with silver, clasped appealingly before him as he said softly, "Bodie, I want you to - take me." He looked up, soulfully, shaking back his curls.

"Uh?"

"Take me," repeated Doyle more desperately.

Bodie didn't look up from his perusal of the soccer scores. "Take you where?" he enquired abstractedly.

Astounded, Doyle stared for a moment, then gave a sigh of frustration, pounding one slim and beautiful hand into the carpet. Alerted to the symptoms of distress close at hand, Bodie threw aside the newspaper, and stared down, his deep, blue eyes exactly like fringed navy nightlights. Doyle was so beautiful, down there on his knees really giving it to the carpet, his bowed head speaking eloquently of rejection.

"Hey, curlytop," he whispered, gently. "Did I say something to upset you?"

"You really get up my nose sometimes," sniffed Doyle, sulking.

Perplexed, Bodie knelt down beside him, saying tenderly; "But you like me to." And he traced a reminiscent fingertip around one exquisite nostril, watching it quiver with excited response.

Doyle brushed his hand aside angrily. "Idiot." The strange bleeping noise caught his attention again and he pricked up his ears, alert as the big jungle cat he was. "What is that?"

Bodie smirked, and proudly produced a tiny device from a pocket. "I bugged George Cowley."

Doyle stared. "What, again?"

"Why not, he's bugged me often enough," said Bodie promptly, with the expectant air of a magician producing a rabbit from a hat. It was his big moment; he waited, almost bursting with gleeful triumph, for Doyle's uncontrollable mirth.

Instead, Doyle looked merely faintly sympathetic, if intensely irritated; and it wasn't an easy mix of expressions. "You got it wrong." When would Bodie give up on this joke? This made the fifth time this week. "He's bugged you often enough," he elaborated, at Bodie's blank stare of non-comprehension. "Not bugged you."

Bodie gave meaningful leer. "Aha," he quipped naughtily hoping to elicit interest and jealousy. When nothing happened, he said it again even more meaningfully - "Ah-*ha*."

Doyle was neither amused, nor jealous, nor interested. How cool he was! Bodie was moved, as ever, by the togetherness of his partner, and he stared deeply into his eyes, fascinated. "Your eyes are like aquariums," he murmured admiringly.

"Don't you mean - aquamarines?"

Bodie shook his head. "No - aquariums. They're sort of a murky green," he explained. Doyle did not appear uncontrollably flattered by this, so Bodie rushed on "Ray, let's go to bed."

"Why?" said Doyle moodily, remembering his earlier rejection.

"I'm sure we can think of an excuse." Bodie applied himself seriously to the problem. "Anyone hit you over the head today? No? Well, have you bumped into a door?"

"No... can't say I have," Doyle conceded reluctantly.

Bodie wasn't discouraged. "Never mind, plenty more to go. Let's see - are we pretending to be gay this week?"

Doyle winced, shook his head. "Stay in character, 3.6 - " he hissed, looking nervously around.

"- 7 -" corrected Bodie automatically.

"- 7.6 - this week we're infiltrating the Keep Britain Clean campaign."

"So we are." Bodie's eyes gleamed as a sudden idea struck him. "Tell you what I bet you a night with George Cowley you couldn't not be turned on by me, and you - "

"No," Doyle interrupted the enthusiastic flow. "That wouldn't work. Lacks realism."

Bodie's eyes dropped to the tight trousers and saw what he meant. "Well, OK then. How about this - we go to bed, and I have a nightmare, or I feel ill, who cares? - and you come in and comfort me, and suddenly our bodies naturally fit together in the unknowing embrace of sleep, and then our eyes flash open and meet, and -"

Doyle made a face. "Nah, hackneyed."

Bodie was running out of ideas. "Are we drunk? I often get carried away when I'm drunk - "

"Yeah, I know, and last time it took three of us to lift you." Doyle cast a tetchy eye at Bodie's solid bodie.

"Ray, I've really got it this time." Bodie was practically hopping with excitement. "We'll play a game."

"What game?" asked Doyle, with cautious interest.

"One I learnt in Africa -"

Doyle was shaking his head determinedly. "No way. Not that game."

"Wait, you haven't -"

"Oh yes I have. You've told me hundreds of times - you didn't like it, but you had to play it so you made sure you won, which you did nine times out of ten and it's *that* bit that worries me."

"Not that game," said Bodie impatiently. He pronounced, carefully: "Strip Tongs."

"Strip Tongs?" Doyle repeated blankly, searching the phrase for meaning.

"Something to do with fire, anyway," said Bodie, puzzling over it; then brightening. "Anyway, the strip was the important part." He eyed Doyle with hopeful lasciviousness.

"Oh, let's give up," decided Doyle in the end. "Go and find some girls instead."

Oddly, the idea didn't appeal to either of the two lustful, macho agents. "Of course," Bodie suggested, hesitantly, not at all sure how Doyle was going to take this, "of course, we could always..."

"Always what?"

"Well, we could always just admit that OK, we're two randy males and we Just feel like having it off together," He eyed the ground nervously.

"Having it off." queried Doyle, incredulous at the crudeness of the man. "Surely you mean something more like - we leave the tides of reality to commune in a glorious whirlpool of ecstasy as our beings merge at the peak of an unbearably shattering crescendo?"

Bodie visibly struggled to work it out. Eventually - "You mean - we come?" he finally deduced.

Doyle nodded. Bodie gazed at him, wonderingly. "You know, that's what I like about you, Doyle," he breathed. "You're so - priapismic..."

Doyle had to get the punchline. He eyed Bodie with pity. "Mate?"

"Yeah?"

"There's no such word."

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Such a Day Tomorrow

Sebastian

Very slight and rather silly. Queen of Sheba is much too fast. Unless you know different...

=====|||=====

"How much longer you gonna be?" roared Bodie through the closed door, over the thunderous hiss of raging torrents of water. "I've bin 'ere hours, Doyle."

A lengthy, totally indistinct message followed this. Bodie quickly gave up trying to decipher it and wandered into the bedroom, hands stuffed into the pockets of his tracksuit. A new painting on the wall caught his attention and he came to stand in front of it. It was half a nude woman. One had to admire his partner's unconventional artistic eye, if not the art itself.

"Like it?" A low voice behind him.

Without turning, Bodie had an instant mental vision of how Doyle would be propped there in the doorway, naked arms crossed over his flat belly, bare but for a brief towel precariously knotted over one tilted hip, the sole of one foot propped on his calf.

"Oh yeah, love it, can I have the other half for Christmas? Who posed for it, for godsake?"

"Murph," Doyle revealed serenely. He pulled the towel from his hips, rubbed it over his hair, peering out from under it, a green-eyed sheik.

"Murph?" Bodie fell for it for one split second, jaw dropping open at the vivid flash of the mental contortions that must have been necessary to translate agent 6.2's solid masculine frame into half a nude female. Then -

"*You* - " he began, turning from his contemplation of the painting -

Doyle, bare and bouncy and full of high spirits, was waiting for him.

Before he could say anything further he was knocked down onto the carpet beside the bed, rolled over and sat upon.

"Christ, Doyle," he complained when he regained enough wind, "you're wet."

Insolent eyes looked into his; Doyle wriggled provocatively; tendrils of soaked chest hair loosed slow drops of water.

"You're making my shirt all damp," Bodie said, but he didn't move, partly because his partner's thin, strong hands were tightly gripping his upper arms, pushing him down. Doyle was clearly in a playful mood, damp-lashed eyes sparkling with faintly malicious good humour.

He released Bodie with one hand, reached out and flicked on the tapedeck. The lively strains of Handel's *Queen of Sheba (Arrival of)* burst loudly into the room. Doyle bounced gently on Bodie, roughly in time.

"So," he enquired, "how was your weekend? 's good this, innit?" He cocked his head, suddenly sent by the music.

Referring not to the music but to the weekend, Bodie made an expressive face. He slipped his arms up around Doyle, began to drum on the small of this back in time with the massed lilting violins and oboes of the London Philharmonic.

"Be glad to get back to work," he said with explanatory gloom.

Doyle looked briefly sympathetic. "Like that, was it? Didn't get off with the bird on the boat then?" He shifted so he was stretched out full length on his prostrate mate; resumed the gentle bouncing, eyes closed, a heavenly expression of concentrated ecstasy on his uplifted face.

Doyle liked Handel.

"Couldn't remember her phone number," confessed Bodie, rueful. His wrists being tired of playing out vigorous tintinnabulations on Doyle's rump, he tapped with fingertips instead, every fourth beat, noting a shiver that ran through Doyle from top to toe, his forefinger discovering goosebumps. "You'll catch your death, mate; get dressed, will you!"

Doyle moved sharply, his face twisting. "Your bloody belt nearly did me an injury then," he complained, settling down more comfortably a little higher up, out of the reach of Bodie's potentially vicious knotted tracksuit tie. The rhythmic rocking resumed.

Bodie could clearly feel the warmth of his genitals trapped between them, pressed against

Bodie's belly. "You gonna let me up now?"

"Nope." Doyle, sharptoothed, grinned down at him, raised on down-pressed palms and tensed forearms either side of his head.

Bodie sighed. "How was your weekend?" he offered, knowing already how it would have been. "Full of Eastern Promise? You still in love, are you?"

In vigorous denial, Doyle shook his head so the damp curls flew from side to side, flicking Bodie with cool drops; then he appeared to reconsider, smiled slowly at Bodie and said, "Maybe." He pressed his stomach sharply down into Bodie's and caught his lip between white teeth, glancing covertly at Bodie from beneath downcast lashes.

"You're a little flirt," commented Bodie, resigned to Doyle in this mood. "You know that, don't you?"

"No?" Doyle marvelled, and dipped his upper torso so that Bodie's lips were just, swiftly, touched with downy damp hair: "Not me, not I." Handel was reaching a climax but Doyle was way off his. He thrust at Bodie, lifted off him, dropped again, looking at Bodie with intense green eyes.

"Take a lot from me, don't you?" he murmured, speculative, considering every changing flicker of response that crossed Bodie's face; then he dropped his head and Bodie's nose was suddenly buried in wet, fresh curls, but he scarcely noticed as Doyle whispered to him, eyes bright, gazing out over Bodie's shoulder, "How far would you let me go? How far, Bodie?"

Bodie couldn't handle it, knew it, let it pass though his heart was suddenly racing; the atmosphere between them suddenly very charged, both men's bodies whiplashed with tension.

"You never did tell me how you got on with the lovely lady," he said, and his voice sounded very loud.

Doyle raised his head and chest off Bodie, glanced down at himself. His nipples stood out erect, little brown points of flesh stirred by the chill; he dipped to brush them against Bodie's shirt, circling his upper body softly. It was the spoken conversation he answered as he said, "Leila? Nice girl. Very sweet. Too good for me, mind."

"Yeah." Bodie agreed, breathless, and Doyle was already continuing, one long-fingered hand going out to press the tapedeck buttons to replay the track. "Very sweet, very passive. Not - really - my - type - at all."

"Ah," said Bodie, "but were you hers?"

Doyle only smiled, enigmatically, and rocked to Handel. He was a little flushed, a little hyped-up, all the fine hairs on his skin raised. Handel swelled, uninterrupted. After a moment Doyle stopped rocking, looked at Bodie, right into his eyes.

"Can't keep up," he explained, with charm. "Too fast."

"Don't try. Get dressed."

But he didn't really want him to, hands closing on Doyle's firm, cool flesh in involuntary denial of his own suggestion.

"Can feel your heart," Doyle announced inconsequentially.

"Good, it's still goin' then is it?" Bodie returned, with sarky emphasis.

Doyle smiled at him, intent on his face, his voice soft, almost tender. "Goin' like the clapper, it is." There was a loaded pause. "Rub my back?" he invited, changing tack abruptly.

"Wha'for?"

"Like it," came the laconic reply: and - "gentler - " as Bodie's hands awkwardly pressed him. "Yeah, thassit - " and Doyle arched and purred against him as he stroked gently up and down the long, narrow back.

"Randy little bugger," he murmured, helpless, "aren't you?"

"Nah," Doyle denied without even trying for conviction, "just affectionate." He pushed forward, eyelids drooping lushly over slitted, bedroom eyes; Bodie could feel him, rock hard down the centre of his chest, the heat of him shocking through the aerated cotton shirt.

"Maybe you should try oysters someday, Doyle," he said, gently mocking.

"Don't - need 'em - " He threw his head back, a little sound escaped him as he gazed, anguished and ecstatic, at the ceiling.

"No, come to think of it, don't you touch 'em. Be frightening. You gonna let me up now?"

Doyle returned from his near-mystic contemplation of the inner voice of his body and its urgent, calling desires, to the more down to earth messages he was receiving from sensitive nerves as he pressed himself into warm, damp aertex. He folded his arms on Bodie's chest, rested his chin on them.

"You could throw me off any time you wanted."

And as Bodie, tempted by the challenge, twisted beneath him, Doyle moved like lightning to pinion him more securely - "but I'd fight," he said gently, smiling a tiger's smile, and his eyes fell shut as Bodie shifted once more beneath him.

"Oh yeah, move, Bodie. Fight me. Yeah..."

There was a small, sticky patch on Bodie's shirt, above his navel; he could feel it against his skin as Doyle rubbed and pressed himself against it, instinctively seeking the eased path. "Ah, Bodie," Doyle whispered, pleasure tightening his face, chin tipped back to expose the long, taut hollows of his throat, "talk to me..."

"Saying what?" Slowly, Bodie ran his thumbs down the length of him, from the silken bunched muscles by the parted shoulderblades, down over the curved back to the sudden upward thrust of this buttocks.

"Just talk," breathed Doyle; he was scarcely moving now, just a tiny near-imperceptible clench and relax of muscle. Bodie rubbed his hands, open-palmed, into the tight warm flesh of each buttock, pressing Doyle downwards into himself. He made his voice very soft, a caress of sound.

"Dunno what to say. What can I say? That you're an arrogant, wanton little bastard who thinks he can get away with anything?" Watching Doyle tensing with intense concentration, every centimetre of his naked skin pricking with excitement, he went on, "A randy little sod who'd only fuck his own fist if he didn't have anything else alive within reach? Full of it, you are, sunshine. You're bursting with it, aren't you, can't hold it in - "

He pinched Doyle's buttocks, hard; watched the mutable expressions flicker over the fey, beautiful features, unflinching as Doyle's nails dug into his shoulders; the music had changed to something no less uplifting in its way, and Doyle was rising, shivering to the joyous sound of angelic trumpets summoning the unearthly seraphim...

He gasped, and whimpered, forcing himself downwards; between their strained-close bodies, Bodie felt the leap and thump and taut-held stillness; and then the swift, moist warmth running swiftly, soaking through his shirt and onto his skin.

He held Doyle's limp, relaxed form closer, one hand at the nape of his neck, rocking him a little with careless, almost rueful affection. Doyle's face was turned into Bodie's shoulder, his eyes closed as he gradually regulated his breathing. When he lifted his head, smiled into Bodie's eyes, his own were sparkling with delight and self-satisfaction. He raised himself a little, looked at the pearly trail pointing up Bodie's chest. He looked very, very pleased with himself.

"Hey," said Bodie, flicking a naked, cooling arm. "What you looking so smug about? Not the eighth wonder of the world, you know. How d'you feel about maybe letting me up now? That's like, if it's not too much trouble or anything," he added.

"Yeah; yeah, no problem," capitulated Doyle instantly, with wide-eyed innocence. "Should've said something before. Was I cramping you?" He gazed at Bodie with devoted, spurious concern.

"Oh no, don't you worry about it, mate," said Bodie magnanimously, patting him and shifting. However could you be cross with him? Yet what he had just done, Bodie had near-killed other men for just appearing to think about. He doubted, even, that Doyle had intended to go quite so far: it had never - quite - happened before.

Doyle rolled easily off him and lay flat on his back on the carpet. The fringed counterpane hanging from the bed tickled his nose; he blew at it, grimacing. Bodie, every muscle screaming protest as it was released back to his care, was about to get up when Doyle shot out a hand, took hold of his and twined his fingers through it, without looking at him. Warned, Bodie lay back where he was.

Doyle sniffed, rubbing his free hand over his nose. "So, what you doin' 'ere then?" he asked, as if Bodie had just that very moment walked through the door. He stroked Bodie's palm with his thumb, gentle and unhurried.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Conscious of a certain discomfort, Bodie squinted down at his stomach and, letting go of Doyle in a hurry, rolled onto his front. Oh christ.

Doyle had not missed the sudden movement, nor the probable reason for it. "Wassa matter?" he asked anyway.

"Nothing," said Bodie, flatly refusing to turn, or get up, even as Doyle pushed at him. "I wish you'd get dressed," he muttered, "makes me feel chilly just looking at you." Not that he was looking at him, was doing everything possible to avoid it, in fact.

"Bodie," said Doyle, squatting on his heels and contemplating him thoughtfully from the dark-haired nape of his neck to his Adidas-clad feet.

"Yeah?"

"What would you do if I said I loved you?"

Silence descended; shock ricocheted off the walls.

Bodie poked his head up. "Faint," he said succinctly.

Doyle wasn't to be put off. "No, I'm serious. What would you do?"

Bodie thought about it. "Why? Are you going to say it?" he tested, eyes decidedly narrowed.

Gentle green eyes met his, tender, measuring. Doyle reached out one hand to lace in Bodie's ruffled dark hair, knotting his fingers there.

"One day I'm goin' to be telling you that," he continued, voice a soft, rough promise that melted Bodie's guts to water. "Properly, at the right time, because although you might not think it, I'm not just playin' with you, not just playing, Bodie. Game's over. 's for real, this is. And you won."

"Won what?" asked Bodie, sitting up, passing one shaky hand over his damp forehead. The

shock was passing, settling into something - familiar, and right. He was beginning to feel very, very happy.

Doyle grinned at him, rakish, perfectly balanced on the balls of his feet. "Me!" With one, fast spring he came upright, headed for the wardrobe.

"Oh yeah?" Bodie got to his feet, too, a vast, unhopd for euphoria seeping sentimentally through him. Doyle, still happily naked, back to him, looked briefly in the mirror on the door of the closet.

"Yeaahhh." Lazy, he stretched the word out.

Bodie, fast and silent as a cat, was on him, wrapping his arms around him and burying his lips in the tempting curve of neck and shoulder. "And what am I supposed to do with you?" he whispered against an earlobe.

Doyle surveyed himself in the mirror, seeing Bodie's arms twined around his chest, the dark head looking over his shoulder. He took in his own expression; tender satisfaction, the face of a man well-pleased with life.

"Oh, anything you want, I should think," he answered, and continued into the heady pause, looking into the mirrored dark eyes, "What *did* you come 'ere for this morning?"

Bodie sighed, dragging himself out of the delightful vision of the future he had been so briefly shown, stashing it away for now. One day -

"Macklin," he pronounced with heavy gloom.

"Macklin?" Doyle stared, pricking all over with alarm.

"That's right. Wants us - " Bodie checked his watch, started, collected himself. " - ten minutes ago!"

Doyle had gone, flying from Bodie's light grasp, rummaging frantically through drawers, plucking forth an assortment of clothes. Bodie watched him, grinning to himself. The grin vanished as Doyle turned, threw him something. "Catch!"

Bodie caught it, looked at it blankly. It was a folded white aertex tennis shirt. Doyle looked at him, head slightly to one side. "Clean shirt!"

"Eh?" Then he remembered. He met Doyle's eyes. Doyle winked.

"Don't let Macklin get me," he whispered, bright-eyed.

*Two lads that thought there was no more behind
But such a day tomorrow as today*

And to be boy eternal
-The Winter's Tale.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Total Eclipse

Sebastian

A mystery. Obviously this is a fragment, a sequel to some longer work, or an unfinished beginning. But I can't remember for the life of me where it was coming from, or going to. If anyone knows, do let me know!

=====|||=====

"Ray?"

Bodie extended a fresh can sideways, without taking his eyes off the TV screen, where highlights of the Cup final were being shown. They'd missed the live action; Cowley had seen to that.

Doyle hesitated. "Dunno - better not. Drivin'." His voice held an unmistakable note of wistful regret.

Bodie dropped the condensation-wet can into his lap. "You can stay here."

"Oh, okay," said Doyle, managing to sound as if he had not been angling for that very suggestion. He snapped the ring-pull with a flourish, drank from the can. "Cheers."

"Pagan," Bodie said disdainfully, and ducked as Doyle made as if to throw the metal tab at him. They continued to watch the match, largely in silence. Bodie had one arm lying along the back of the settee behind Doyle's head; whenever Doyle shifted position the warm curls brushed Bodie's forearm. Bodie liked it. Most of his attention was concentrated on the football, a cherished stored-up reward they'd promised to themselves throughout the fraught afternoon. A very small, unconscious corner of his mind, however, was set to wondering how much closeness he could

push Doyle for tonight. Bodie liked very much to be physically close to his partner; a quirk he had never concealed and knew to be largely unreciprocated. In the early months of their teaming, it had amused him to annoy his new partner by grabbing him, slipping an arm around him, patting his cheek, his arm, his rump at any suitable or not-so-suitable, moment; to be pushed off coolly, or with heat. As they had come closer, however, the tenor of it changed; he no longer did it to annoy, but simply for the warm, inchoate pleasure he got out of touching him. Bodie didn't consider there was anything sexual about it. Doyle was a close mate; and Bodie was the demonstrative type.

He edged his arm a little further along the settee, until his hand was almost touching Doyle's shoulder. Suddenly, the team they were mutually supporting for the occasion scored. Amid the noise and confusion on the screen, the players embracing with exuberant delight, the commentator babbling incoherently, Bodie and Doyle whooped and rolled around, pulling and punching at one another in a mindless tangle of vicariously aroused enthusiasm.

When they recovered and settled down, still breathing rather hard, Doyle leaned unabashedly on Bodie, and, at last encouraged, Bodie let his arm close around his friend's shoulder and they stayed that way, close and companionable. Now, Bodie was happy.

When the match ended, "Daft, isn't it," said Doyle with muzzy disgust, even though the team of their choice had emerged with a 2-1 victory.

Bodie rolled a delighted eye at him. "What's daft, we won, didn't we?"

"Jus' the whole thing's daft." He made an expressive gesture with his hand. "Gettin' all worked up about a - football match." He put all he felt of disdain, the feeling that he at least should restrict his enthusiasms for more worthwhile subjects.

Bodie retrieved the hand that was wavering dangerously near his nose and dropped it back on Doyle's lap. "Gotta have some hobbies." His hand Doyle's shoulder slipped down his arm - and stopped, arrested by the discovery of something hard and bulky in his way.

"And explorin' my armpit is one of yours?" Doyle tilted a glance up at him.

"You're still armed," said Bodie with disapproval. He hunted around under thick Aran wool, found the offending object and pulled. Doyle suffered all this with remarkable restraint, merely watching with half-closed eyes as Bodie retrieved the gun, checked it automatically, and laid it to one side.

"Feel undressed without that," he complained.

Bodie made a face. "Yeah, well, that just goes to show, mate, the effect this life's having on us." He settled back down against the warmth of Doyle. "We need to get away from it all, that's what we need."

Doyle grinned and stretched luxuriously. "Ah. Next weekend, mate. I'm getting away from it

all."

"Next weekend? Why, what're you getting up to then? I thought we were going fishing," Bodie grumbled, resigned. "You'll stand me up once too often, you will, mate."

"Bloody hell," Doyle swore, with contrition. "Forgot all about that. Sorry."

"'s okay." Bodie turned the apology aside ungrudgingly. "What you doing instead then, Doyle? What's so tempting you'd turn down an action-packed weekend with your best mate, eh?"

"I never said you were my best mate," Doyle said quickly. "When did I say that?"

Bodie capitulated. "Okay - second-best?"

"Nah, you can be my best mate if you want," Doyle said in a friendly way. "If you don't mind the nits." He scratched his head in a thoughtful fashion.

"The nits, fine. It's the bloody nose-picking that gets me," said Bodie swiftly, and pounced promptly on the hand rubbing thoughtfully over the organ in question.

Doyle snatched his hand back, wide-eyed with indignation. "I do not," he said with extreme dignity, "pick my nose."

"Nah, you just like to check it's still there from time to time," agreed Bodie - and oofed with surprise as Doyle's vicious skinny fingers pinched him in a tender, and highly personal spot.

When he recovered, he eyed his unconcerned partner with wariness. "You really are a bad-tempered little sod, you know that, Doyle. A vindictive little so-and-so."

"My mum always used to say I 'ad a very sweet nature," said Doyle, unperturbed.

"Oh yeah? That was before you dropped out of the pram onto your bonce, was it?"

"Afterwards," Doyle gave him a shark's smile, "naturally. Before that, I used to strangle moggies with the cat net 'eld in me chubby little fists."

They stared owlshly into each other's faces, two inches apart. No joke, really. Doyle certainly had a nasty temper, stored up a grudge if he couldn't repay it instantly. Best kind of partner to have, supposed Bodie, who had never wanted a partner; had never dreamed there could be one he'd respect to the necessary degree to make a partnership work. Then Cowley had dumped him this one, a hot-tempered enigmatic creature with a lean hard body as disciplined as the head of curls were disordered, and a fast gun and fast wits to match.

"You never got round to telling me where you're going next weekend," he said, slanting Doyle a look of repressed despair. "I'll be okay, all alone with me can of beans and the telly, so don't you worry about me while you're raving it up, will you?"

"Oh, all right, I won't then," agreed Doyle. He stretched, sliding down further on the sofa, hands behind his head. "I introduced you to Diana, didn't I?"

"Very briefly. Blonde, 36" bust, kiss-me-quick mouth - "

Doyle licked his lips delicately, with reminiscence. "Or slow. Yeah, that's her. She's invited me to stay, nice country house, you know the kind of thing. Or at least, you'll have read about them," he amended, kindly.

"Yeah, dirty weekend by any other name, only instead of the back seat of a mini, it's a four-poster bed - I get it, all right. You fall on your bloody feet all right, don't you?" he said with a hint of gloom.

Doyle considered this. He reached for his can, found it empty, plucked Bodie's from his fingers and swigged from that instead. "Well," he began, "I don't know about on my feet, exactly - the English Upper Classes don't go in for that sort of kinky stuff, not that you'd know. It's more flagellation, sodomy, that sort of thing - "

"Sounds great," Bodie enthused, rubbing his hands. "And what are the men into?"

"You wouldn't want to know," Doyle assured him, and then looked pointedly at Bodie's thigh pressing against his. "Or maybe you would."

Bodie didn't rise to this. "Well, have a good time, sunbeam. Behave yourself. Remember," Bodie instructed patiently, "you start at the outside and work inwards - "

Doyle gave him a look of surprise. "Worked that out when I was 12, mate."

Bodie thumped the top of a brown head lazily. "The cutlery, Don Quixote, the cutlery."

"With you, Sancho. Hey - "

"Yeah, very good, they give that to the horses. That priceless bit of knowledge'll come in handy when she's showing you round the thoroughbreds," approved Bodie, who after 4 pints was fast approaching the lowest-form-of-wit stage. He took the can back from Doyle, discovered it was empty. He shook it mournfully, eyeing Doyle with speculation. Then he tweaked open the collar of Doyle's sweatshirt and held the can over it, upside down.

Doyle squawked as the cool drops trickled down the back of his neck, and twisted away. "Piss off, Bodie, or I won't invite you, after all."

"Invite me?" Bodie stared at him.

"Yeah, why not? Big 'ouse, don't suppose they'd notice even an extra clod-footed mercenary around the place. There's a river there, good fishing. That way we'd be killing two birds with one

stone," said Doyle, unoriginally.

"That's hunting, Doyle, not fishing." Nevertheless, Bodie hopefully fished out a hanky and began to mop with assiduous care down the back of Doyle's shirt, in penance.

Doyle pulled away, irritated. "Look, d'you wanna come, or not?"

"Won't the fair Diana think it's a bit - odd?"

Doyle stared at him. "Why the 'ell should she? What's odd about it?"

Well, if Doyle didn't see anything odd about taking his mate along on a weekend with his girlfriend, Bodie didn't see why he should.

"Okay."

"Good."

"Let's go to bed. You sharin' with me?"

"Not bloody likely, it's like dossin' down with a combine 'arvester."

"Night, then."

"Night."

-- THE END --

Zeropanic

Truth Beauty?

Sebastian

First person stories aren't really me. I think I wrote this one as the Doyle-side of someone's Bodie, maybe even at her request. But which one I have no idea. Again, if anyone has the Bodie-side and sees that this one slots right in, do let me know.

=====|||=====

S'funny really. Not that it happened at all, because that doesn't surprise me now I come to look back over my partnership with Bodie -- but that it never happened before. You see, Bodie's always made a hell of a lot of excuses to spend the night at my flat -- pretty plausible ones, I'll give him that, nothing to make you stop short and think wait a minute, that's a bit odd, innit? but, looking back... Wouldn't sleep on the sofa, either; oh no, that idea didn't suit Master Bodie for long. I told him, being a bit unfeeling, that these army types were supposed to be able to sleep on a clothesline, but all he could say to that was why'd I think he'd left the army? So it must have been two, three years ago I first resigned myself to the fact that several times a month I'd have a bedmate. And not the softbreasted cuddly type you can turn to in the drowsy small hours for some half-awake loving, either.

No, this one smelt of warm whisky and aftershave, had a snore on him like a blocked drain and an annoying little habit of waking me up at 5am to accuse me of hogging the duvet. Bit rich, I always thought, considering whose bed it was.

Not that I minded all that much, must be honest. Can't be screwing every night, just not even practical, or even necessary. And even if you aren't in the mood for fucking it's always nice to wake up and not be alone; keeps the nightmares away. So I got used to him, all the snuffles and snorts and the warmth of him all over me in the chilly dawn. Even thought about suggesting we share a flat, in some of my madder moments. Now, I suppose -- but that's telling the story out of line. Get back to the point, 4.5.

Was having a dream, that night. Running and shooting and yelling a lot; Bodie was there with me, giving me cover, I didn't even need to see him but I knew he was there. Then suddenly it all changed the way it does in dreams, and there was a good sweet feeling deep inside me growing and spreading and, suddenly, overflowing --

I woke up straight after like I always do and it took me a moment to realise what was going on. I was damp and sticky, and all shivery still with pleasure, and it was a bloody shock to find Bodie's clearly malicious face peering at me so close and snidely asking if I'd had a good dream.

'Nocturnal emissions', that's what that book I used to purloin from the library and pant over in my early teens called 'em. It was bloody embarrassing. I have a lot of wet dreams, love 'em, all that fun without even trying, but I prefer to have them alone. I agreed, yeah, it was a good dream, in a kind of noncommittal way -- after all, he might not have noticed anything for sure; and then he seemed to forget it, thank god, and started off the usual early morning litany about the cold. I knew what was coming all right, and in the light of the cooling stickiness which I'd managed to erupt all over myself and the inside of my pyjamas, I wasn't too happy about it.

There are times when I look back with affection on the far-off shortlived good old days when one could have the pleasure without the messy business of ejaculation -- not many of 'em, I grant you, but some.

Anyway, it wasn't any good. He's a determined bastard, is Bodie, despite all that little-boy innocence he affects at times, and I knew he was in the mood to cuddle me, and cuddle me he would.

He passed it off like he always does, using the cold as an excuse; once or twice in the past even before all this I've felt like pointing out to him that it's no big sin to want to cuddle someone if they don't object, and I don't. I hate being mauled about -- not keen on cuddling at the best of times, sometimes not even with the women I've known, but somehow it's different with Bodie, always has been. He's not mushy about it, maybe that's why, just grabs me and hauls me close and pets me in a rough kind of way, breathing happily and heavily into my ear; we seem to fit together pretty well. When he first used to try it on I suppose I must have been a bit tense and edgy about it or something -- I can remember him telling me in a disgusted sort of way that sleeping with me was about as relaxing as snuggling up around a coiled rattlesnake. Don't get any complaints these days, so you see I must have learnt to live with it.

Anyway there we were as usual all huddled together like Babes in the Wood, snug and warm, plenty of time till we need get up, nothing to stop us going back to sleep -- only we couldn't, of course.

He made some comment, and I answered it in a flip kind of way, mildly getting at him, which was a mistake because it brought his mind right back to the state I'd been in a few minutes before.

He'd noticed, all right.

Bodie's very curious about what I get up to in bed. Always has been, probes about as far as he thinks he can push me. Not in a sly, furtive way, not Bodie. He just asks right out in the same happy tone of voice he'd use to offer me a sweet -- fancy a polo, Doyle? Bet she was all over you with her tongue, right, Doyle? And now, it didn't seem to be bothering him in the least that a bare millimetre of very damp cotton was all there was saving him from direct contact with my nocturnal outpourings. In fact, on the contrary he seemed fascinated by it, eyes kept straying down there, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that any moment he was going to reach out and prod me in the area with a curious forefinger.

I dunno what I must have been doing while I was having this famous dream -- rolling around a bit I suppose -- and now he starts on about what went on in it, what was I doing, to whom, where, and what with. Very persistent, he was; and in a funny playful kind of mood -- kept tickling me, hands going everywhere, pointless trying to fend him off. Until he blew at my ear, anyway -- that really does something strange to me, makes me go tingly all over as if I've got an exquisite itch somewhere I can't get at to scratch. I leapt a mile, managed to bang the poor sod on the nose and he, being Bodie, made the most of it, heaving about and groaning -- truth to tell, I did feel a twinge of pity for him, noses are hell when they're bashed and he was distinctly watery-eyed and pink-tinged around the nostrils. So I decided, what the hell, cheer him up a bit; and I open my mouth and start to waffle on. Just bringing out the first things that came into my head 'cause I couldn't remember the bloody dream anyway, though bits and pieces like the running and the yelling and the smg pattering out did filter back as I was talking so I chucked those in too for good measure.

At first he was all agog; swallowing it all down like the gullible creature he is, and then he started to get a bit restless waiting for the dirty bits. He was taking all this very seriously, I realised, all eyes and ears and attention on me. Great, it was. He'd been having little goes at me all morning and I'd taken it all so far without making any comeback. So I led him on, kept stopping in a tantalising way whenever it sounded as if I might be getting to a good bit.

He was pretending to be patient with me, and really quite offhand about all this, as if it wasn't actually very important to him, just a casual bit of fun; but he was gripping onto my shoulder for dear life -- had a bloody great bruise there the next day -- and his eyes as he leant over me were very dark, very intense. Pushing a bit more, I asked him if he wanted all the disgusting details.

Yeah, he said; he wanted a blow by blow account.

I've got a strange mind, I know that; sometimes it works for me, sometimes against me.

Anyway when he said that, used those words, something snapped together in my mind, a connection of ideas, and before I'd had a chance to think about it I said it straight out.

You did a wonderful --

God, it was hard not to laugh, he looked so stupefied. If I'd wanted revenge for all those tiny embarrassments and annoyances of the morning, then it was mine in full measure.

Stupefaction turned quite quickly into speculation -- he knew I was lying there laughing at him - and then, finally, he disbelieved me, calming down and lying back. Somehow I had the feeling he wasn't going to be asking me about my erotic dreams again for a very long time.

I always thought I didn't have any morals left; CI5 drains you of them. But just at that moment I was feeling, peculiarly, a bit sick with myself, a bit hollow-gutted and shaky. What a bastard thing to do to someone. If he'd seen straight away that I was teasing him, and given me a thump; or if he'd been angry with me for lying to him deliberately like that, it would have been okay.

But it wasn't okay, not at all, because for one moment there I'd known he believed me, and, more than that and worse, had been pleased to think it was true.

I hadn't meant to hurt him; that was the last thing I'd wanted to do. Generous to a fault, that's Bodie; at least where I'm concerned. He'd forgiven me already, after a bare moment's anger; let me get away with anything, Bodie would.

If I threw a fit of insanity and murdered the Queen, Bodie'd be right there in court pleading extenuating circumstances.

Not really any way I could put it right. I'd said a stupid thing, and wounded him. The best I could do in penance was keep the lie going, make him think it was true.

He was a bit short with me, which only confirmed it in my mind -- I wasn't imagining it, I'd hurt him all right, he's easy to hurt is Bodie though you mightn't think so, hides it very well. Just retreats behind darkened eyes and a cool don't-care nothing-hurts-me mask, throw it all at me, see if I care.

He does care.

I know him, you see; and when he tried to move away from me, escape all that careless intimacy we had going for us, I knew in a chilling moment that in my own thoughtless heartless way I'd managed to make him feel uncomfortable with me.

Probably realising that he was coming across a bit odd, he chatted a bit, trying to get it all in perspective, and I responded because that took courage on his part; but I was only halfhearted about it despite myself and we were silent after a while, and it was then I got to thinking.

Bodie, going down on me? Pity I *hadn't* dreamed it, would've been nice. Would he do it, though, in reality? Even my mind, surely, would've had trouble coming up with that. Can't be the nicest thing to have to do to anyone. I've never even asked women to do that; if they make moves that way, fine; but if not I'd never dream of hinting I wanted it.

Such a sweet feeling, though... better than fucking, even...

I came back to reality, realised I was staring dreamily at Bodie's mouth while the weirdest

thoughts assailed me from every direction --

Well, if I hadn't been dreaming about Bodie sucking me before, it was on the cards for tonight. 'The things you can do with your tongue' -- I'd said that to him moments before, and now I was seeing it all in pinpoint clear detail as I gazed entranced at those pale pink lips; and it was the most beautiful idea I could ever remember having.

Honour satisfied now, Bodie? Even if I never dreamt it, I thought it at that moment, consciously and deliberately, and I wanted nothing more than to make it true.

Impossible.

But then I saw him looking back at me, the same confused shy speculation in his eyes that I was feeling.

He wouldn't confess it, just wouldn't. Not Bodie. I knew he'd get out of bed, die, send Cowley a signed Valentine rather than make moves to me that way. So I plunged right in, and if my heart wasn't exactly in my mouth it was certainly doing some pretty peculiar things down in the region of my diaphragm.

Whatever else we could, or couldn't have, there was no reason in the world why I couldn't kiss him.

And the moment I did, everything changed forever.

The moment my mouth touched his, barely brushing over his warm lips before they parted for me and let me seek out the sweet moist darkness inside, we both knew.

It frightened me, yeah, it did that all right; but it was the kind of fear you go through when you're a kid, alone in the dark, staring at the stars and wondering what would happen if you were the last person left alive on earth.

It was then I knew we must have loved each other for a long time, because I just don't believe in love at first sight, love bursting into being at the first touch of mouth on mouth. Lust, yes... desire can spark that way, that fast. But not love. That takes time. And in that moment I knew I loved him so much, so goddamn much I felt sick with it, all choked up like I wanted to cry. Not happy. Not yet. That came later.

I stopped kissing him then because we were getting rather urgent about it and my body was acting like it was getting ready to rape him, and that was something I didn't want. So easy... it would have been so easy for me to do that, him so soft and dazed and one step behind, even appropriate maybe between two tough men having it off for fun, with a deadly play for dominance going on beneath it all: but not for Bodie and me. We weren't in this for fun: we weren't even tough any longer.

I wanted to check how he felt, if he wanted it to go on. Just a few phrases, clumsy -- 'do you?', '-'

- and me --'; not poetry. But it was enough. We were gentle with each other because that felt right; neither of us, I think, knew quite what to do, but somehow that slight clumsiness, hesitance, was one more thing to treasure; it was so sweet, to travel hands and mouth over him, discovering what made him light up; to have the gift of his body laid open to me, to watch his face crease, then settle; hearing him whimper, and say my name in a whisper --

He could have done anything to me. I'd have let him do anything, let him have whatever he needed. But it didn't take anything heavy in the end, nothing deep; I just reached out, took his cock in my hand and it felt so good to touch, so right to be handling him like this, having him entrust me with the precious responsibility of his coming that it felt as if I must have done it a hundred times before. I stroked him gently and made him shiver; then I touched him harder, and that was enough.

The feeling of his spurting, spilling into my hands was the most wantonly erotic sensation I've had in my life; and I watched him the whole time, not missing one clench of tensing muscles as his body lifted, giving itself to me, one spasm of pleasure that twisted his face, nor the tiniest whimper of anguished ecstasy that left him. And I loved it, loved him, loved the luxurious texture of his semen that I was trying to hold on to as it threatened to slip away; the damp softening curl of his sex as it nestled in my slippery palm; loved seeing him lose control like that, abandoning it and himself to me. His eyes were soft, and very bright, with tears and love.

And then he did the most beautiful thing he could have done for me; I was desperate for anything at all but instead he answered my unspoken wanting as surely as if I'd begged him to do it.

Impossible to describe, the exquisite feeling as his tongue pressed against me, a bit shy, a bit delicate at first, and then a firmer achingly beautiful touch as it stroked up and down me; and when I cried out he opened his mouth, his head laid on my belly; and took me in.

I came between his lips as his tongue was searching over the tip of me, sending me over the edge, just couldn't help it, couldn't have held it back if the serried ranks of CI5 had marched into the room and stood gazing; but he didn't flinch, didn't let me go, just stayed there as I poured down his throat, accepting me.

I found my nailmarks in his shoulders afterwards. Don't suppose he noticed at the time.

When I was finished coming, fireworks over and fizzling back to earth leaving me warm and relaxed and comfortable, it struck me what I'd just done. Christ, the poor guy, was my first shamed thought, but he drove it away from me instantly, sliding up the bed, deep blue eyes lit up with laughter and magic, kissing me deeply and thoroughly so I could taste myself on his tongue.

He can be a kinkily inventive bastard at times.

It was so unexpected, so forbidden and so wicked and so wildly erotic that I found I was thinking darkly wanton things all over again.

Like about doing it to him. But that was for the future. For now, there was the present to think of.

There wasn't any hassle about how long it would last, and whether we meant all those crazy things we'd been murmuring; and if it was really love or just a passing fancy. We both knew the answers to all those things; had done since I kissed him and he reached out for me.

So that's it. Weep no more fair ladies, and all that. We've come to the end of the line, Bodie and I, and found each other waiting there, almost by accident -- not that he knows that. Bodie can have all the truths he wants from me and the rest of my life to hear them in; but he's never going to know that I was dreaming of shadows in an unreal unremembered world. I think he guesses anyway; but it isn't important any more.

Funny, the way things happen...

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Two In A Bunk (Is Worth One in the Hand)

By Sebastian and HG

=====|||=====

indicates Bodie's speech
* denotes word in italics

"Bodie! You asleep down there?"

#"Mmmnph!"#

"I'm afraid I'm gonna fall off this bloody thing if I let meself drop off - and that was **not** meant to be a pun."

#"Pity, would've been one of your best. Particularly for this time of night. Not like you to be so insecure."#

"Don't do that!"

#"Do what?"#

"Bloody bunk's heavin' about like a raft in Jacuzzi. What you **doin'** down there?"

#"That's for me to know and you to find out, mate."#

"S not much you could get up to down there I wouldn't know about. What the 'ell are we doin' 'ere anyway?"

#"Dunno what you're doin' but I'm explorin'."#

"I mean why the 'ell did *we* get lucky enough to draw the bunking bloods? I mean the bloody bunks."

"Gettin' you flustered, am I? Come to that what the - Christ, careful!"

"Got me 'and stuck, 'aven't I? 'S more intimate than sharin' a bloody bed would be...and no, there isn't room for you up 'ere."

#"M quite happy where I am, thank you. View's got all kinds of possibilities."#

"Bodie...m warning you, if this bunk keeps shiftin' from side to side in that suspiciously rhythmic way, you know what I'm gonna think..."

#"What makes you imagine you'd be wrong? Mmm...s nice down here. All warm an' dark an' -"#

"You wouldn't. On second thoughts, maybe you would, all that communal army solitude an' all...me, I like privacy. If I'm gonna do that."

#"If? You tryin' to tell me you aren't already? Bloody 'ell, Doyle, d'you have to make so much noise about it - could at least breathe through your nose."

"...Ray?"#

"Yeah, 'm still 'ere, just - concentratin'. Thinkin'."

#"S what about that worries me. Ray, when...if you do that...how d'you like it?"#

"Ah, christ... What? Oh. Depends. Don' often do it in company. Might - cramp my style."

#"Can't imagine that. Often envied you, if you must know."#

"Don't sound like that. Don't believe it anyway. Why've you stopped?"

#"Because - sometimes I wonder..."#

"Yeah, I know, I know. Always bein' rivals, aren't we? Jockeyin' for position..."

"Used to think I had something to prove to you. Funny how things change. We stopped that a long time ago, you know."#

"Something to prove... Yeah, you the know-it-all smoothie tryin' to put the flat-footed cop in his place... 'S all images, Bodie. An' one day you look back to it and you find it's gone and you dunno when it went or how to stand up to what's looking you in the face..."

"Sorry, mate. 'm in a funny mood tonight. Just shut me up if you wanna go to sleep. Thump on the springs or something."

"M not sleepy. What you were sayin', about images - 's right. In the dark's easier to talk - admit how much things have changed, what you want, hope for. Lyin' down here, puts a different perspective on things - an' I don't mean lyin' here staring up at where your arse must be... Though I've doin' a lot of that recently - noticing everythin' about you. Thought it couldn't have bothered you though or you would've said. You would've, wouldn't you?"#

"What, keep your eyeballs off my arse or I'll bloody geld you, that sort of thing? Bloody 'ell, mate. Nearly 'ad me off then. Try a bit more to the left next time..."

"Ah, Bodie, don' be embarrassed. Nah, I meant it. Want you to keep talkin', 's not often we get a chance to be close like this..."

"Am I makin' you nervous? Sorry, mate. I'll stop if you want me to. "Talkin' that is. 'S the darkness...it's so easy to talk in the dark - "

"That better? Oh, yeah, that's better all right... Nah, not nervous. Not now. 'S easy...so easy...with you."#

"Oh christ. Bodie - I didn't mean to do this. Too bloody risky... D'you know what I'm tryin' to do? Do you? 'Cause if you don't - oh forget it. Just forget it. Go to sleep."

"Will you stop bein' so bloody paranoid. 'Course I know what you're doin' - same thing I've been tryin' to say all fuckin' night. It's you an' me, sweetheart. All the way down the line it's you and me."#

"D'you know how many times I've thought you were gonna say that? An' now you 'ave, oh jesus, Bodie I just dunno what to say... Didn't mean to go quiet on you, it just..."

"There were times I thought it was just me felt like this - tried to kill it off -

"Christ, Bodie...if you could see the bloody state I'm in - I'm practically comin' just talkin' like this -

"I'm sorry. You really didn't wanna know that, did you? What we were doin' to start with - that what you want - 's not a joke, is it?"

"#No, 's no joke... But - wasn't jokin' for once. And neither are you. Can tell that. I meant every word...but I'm not used to bein' open about things, talkin' about them. Even with you."#

"S easier in the dark, innit? Think I don't understand, don't you, but I do. Tryin' to, anyway... Lemme tell you how I like it then, since you want to know..."

"#S all right...never thought either of us would embarrass easy. Well, not embarrassed - not with each other. It's important, though...knowing what turns you on."#

"Makes me hard, hearin' you say that...'cause, don't laugh, will you? Wanna be important to you, Bodie, don't much care how I do it...feels good, bein' 'ere in the dark an' you down there...excites me somehow... Bloody pyjamas in the fuckin' way - you like that, Bodie? Like it when I talk dirty?

"Cause I do, turns me on...ah, 's better, kick the bloody things off, touch myself this way... Oh 's sweet, Bodie, you dunno how sweet it is...needs much more now, harder... Wish you were goin' down on me, oh yeah, Bodie, I'd like that, love it, your mouth on me...

"Would you do that to me, Bodie? Yeah, you would, wouldn't you, you'd let me put it there, suck me... Oh christ, Bodie, so fuckin' beautiful...

"You all right, sunshine? Wanted it to be good for you..."

"#Good for me - oh christ, Ray... So - too much. Couldn't stop myself, listenin' to you...made me.... But it's not wasted though. Almost like I could feel you with me. Never tasted me before, 's coolin' now..."#

"S nice...don't waste it, Bodie, 's beautiful - Here, reach up, not over there, this way, touch my hand."

"#Oh yeah - warm an' sticky an' - can only get a fleetin' taste of you. Not enough. Not nearly. Want more. Ray, come down in here with me. Please?"#

"Yeah, okay, 'm coming, sunshine. Glad you want me... Oh, christ, nearly fuckin' went then - where are you...here, 'ow's dat?"

"#Bloody marvell - shit! Got bony knees, 'aven't you, gave out on you, did they - moved with all the grace of - Hey, you do know you're the wrong way round? Ah, you do want me, don't you - such a bloody turn on...your tongue... If my feet can do *that* to you...#

"#Be better if you turned the other way, you know - if you wanna do that. No, it's okay...stay there a moment. Got such a beautiful arse, Ray. Never thought a bloke's skin could do this to me, 's beautiful. Tastes... Ah, Ray..."#

"Makin' me shiver... No, 's all right, 's good to have you touchin' me that way. Oh, Bodie, come up 'ere. Wanna hold you - "

"#You are, sunshine. Oh god. Yeah. Careful. 'S right. Oh christ, Ray. So bloody sexy - your tongue on me..."#

'S so sweet, the taste of you...here...and here... Oh yeah, you like this, don't you? Come on, sunshine, get hard for me, yeah, thassit..."

"#Ray... Will you suc - ? Oh god, the warmth of your mouth taking me in...'s goddamn beautiful..."#

"Ah no, Bodie, not yet... Jesus, so fast you are...you always come again so fast? Not yet, mate. You 'old on, learn some control. Come 'ere, thass right, 'ave to kiss here instead. What turns you on, then, Bodie? Gonna tell me? Yeah, you are... Talk sexy to me, lemme catch up..."

"#S lucky you're only skinny... Haven't you guessed what turns me on... Lyin' here, wrapped around you, rough-smooth feel of you... Hey, you're shiverin' - like it when I touch you there, and there.... Hair's all soft there... 'S not so soft here, though... Yeah, I thought you'd like that.#

"#Ray, you like that? Need that? 'S beautiful... 'S what I've wanted for so long, so very long. Wanna come inside you, Ray. In here, yeah. Hey, you're openin' for me - oh christ, Ray. Deep an' hard an' - "#

"You wanna? Dunno if I - if we can - Oh yeah, come on then, lover, lie on me, if that's what you want - "

"#Lover, oh christ, yes. But, Ray, no just for me. Listen, sunshine, if you - if you don't want... Yeah, okay, stupid thing to say, but - #

"#Look at me, shaking so much I can't -#

"#Oh, jesus - !"#

"#I didn't... Couldn't stop myself from.... So bloody beautiful, deep inside you, hot and - Left you behind. I didn't hurt you, did I? Ray? #

"#You're crying - oh god, look 's okay, let me look at you...check I didn't - "#

"Course you didn't hurt me. Great... Oh, Bodie - look what you've done to me - I don't mean that, you idiot. I mean I never wept over anyone before f'chrissake -

"Wish you'd waited for me - 's kind of flattering that you couldn't though - Bodie, what was it like?"

"Like? Was - oh, come 'ere. Was like - discoverin' sex for the first time. All the fumbling and the desperation and sheer bloody urgency and the sweetest thing that - You're beautiful."#

"I mean - what did it feel like? When you - Christ, Bodie, 's like being a kid again. I'm blushin' - You know what I mean?"

"Oh? You mean when I was inside you, all the way in?"#

"Yeah, thass right - was it like - ?

"Bodie, will you stop laughin'?"

"M sorry, but - You know what you are, thick's what you are. It was tighter, hotter, somehow an'... Oh hell, I dunno. Maybe it was because it was you, y'know. That made it so special. All a bit too much for me but maybe you'll do better - if you want to. Sometime."#

"Sorry - didn't mean to squash the breath out of you, you just sounded so -

"Of course I bloody want to. Not sure if I can right now - need something quicker -

"I'm desperate, Bodie - "

"Yeah, can see that. Lie back, then, sunshine. Yeah...'s okay, relax... Christ, bloody bunks. Mmm, 's better."#

"If you keep doing that I'm gonna come - Bodie, I'll come - yeah..."

"Mmm, 's nice... God, I'm knackered. Oh, look at the pair of us. 'Course you were meant to bloody come... Give us a....

"...kiss. Mmm. Reckon we can get to sleep like this? Ray? Too late.#

"Should get up to lock the door, y'know. Speak to yourself, Bodie. Lock it in a minute."#

[End]

Written 1983 First published in the Pros newsletter 'The Hatstand Express 3'

Zeroplanic

Velvet Underground

Sebastian

HG, who had a wonderful, esoteric and quirky taste in music, had introduced me to Venus in Furs (she also introduced me to Sebastian, by Steve Harley, but that's another story...) and it inhabited my mind for a while and churned itself into a story. I am sure that other writers must also write under the influence, as it were, of music, it has a strange power over humans. I'm not into S/M but the song makes it sound almost pretty: very mysterious, and very, very dark.

=====|||=====

In the looking-glass, he embodied fantasy: a warlock.

A stranger.

Even as something urged him to turn away—dangerous, the path this sort of self-love set you on—his eyes, greedy, devoured the image the mirror showed him.

Burnished, polished curls were the only soft thing about him. White T-shirt, the more simple to contrast the rest of his attire; long black gauntlets, warrior style, to his elbows, where they flared into a cuff; his arms, thin and strong, bare above to the shoulder. Dark velvet jeans, skintight around his lean thighs and narrow belly, delving into shiny leather boots with sharp, sharp heels. He stamped once, suddenly, with the self-assured arrogance of a Cossack, his chin held high, haughty. And over it all, his own eyes, winter's grey, stared out at him, imperious, bold.

Prince of the night and of men's darkest, weirdest dreams.

He shivered: understanding all too well the chilling hint of something diabolical; perverse though it might be. He touched himself through warm velvet, then squeezed with vicelike fingers

to cause pain; hating it, loving it—

Hating it.

It's just a job. Keep it that way.

The cloak he swung around his shoulders was edged with fur. Oddly, it had bells to adorn the hem; dull and mottled copper-bronze shapes, they could have been a long time buried in mud under flowing water. Not tinkly, fairytale bells, these: bells for adults who needed— certain things. They produced a weird, off-key sound to grate on the nerves: an eerie whine which slid through the senses, promoting the message of his eyes and what he wore and the things he would say—

A sexuality of ice. No mercy.

He did not want to see Bodie. But Bodie came anyway, that afternoon, curious; sharp blue eyes peered into every corner of Doyle's appearance, missing no detail, carefully assimilating it all.

"Hmm." Hands clasped behind his back, he stalked all around his partner, returned to face him. "You look—"

Doyle could not repress a wry smile. "Ridiculous?" he offered, knowing just how he must look to an outsider—for Bodie was very much an outsider, here in this secret underground where pain was pleasure and darkness ruled with a whip...

"Oh no," Bodie said, very quietly, and shivers coursed down Doyle's spine, "not that."

Vibrant with tension and jumpy, Doyle said, "Good, is it?"

Bodie smiled, sudden and dangerous. "Good isn't quite the word."

A little silence between them stretched, drew taut.

Doyle turned away from Bodie. Parodying himself a little, he picked up the whip that lay on the dressing-table. It was a beautiful whip, a whip for connoisseurs, ivory-handled with a ring of pure silver and flighted with the finest, purest leather. Doyle ran his hand along the knotted thongs, studying himself in the mirror.

Bodie watched him too, taking in the arrogant spread-legged pose, the strong slender line of his body; the way the white T-shirt showed off Doyle's thin, firm-muscled upper arm, the skin brown outside, tender white within. Small nipples made little points and cast a dark aureole. And his face: tense, brooding—

Bodie frowned abruptly, disturbed.

"You okay, are you? I mean—not getting to you too much, is it, Ray?" When he had heard what

Doyle had been assigned to do, he had felt first amused, then incredulous. He never thought Ray would agree to do it, nor that he would stick it having started, and it was worrying him that Doyle seemed so remote, an other-worldly look in his eyes.

Without warning, Doyle kicked the heels of his high boots together and whirled, flicking Bodie lightly across the thighs with the whip. A stylish and graceful move, it unnerved Bodie: the more so, since Doyle did not even seem to realise the oddness of what he had done.

Even through corduroy the whip had stung, pain dancing on his nerves like an itch.

Christ, Bodie thought, sweating, yeah, this job's getting to him all right, bloody daft question to ask... It was always the same. Whether coffee-morning circles in suburbia or killing parties raiding in the desert were the norm in your part of the world, sooner or later you conformed: unconsciously you soaked up the rules and sank into unity. Doyle was a part of something else now; living a new reality. One Bodie did not dare to imagine.

Doyle was answering him, looking far away with eyes that dreamed.

"Yeah. It...yeah." He fixed his eyes on Bodie's, gave a small shrug. "It—unsettles me."

"Not surprised," Bodie said, his chest so tight he could hardly draw in a deep breath, and Doyle nodded, briefly himself again.

"Yeah, gonna need a week on Ross's couch when I get out of here." Restless, he twirled the whip in his hand; already, Bodie noticed, he was an expert with it, and the strangest quiver ran through him, raising all the tiny hairs on his skin.

"You hate it?" he asked directly.

Doyle met his intense gaze head-on; then his lashes dropped over firekindled eyes as he said: "No, that's not my problem."

Bodie, voiceless, took that in. Also silent, Doyle shrugged again. There was a speck of dust on the calf of one boot; he bent to brush it off. Bodie attempted humour, eyes never leaving his partner.

"Probably better than rhino horn, watching you in action."

But Doyle seemed hardly to have heard him, the whip handle tapping carelessly on strong leather as he turned away. "You better go now, Bodie, I need some time on my own."

Before—

As he left, to leave things on a light note, Bodie said:

"You never know—I might come in myself, find out just what you get up to."

But it didn't come out as a joke.

Doyle's curly head turned, wintry eyes locking with his.

"You know where to find me," he said, expressionless; and a dark vista fell open between them, black magic, tainted, impure.

Challenging.

=====|||=====

Time had passed, days and weeks, but what they had created was infinite.

Doyle had changed; or maybe it was Bodie who had changed, because, clad in denims and a lemon T-shirt, flipping open a can of beer and wincing at the pop, Doyle seemed normal; or as normal as he ever was. Right from the start Bodie had suspected Doyle had depths of strangeness untapped by most: a changeling, a dæmon whose choice, for reasons all his own, was to fight for the angels, not the dark.

Straight as a die: honest to a fault: put with this a morality so extreme it was in itself almost a parody of corruption, and it all added up to the paradox of character which Cowley needed from his hand-picked army, hired to fight the worst things in the world.

Doyle had a rare temper, not the noisy vociferous tantrum which might explode over a lost sock or a missed parking space; those even Doyle did not expect to be taken too seriously, but occasionally something else showed itself. A cold and vengeful fury for those who had annoyed him, or made him look small: times when Doyle, under cover, had been forced to take humiliation from some carefree soul who thought he was an easy target, exactly what he seemed: but Doyle brooded and did not forget. Certain telling little events made Bodie uncomfortable to remember them: the former colleague, for instance, Doyle had never forgiven for making him look foolish in some prank years ago, languishing now in some forgotten hellhole, never knowing whose word in whose ear had had his minor drugs charge made an example of. Nothing illegal, not even unfair: it was simply that extenuating circumstances did not enter into Ray Doyle's scale of justice, and mercy was not his style.

And Bodie. A mercenary with a twisted elegance of outlook, as casual about life as death, Bodie was a suave psychopath to Doyle's green-eyed paganism, fighting for the angels at his side, though god knew why.

They had been good as partners, one of Cowley's inspired teamings; fiercely loyal to one another even if they were not exactly friends; but now they were off-course and drifting. There was one way to go, or there was another: but to undo the dark, unmentionable sin of the past, to unclench its twisted fingers from everything they said and did and felt now, was impossible: somehow, they had to live with it.

And so here Bodie was, lounging on Doyle's bed and drinking from a can of beer while Doyle put together a sandwich in the kitchen. One bored blue eye on the screen, Bodie flicked channels relentlessly: soap opera, sport, cartoons, black and white film—

Doyle appeared in the doorway wearing a white chef's apron and kissing his fingertips. "Le dîner, mon copain." He twirled the plate on his hand. "Ç'est magnifique. Though I do say so myself."

Bodie's stomach was tortuously tied. "I'm not that hungry."

"*Croque monsieur*," Doyle continued, advancing undeterred, confiding: "That's a cheese sandwich to you, mate."

"You have it," Bodie said, uninterested.

The sandwich landed on his chest.

"Christ, Ray!" Bodie sat up in a hurry, knocking over his beer; the toasted sandwich, hot and greasy, fell onto the bed. He ate it, to get rid of it. Doyle threw himself down beside his partner and lounged against the pillows. With one hand he stuffed the sandwich into his mouth, with the other he reached for the TV flipper and went through the channels: black and white film, snooker, cartoons...

"Pass me a hanky," he said, through a mouthful of sandwich, indicating: "wardrobe."

The handkerchiefs were in a drawer within. Bodie extracted one and noticed, as he turned to pass it to Doyle, something imperfectly hidden behind rows and rows of jeans and shirts. His heart jolted and his stomach turned, as a vista of memories he had buried fluttered darkly in his mind like moths, and from nowhere he heard the faint, eerie sound of bells.

The devil stepped into the room and stood looking, interested.

Anger Bodie had suppressed rose to torment him; the past surrounded him like incense, richly scented with emotions best left unstirred. To keep silence would be the best thing he could do; being Bodie, he defied damnation and chose, instead, the worst.

"That little job well and truly over, isn't that right, Ray?"

Doyle followed his gaze to the edge of fur along brown cloth. With one finger, he stirred a circle in the condensation on the top of his beer can, round and round; his gaze on Bodie was quite steady.

"You know how it is."

"But I see you've still got the gear," Bodie said, bending an amiable glance towards his partner.

“Just in case, I suppose.”

Doyle’s grey-green eyes blazed sudden ice. “And what’s that supposed to mean?” Very carefully, very gently, he set his empty plate on the bedside unit, dusted his hands and the crumbs from his shirt, watching Bodie with a cat’s slanted concentration.

“Well, I’d have thought you’d want to rid yourself of all that filth as soon as possible. You know what they say: live in dirt long enough and it sticks.”

Doyle laughed coldly. “Oh, come off it, Bodie. Don’t be such a bloody hypocrite.”

“And what, my Raymond, is that supposed to mean?” Bodie smiled, a clever and terrifying smile. The flames rose around them; fire and brimstone faintly scented the air. Doyle chose to be perverse.

“Oho, a slight case of diplomatic amnesia. All right, mate, I understand.” He winked outrageously.

Bodie wanted to choke him. He grasped the bedclothes in tense fingers and stared from the foot of the bed at his curlyheaded partner, half his size but a dirty fighter. He had his back now to the offending robe, which roused in him the most disturbing and violent feelings, bonded as it was to the past, to the wicked thing they had done: bent on expiation he turned round, yanked the wardrobe door fully open, ready to tear the garment up with his bare hands.

A worse horror met his disbelieving eyes.

He stared, utterly silent, and heard the obscenity of Doyle’s laughter behind him.

It stopped when Bodie turned, six feet and 170 pounds of heavy muscle, his eyes sardonic and murderous.

“Don’t tell me. You got attached to them.”

Doyle didn’t say anything. He stayed where he was, prone, shockingly vulnerable, refusing the option of defence. Indeed, his eyes stared up in mocking provocation, defiant and bold.

Bodie kicked aside a tangle of fetishes, the sad trappings of sadism. He continued, with grim and sinister geniality, “Or, I know. Secretly you hoped for a Master?” From the hoard of peculiar toys, Bodie selected the whip, the very whip which in Doyle’s hands had lashed with a furious beauty, flying to draw blood from tender skin: he weighed it in his hands and considered Doyle with measuring eyes. “Sweetheart, you never know: I may oblige you.”

The endearment venomous, the offer dripped black poison. Doyle laughed up at him and kicked his foot against the duvet, casual and leisurely. “No chance, mate: I know you. You couldn’t do it.”

As an invitation, a provocation, it was hardly subtle. Doyle tossed his head with roguish coquetry: but something more flickered beneath, a terrible desperation, a mad dervish dancing wildly in his eyes.

Bodie hated him for that.

It was the sweetest, dirtiest temptation he had ever had, to lay into Ray Doyle with slashing strokes, punish him for lascivious acts with half the world, the whip singing in his hand: he felt the thing vibrant, eager to snap through the air and take the blood it hungered for.

Bodie threw the whip down, hard, so that Doyle caught it instinctively and winced.

“You sick bastard,” Bodie said, breathing hard. “You poor, sick bastard. Grew on you, did it? Now you can’t do without it?” His mouth twisted, savagely. “I know the story, Ray. It starts as a game, and then you find you can’t stop playing.”

“It isn’t like that,” Doyle said.

“*Then why hang on to it?*” Bodie hurled at him, all of his anger and his shame blazing like a torch, burning the last hope of salvation away. Abruptly, Doyle’s attitude changed, melting him into a pliant sprawl. His sudden smile was sweet, deepening the crease in his cheek so that it flashed like a dimple. “You said it yourself. To—play with.” And he drew the whip between his legs obscenely, like a lover, a deviant caress rich with subtle eroticism. Bodie was disgusted, and fiercely excited, and could not take his eyes from his wanton partner. It was already too late: already they were doomed.

“That’s a dirty game, Doyle,” he said from a tight, tight throat, astonished and ashamed by his intense and urgent responses to something his intellect was sickened by, even as his body yearned.

Doyle kissed the tip of the whip and threw it away. He held out his arms. “But you want to join in.” His eyes, insolent, travelled the length of Bodie to linger, appropriately.

“I don’t think you mean this, Doyle,” Bodie said through gritted teeth, undoing his belt buckle. “But you’ve done it anyway; and now you’ll have to take the consequences.” With a shocking thrill he saw the first apprehensive flicker from Doyle, the nervous sideways glance. Bodie advanced on him with deliberation. “You’re asking for this, aren’t you? Well, you can have it.”

Very carefully, with a lover’s tendresse, he unclasped Doyle’s belt, pulled down the jeans and the scrap of warm cotton he wore beneath, pushed up his T-shirt to his armpits. He opened his own trousers just as far as was necessary and no more.

Half naked, an appealing sprawl with his clothing disarranged, Doyle looked sweetly ripe for rape. His hard organ curved up erect; it looked huge over his narrow hips, straining halfway up to his heart, a vivid colour against the pale skin of his belly. A teardrop glistened at the slit. Bodie smiled tenderly, brutally. “I think you’re enjoying this even more than I am. Which—” he

knelt over Doyle's face— “only goes to show—” he paused, with the tip of his cock an inch from Doyle's perfect, quivering mouth— “just how beyond help you are. And sweetheart—” his hand closed, suddenly, on the fragile windpipe of the man beneath him— “if you bite me, you won't find breathing very comfortable: just a friendly warning.”

Doyle's eyes looked up at him, shining, somehow sad. Bodie shut his mind to them. Madness, this was insanity; but he fucked the warm wet hole of Doyle's tender mouth in a white-hot blaze of lust, giving vent to all the anger and the fear and the sheer sexual glory of passion unleashed and power gained. A gasp left him as orgasm surged; he grabbed at curls and ground Doyle's face hard into the musk of his loins as his cock extended itself and spat sweet fire down Doyle's throat, a wonderful physical joy spreading warmly through him, convulsing him with shudders of glorious sensation.

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Looking at Doyle afterward, with his heart still pounding fiercely, Bodie didn't regret a second of it, not one second; it had been far too marvellous for that. Doyle's eyes, closed, were wet with tears; Bodie brushed them away with his thumb and tasted sweet salt. “Was that what you wanted?” he whispered to him tenderly. “Right up your street, eh mate?”

Unable to speak, Doyle turned his head away from him. Bodie caressed his chest gently and saw Doyle's cock, a pale, sad little curl on his belly. “Too rough for you, sweetheart? Or— not rough enough?” He leaned over and picked up the whip from the floor. “There.” He brushed Doyle's genitals with the leather thongs, trailing them over him kindly. “Is this what you like?” Slowly, Doyle's body responded to this inhuman lover, the cool corrupt touch of an artefact. His eyes, wide open, watched Bodie all the time; even in the sharp-edged ecstasy of orgasm: the last and best bravado of all.

And now there was no hope.

Pride and perversity, the weird ritual dances of pleasure sharpened by pain; they had let these things out of the box and the consequence was damnation. Perhaps, once, they had dreamed of something different, and never spoken: but it was out of reach forever now.

Perhaps it had been theirs for the taking, once.

Once upon a time.

Before...

Tired, Bodie lay down beside his partner; his hand groped for and found Ray's. They lay there hand in hand. Doyle was sleeping sweetly, his breathing a noisy rasp, his cheeks streaked with the silvery salt of tears; his fingers entwined tightly with Bodie's. Bodie shivered, and burned, as if with a fever: he could not sleep.

The present was no comfort at all: but when he shut his eyes it was to find the horror of the past waiting, unpurged, to unfold its little drama again before his cringing mind.

They were in hell, no doubt at all of that: the wheels were set in motion; all they could do was suffer to be swept along, and pay the price for eternity.

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And so he had come, anonymous, into the stormsweet world of depravity where the Master now ruled; opened for a while the chink of dark fire that ran beneath the real world where people worked and laughed and played, the currents that ran deep beneath the rational mind, and he discovered forbidden enchantment; it engulfed him.

Briefly masked, two harlequin diamonds shielding his eyes, the man who was and yet was not known to him led him into velvet passages of desire, spiked with thorns that only sweetened the pleasure, the rough voice harshened now with command.

And he listened to it, shivering, and obeyed because damnably he wanted that, and only that; and the sound of weird bells celebrated his subjugation. The whip whispered silk, and struck home on bared skin, drawing nerve-shrieking pain, exotic pleasure equal in strength: he knelt for it without meekness, seduced into wanting by that voice of subtle magic, beg for me, kneel for me—

He tasted leather, and felt only rushed, dark excitement frightening in its intensity, a tidal wave, too fast, too much for him. The whip, enchanting, stung along skin and teased him. The Master spoke to him, harsh, imperious, and his own voice answered only in gasps, whispery. The high sexual tension gathered, and peaked—

A moment of stillness lasted too long. He waited, in an agony of wanting.

“BLEED FOR ME,” said his master, and he laughed, a soft, chilling sound just as the whip struck home.

Kneeling bared on fur, he cried out, the warm sweet pleasure at his centre ripening, overflowing: and he was coming with unbearable glory even as the silver-tongued whip, expert, drew blood.

Awakening from the maelstrom to silence, tasting the warm mouth of the man who now knelt beside him, holding him, something he had not expected and yet it came to him as naturally as breathing; for an infinity they stayed that way, equals once more, very close.

Then the crack opened, and closed behind him with finality, and he was out in the world again, with the knowledge of a thousand years on his shoulders.

And that was the end of innocence.

Zeroplanic

Vivamus, Amemus

Sebastian

The beginning of what was meant to be an epic. Unlike some of my fragments it stands just about alone.. but I think it's a shame I never finished it: I like its feel, I like the dialogue, the heroic and irresistable Bodie, the unintentionally callous but irresistable Doyle, the plaque on the wall, Phillippa, and most of all, the cream horn.

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"And that's another thing," she said.

There was a scraggy sparrow darting across the grey slate roof. Probably nesting in the eaves. Bodie watched it duck beneath them, twig in beak. Yeah, nesting all right. Making a nice cosy bed for a mate. There was no mate yet, but mate there would surely be: written in its blueprint, that was. Eggs in the spring. Greedy squawking open-beaked kids to feed for a brief furious summer. And then it would probably die in the winter freeze.

" - You never listen to me."

"I'm listening," he said, wounded. "I've got the hang of it quite nicely, thank you. If this were a letter it would be a Dear John, right?"

"I wish you didn't have to make a joke about everything."

"Oh, I'm not joking, sweetheart. When I'm joking I put a sign up."

"It's him, that's the real problem."

"What's him?" Bodie stared, crossed his eyes, made a match bounce across the table. Two empty coffee cups, a plate littered with cake crumbs (his) and an untouched pile of pastries lay between them. "In fact, who's him?"

Well, of course he knew who she meant. But he waited, curious, for what she would say. Maybe she was going to cite Cowley. God knew, the old man and his unreasonable demands had come between them enough times.

"You know who I mean. Your partner. Ray."

Bodie made a face of disbelief. "Ray? As in, bionic golly Ray? Wouldn't harm a fly, old Ray." At this thought a gigantic snigger erupted at the back of his throat but he managed to swallow it down.

"It's too much, Bodie. He's too much. He's always around. And when he isn't, you're thinking about him. Worrying about him. Or he phones. Or he calls round and then you drop everything and go off with him."

"Being quite fair, are you?" Bodie crinkled his eyes quite humorously. His heart beat like stone inside him, but he kept up the smile, the narrow look, the air of intelligent flippancy. "I work with him. He's my partner, like you said."

A nice-looking girl, grey-eyed, elegant, she looked across the table at him studiedly calm. "Look, I'm not blaming anyone. Not really. I know he's your partner. I know you can't keep regular office hours and your job's very important to you. I'm just saying, it's - too much. It's like, well, I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's just like there's three of us in this relationship. I need - more than that."

"Look, he's been ill. He's needed a bit of support lately, that's all."

"Yes, Bodie, I know that. It can't have been nice for him being shot and all that. Of course I don't blame you wanting to help him out. I'm just saying - however it is, I can't live with it any more. Right or wrong, I wanted all of you to myself. I'm 27. I'm looking - well, I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I'm looking for, well, a husband. A - a father for my kids, if you like, if that's not sounding too - stupid. But you're not ready for that, are you? I was just kidding myself when I thought - Face facts, Bodie. You want to stay right where you are, running around with him like two big kids yourselves."

True, true, all of it true. And more besides. "Look, Philippa - "

She was scrabbling for her bag, suddenly distraught after the calm. Maybe she'd been expecting him to talk her round, promise to do better, offer himself in marriage, perhaps. Perish the thought. "Well, I just hope for your sake you never wake up one day and - well. Bodie, it's over. Don't make it hard for me - It's - Well. Maybe I'll see you around."

'And' - what? Oh, he knew. Never wake up one day and realise what you've missed out on. And

for what - ? nothing. Nothing at all. Out of the window Bodie could see a gold Capri draw up and park illegally, terribly, wheel bumping off the kerb, handbrake squealing. He winced. Whoops. Bad timing. Doyle leaped out of the car, all lithe cheery energy, recognised Philippa, raised a hand in greeting, saw her face, looked puzzled, turned to watch her hurry along the street, head down - crying probably, the sight of Doyle the last straw and now all set to be the last memory of an affair which had lasted all of six months, which had boded well for the future and looked good from the start. Finito. Adieu. Bon voyage, auf wiedersehen. Pet.

The cafe door banged. "What was all that about?" Bodie's partner eased himself into the recently vacated seat across from Bodie and looked at him quizzically.

Bodie shrugged. Gave a brave smile.

"Haven't dumped her, have you?" Doyle asked with interest, and a rather faux sympathy. He turned the plate of cakes around, examining what was left.

"Other way round," Bodie told him, faintly embarrassed.

Eyebrows arching, Doyle turned it back again.

"Not the plate," Bodie said patiently, "who dumped who."

Doyle made huge astonished eyes at him, blew through pursed lips. "Must be losing your touch, old son. I thought she was a stayer. Been six months now, 'asn't it?"

"Dunno why you're laughing. It's your fault." Bodie said, devil-may-care, inward mischief taking over. Doyle could be so - Doyle. Insensitive wasn't in it. Here was Bodie, freshly dumped by his long-standing girl, could be really cut up about it for all Doyle knew, hiding visceral torment. Words of comfort from Doyle, Bodie's best mate? Nope. Inner mirth shook Bodie; Doyle had had an empathy bypass some point soon after birth, that was for sure. All Bodie was getting from him was a kind of cocksure amusement, and in a moment he was going to be mocking Bodie's ladykilling technique.

"How d'you mean, my fault?" Doyle snorted down his nose. "I did my best for you, mate. I gave you all the tips you needed - How to Handle a Woman and all that, more fool you if you didn't take 'em."

"Let's go, I've paid already." As Doyle rose Bodie snatched a pastry from the plate and palmed it. Outside on the cafe steps: "Shame to waste it, cost me an arm and a leg. Have a cream horn," and he presented it to his mate with a flourish, "on me."

Doyle took the cake and bit into it. Cream squished out from both sides of his mouth. "Come on, how was it my fault?" he said, muffled, spitting crumbs.

Bodie was laughing at him, watching Doyle wipe his fingers down his jeans. "Perhaps she didn't like your table manners. Been out of the zoo long, have you?"

"Stop messing about, Bodie. She fancied me, was that it?"

Bodie smiled inside. Well, you would think that, wouldn't you? Probably think George Cowley would give you a shafting if he could catch you and keep you still for it. "Miles out. I don't think you're going to guess this one, Doyle."

"Well, tell me then." Cake gone, and never to make its appearance on the lean hips and flat belly, Doyle licked his fingers and looked at him calmly, waiting, eyes green as gems under the shading of his lashes, ringlets of hair tipped gold by the sun. Hands stuffed into his pockets, rocking back on his heels, Bodie told him.

"She thinks I'd rather have you, darling."

The sun shone down, the river lapped against the city walls. Beyond that Bodie was aware of the roar of traffic out on Western Avenue. Rush hour soon, they'd best be getting on their way; shame to leave this pretty peaceful back lane with its history and antique teashops. Maybe a plaque was now in order: Here, on this spot, Raymond Doyle learned - big Doyle eyes goggled at him, his mouth dropped open.

"She - ? - you're kidding."

"Well, she didn't exactly say it, not in so many words. Nevertheless," Bodie sighed, hands going into his pockets, "I got the point all right. It's lurve." He tossed a glance Doyle's way, impure mischief, inviting him to share the joke. "Did you guess, my pet? Always thought I hid it rather well, myself."

Doyle sparkled at him, highly amused. "She thinks you'd rather go out with me, does she?" He shook his head, hands on hips. "Now I've heard everything."

At that moment Bodie noticed that there was in fact a plaque on the wall - detailing not Bodie's thirdhand confession of unreturned love to his partner, but instead the visit of George III to this very teashop. He leaned against the wall, lashes blackly fluttering, looking up at the sky. "Yeah. Can you believe it?" Out of the corner of his vision he spotted the flat black cap and yellow stripes of a traffic warden homing in on them like a wasp arriving at a picnic.

Doyle fell into step beside him as Bodie began to descend the steps to the car. "She thinks we're fucking, does she?" he said into Bodie's ear, highly diverted. "Very - interestin', that. Or is it more of a - a spiritual kind of love?"

"Oh, an unrequited love, I got the feeling." By the time he spoke Bodie's voice did not reflect the missed beat of his heart which had made him momentarily lose his breath. Doyle slammed the car door shut, turned to grin at him, all white teeth and easy charm.

"I get it. You're in love with me but I'm keeping you at arm's length?"

"Well, that's about it. Except I got the feeling she thinks maybe you give me one every so often just to let me know what I'm missing." He shook his head, more in sorrow than in anger. "You called me up just one too many times, sunshine."

"I must have done," Doyle marvelled, hand on the wheel. He too had spotted the warden, importantly approaching. "So." He eyed Bodie speculatively. "I grant you a, kind of mercy fuck, every so often, do I?"

"She's not sure. She'd rather not think about it." Bodie shuddered, delicately. "She's probably not too sure of the gory details, anyway. Most likely she thinks gay love means two blokes dressing up in women's undies and reading Oscar Wilde out loud."

"Even she couldn't be that naive. Mind, more Densa than Mensa, I grant you, I always thought so. And this mercy fuck I throw your way every so often - Do you have to hold me down for it, or do I give in willingly?"

Bodie mused. "Bit of each, I should think. Keep me guessing, you know?"

"Probably I let you blow me," Doyle mused, "I would, wouldn't I? - grant you the privilege, and all that. But would I blow you? That's the question."

"No," Bodie took a deep breath. "Definitely not. You'd think that was beneath you."

"Beneath you, you mean," Doyle said promptly, and they sniggered crudely, were still at it when the warden, a mean toad-faced person of indeterminate sex, leaned down to glare triumphantly in at the window. Bodie had the ID ready in his palm; it gave him not quite so much satisfaction as usual to wave it in the general direction necessary and not even meet the eye of the inferior being. The warden retreated, mumbling. Doyle blasted off with a grandiose screech of tyres.

Bit of a laugh. Quite a lot of a laugh. Turned Doyle on, too, Bodie could see that. He liked the thought of some bird of Bodie's thinking they were fucking. Sexy idea. Doyle loved that kind of stuff, got off on it. As far as it went.

Doyle was still talking about it. " - easy mistake to make, I s'pose. We do spend a lot of time together."

"Well, we 'ave to. We work together. And it isn't exactly a 9-5 sort of job."

Hand on the gearstick as they waited at the lights, Doyle cast him a speculative look. "Come one, come all. Bet she's not the only one who thinks we're queer for each other."

"No, probably not," Bodie said, unperturbed. It wasn't true, not at all, so how could it harm them? "But then, some people see sex everywhere. Remember all that talk when Lucas went away with McCabe to Manchester?"

"Yeah, said they were going for City v. United. Very unlikely. Then there was that time Betty

went round to see if she could give Anson the anti-smoking lecture. All night, it took her. And then, of course, everyone knows about you and Cowley." Doyle kept his eyes piously on the road though his voice wavered perilously up and down.

Bodie hit him on the knee in mild rebuke. "Some things are too precious to joke about, Doyle."

Old banter, safer ground. But he knew he had to be prepared for its sudden return; Doyle wasn't one lightly to relinquish such a tasty titbit. And when Doyle drew up at CI5 HQ even as his fingers were turning the key in the ignition his mouth appeared before Bodie's tantalisingly close, his eye winking, a deep, deep crease in his cheek.

"Give us a kiss then, flower. Gonna miss me, aren't you?"

Bodie flicked a speck of cream horn off the corner of Doyle's mouth with a fingertip. "Why, you goin' somewhere?" He gazed down into the battered, grinning face, eyes focussing very carefully on the heartshaped outline of the lips. And what would he do, I wonder? If -

The moment was past, Doyle back on his own side of the car again, and chuckling. "No sweetheart, but you are. Cowley wants you. In his office. Ten minutes ago."

He never had asked Doyle why he had appeared at the cafe then abducted him. Gone with him without a second's thought. Oh well. That was just like him. Doyle snapped his fingers and bang, he followed. Getting careless.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Doyle's voice floated out of the car window at him, and Bodie couldn't but grin.

"Well, that gives me plenty of scope, dunnit?"

Training. They were always training, these days. Still young enough for the A squad, but every year you had to fight that little bit harder to stay on top of physical perfection instinctive to the teens and early twenties. Since the shooting Doyle seemed to have regained it and then some; but he would have had trouble with Macklin even five years ago. Anyone would. Macklin was special. Word had it, if he hadn't lost his gun-nerve it would be him and A.N Other (Murph perhaps? Bodie himself?) as the A-Team, at the top of Cowley's love- list; certainly looked that way today. Bodie leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching. Any minute now Doyle was going to blow; he had been fighting his heart out now for five, ten minutes, and still Macklin wore that lazy little smile.

"You're losing it, Doyle," taunted that cultured, drawling voice. "And once it's gone, you never get it back."

Bodie started away from the wall then in sudden shock, because he had not seen Doyle make any obvious moves, and yet a knife had appeared in his hand.

Nasty looking thing, small but sharp, stiletto sharp. Now it was Doyle's turn to smile, an ugly

little twist to his mouth. Macklin backed a little, watching wary as a cat. Like a starburst he launched a kick at D's right hand. Missing not a beat Doyle switched the knife to his other hand, just like that, flourished it in Macklin's face, definitely taunting now.

Oh, careful. Bodie took a step nearer. Macklin went for a lunging hold on Doyle's wrist; Doyle jumped backwards, neat as a cat. The knife described an arc one centimetre from the pale skin of Macklin's indoor Englishman's face.

"Okay Doyle, you haven't lost it."

"Yeah?" Doyle said, smiling, all gritted teeth. "Maybe I haven't done quite enough to convince you - eh?" The knife plunged forward again.

"You've got Bodie worried, Doyle," Macklin warned but his eyes never left the point of danger, tracking it, making judgements. "He thinks you've flipped; he's going to jump you. Save you a night in the cells."

Bodie didn't even bother to speak; Doyle's attention had not wavered, not for one split second. ""That's cheap, Brian. Very cheap. I know Bodie. Bodie's on my side."

"Bodie's on his own side, Doyle. Don't kid yourself." Macklin raised his hands, unsubmitive even in defeat. "Okay, Doyle. You win." And he turned his back on Doyle, began to walk away. Bodie tensed, not knowing why - saw Doyle hesitate, toss the knife from hand to hand again - and then Macklin whipped around like a cobra in full strike, his foot flying high to thud into Doyle's belly, Doyle doubling with a choke and dropping like a stone to the floor.

Macklin stood over him. Not laughing. Not even smiling. If he had been smiling, Bodie thought, he would have probably gone for Macklin's throat. Instead he dropped down on one knee beside his wounded partner, hand settling in the end on the small of his back, rubbing gently.

"That'll teach you, Doyle," Macklin said, not even breathing hard, "Never trust the white flag. Timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes. You dropped your guard too soon."

"Silly of him," Bodie put in deeply, pleasantly, "but then he probably never dreamt that his own trainer was going to put the boot in over the area of his recent heart surgery."

Macklin looked down into the eyes trained chillingly on him, a clear, dark blue; he wasn't afraid of anything, Brian Macklin, not even seeing his name writ large and clear right now on Bodie's deathlist. He had his hands on his lean hips, a lock of lank blonde hair flopped over his forehead into his eye and he tossed it back with a shake of his head. "Bollocks, Bodie. That's bollocks and you know it. It was his belly I kicked, not his heart. You can't take all his knocks for him, you know. It's not good for him - or you."

"Mind you," Macklin added as he left, "he's coming on well. Right back on song, I'd say. You can tell him that, when he's in a fit state to hear it."

Bodie helped Doyle over to the vast gym mattress and lowered him to it. Doyle curled up into a ball and moaned a bit, but Bodie's practised eye decided he was over the worst of it, making the most of it now, typical Doyle, and sympathy wouldn't do him any good at all.

"Let's have a look at the damages then." Doyle rolled onto his back for him and let Bodie tug up his T-shirt from the bottom. Bodie sucked in his breath, impressed despite himself, and Doyle raised himself on one eyebrow to look down. A clear imprint of Macklin's size 10 boot was etched across his skin, angry red. Bodie grimaced with him.

"Nasty."

Doyle's face went through a variety of contortions as he felt over himself tenderly. "Think he's ruptured me spleen?"

"We'll know in about an hour. When the blood starts coming up."

"Thanks, mate."

"Well, you deserved it. No-one's made Macklin look a fool and walked away upright." He spoke brusquely, and at the same time urged Doyle with a nudging motion to lie back down on the mattress. Beneath the pulled-up scrap of red cotton he could see the long ridged scar across Doyle's sternum, a nice little legacy of having his chest cut open and Mai-Li's bullet dug out of the tissue of his heart. "Rest for a few minutes, might as well. That was just the hors'd'oeuvre, you know. Towser's probably on his way for the main course any minute."

Doyle shuddered, and closed his eyes. Out of habit Bodie looked at his face, a long and dwelling look.

"I'll tell you something," Doyle's voice broke through the peaceful spell.

"Yeah, tell me." Bodie's voice was gentler than he had planned it; he cleared his throat.

"Reckon Macklin's a sadist?"

Bodie snorted. "You'd have to be, wouldn't you, to do his job and sleep at night?" He yawned, threw himself down on the mattress flat beside Doyle.

"No, I mean it. Just for a minute back there I could swear he was getting off on it."

"Getting off on doing you over?" Yeah, Bodie could believe that.

"Hard-on like the bloody Eiffel Tower."

"You or him?"

They both smirked a bit at that. "Nah, I'm really serious. He just looks the part, doesn't 'e?"

Batting his lashes, "I'd not noticed," Bodie simpered, which prompted another bellylaugh from Doyle, followed by a wince and another tender feel around the kickmark.

"I can just see our Brian down the Phoenix picking up a trick. A little bottom boy just looking for a Master."

"Taking him home - "

"Tying him up - "

"Doing him over - and when he begged for more - "

"He'd say no," they chorussed and rolled about, and laughed until Bodie's ribs hurt as much as his partner's.

But it was not Doyle Macklin telephoned three days later, but Bodie himself.

Bodie took a hearty swallow of the pint Macklin had bought him and looked across the table at the other man. Very spruce tonight, expensive designer gear. Shining blonde hair, very clean. Smooth skin, neat features. A goodlooking man by anyone's standards. Rather too public school for Bodie's taste.

"What's all this about, Macklin?"

Macklin smiled at him, rather alarmingly. "Brian. I just thought - " he reached out, clinked his whisky tumbler on the dimpled glass of Bodie's pint - "you might like to go for a drink, that's all. No strings."

Too right no fucking strings. And perhaps Macklin read that in his eye because he sat up straighter, stopped smiling, and turned the talk adroitly to training. The beer went down well; Macklin - Brian - tossed down a few more straight whiskies. Via guns and military action through to men in combat, the talk became, it seemed, all at once edged with a certain provocation, an acknowledgement that they were, somehow, standing on the same line, coming from the same viewpoint. Bodie didn't know how Macklin had done it, but he had: viewed Bodie's membership card, approved it, and let him into the club. And now Macklin's eyes were engaging his with greater and greater frequency. A knee nudged his under the table.

Any minute now, Bodie thought, it's going to be, 'we're both men of the world, Bodie - '

"We've both been around a bit, Bodie," Macklin said. "Done a few things we'd maybe rather forget."

"Or maybe not," Bodie said, and smiled ambiguously. To hell with it, he thought, why not? Macklin was goodlooking enough. Would have, no doubt, many pretty tricks up his sleeve. It would definitely be a night to remember if nothing else.

"Fancy going back to my place for a nightcap?" Macklin asked him, watching him closely.

"Never wear one," Bodie replied, and put down his pintpot firmly. No. Macklin had blown it. For a moment he'd been tempted, but that corny old line - why not mention his etchings and have done with it?

Macklin smiled at him then, rolled up his sleeves. In the low light his hair still shone all but silver, his eyes cruelly slanted. For a moment he became, in Bodie's alcoholic imagination, the devil incarnate: those eyes, those strong arms, a master's touch with sadism: oh yes, tempting. A shiver rolled down his spine. Macklin sensed victory; the cruel slant of his eyes deepened.

"Doyle play those games with you, does he?" he asked, soft ice. "Is he Top for you? Is that the way you like it, Bodie?"

Quite and utterly distracted, Bodie consulted for a moment the inner vision this conjured up for him, of Doyle in leather with a whip in his hand. Abruptly the image flipped and it became Bodie with the whip, looking down at Doyle looking up at him.

He stood up: the table shoved back against Macklin's lap.

"Look, don't take this amiss, mate," he said, amiably enough. "But games.... aren't much my thing."

At first taken aback, Macklin had recovered himself with lightning instincts. "No? Pity." The voice was clipped, brisk. By now they might have been discussing selection for the CI5 darts team. "Call it a night then, shall we?"

Having delivered the brush-off, he felt with good grace, Bodie smiled warmly at his trainer, a good man to stay the right side of. "No offence - eh?"

"Certainly not," Macklin replied, as dry as parchment, and they parted.

Bodie did not sleep well that night.

There was no reason not to tell Doyle. There really was not. It was in fact the kind of thing Doyle would hugely enjoy and which Bodie would probably get a kick out of telling him.

"You're having me on, Bodie, I swear it."

"No," sighed Bodie, "100% true, alas."

Doyle stared at him narrowly, those annoyingly elfin eyes intent on discovering the truth. "He made a pass at you?"

"Yup." Bodie was enjoying this, despite all appearance to the contrary, of regretfully laying

some unsavoury truth before his partner. He rolled his eyes, fluttered his lashes.

"Are you sure you got it right?"

"Doyle, I may be thicker than Cowley's Y-fronts, but even I recognise a pass when I hear one."

"Yeah, but - a 'nightcap'. That could mean anything. Another beer. A glass of port, 'e's a navy man, inne?"

"Yeh, and they're the worst, didn't you know? Rum, bum and the lash - "

"Did he actually say right out - "

Bodie looked at him enigmatically, waiting for Doyle to say it.

"You know." Doyle snapped it out very fast. "Come to bed with me." "Ooh sweetheart," Bodie camped, "I thought you'd never ask -" ducking to avoid the swatting blow aimed at his cheek.

"But did he?"

"Not in so many words. But I knew what he was getting at."

"That sort of thing happen to you often, does it?" Doyle asked, suddenly intent.

Sensing a change in the air, Bodie looked back at him, quizzical. Not knowing quite what to say.

"Get lots of passes from blokes, do you, Bodie?" Doyle looked at him, head tipped a little to one side, the artist's eye calculating. "Yeah, I reckon you do. Not your fault, is it - looking like the centrefold of Big Boys in Boots?"

Bodie gave him the expected kick and a look of exasperation. "Never knew you were so familiar with Big Boys in Boots." Actually he had never heard of that particular publication: had no idea whether Doyle had simply invented it on the spot. Probably, since Doyle was now cracking up at his own wit - "Big Boys in Boots - !" leaning forward, one hand pressed tight into his midriff, mouth stretched wide in mirth, white teeth all on view. Two or three black fillings on the back molars. Wheezing noises leaving his throat.

Bodie slapped down his pint pot and stood. "Gotta go." He reached over to ruffle the disordered hair. Twined a curl around a finger, cruelly tweaked. Doyle winced, pulled his head away.

"Where you going?"

"Man to see." He winked at Doyle. "So many men, so little time - !"

"I worry about you sometimes," Doyle said, gazing at him soberly, and Bodie made as if to go. He felt happy, for some reason. Everything was - okay. He and Doyle - they had a laugh. Though

the actual phrase best friends did not form themselves in his mind, that was nonetheless exactly how he felt. There was no getting away from it. The world was a brighter place for him since he had met Ray Doyle. Nothing sentimental about it. How wouldn't die for him, or anything like that. But they were - mates.

"Bodie," Doyle called after him, and Bodie turned, looked right into those greygreen eyes, the eyes of a winter sea.

"What?"

"You eaten?"

"Gotta table booked."

"The Savoy?"

"The Wimpy, more like, rate I get paid," Bodie said grimly, tossing keys from hand to hand.

"8 o' clock," D said, "at mine. Bring a bottle."

"Ketchup be okay?"

It was not of course ketchup he turned up with but a bottle of Tesco's Bulgarian Cabernet, in fact two bottles, and a video. Doyle was chopping something in the kitchen, but he leaned over to inspect it - eyes brightening at the well-endowed lady who graced the front. "Mmm. That for later?"

"Yup. If you're good." Bodie strolled into the living- room and put the tape down on top of the video unit. Then he went back to the kitchen. "What we having?"

"Best Aberdeen Angus Sirloin - medium rare - side order of chips, sorry, french Fries, petit pois -"

Bodie took it in. "Steak, chips and peas?"

Doyle nodded. Bodie gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek, one of those rare moments of impulse. "My favourite."

"I know," Doyle said modestly, grimacing as he scrubbed at his cheek, and it was a good meal, Bodie tucking in heartily to the offerings, heaping his tender steak liberally with fried onions and mushrooms and drenching it in creamy pepper sauce. The wine washed it down well - so well, in fact that the two of them felt decidedly tipsy - which, they agreed over the washing up, was an altogether pleasant state to be in and one they intended to compound by opening the other bottle of wine as they settled down to watch the video.

Kitchen done, Doyle flopped down beside him, going "Phew," and flapping at himself as he

undid the buttons of his shirt.

"Hot flush?" Bodie asked sympathetically. "Must be getting on to that time in life, aren't you, Doyle?"

"Yeh, and this could well bring on another one," Doyle drawled, nodding at the video, which featured largebreasted females spilling out of their tops, and quite soon dispensing with the tops altogether, a feast of bouncing mammaries any redblooded male would be hard put to resist. Bodie quite enjoyed it himself, though he had chosen it purely - or impurely - because he knew Doyle would like it, and so they watched it all the way through to the end, sharing the last of the wine and few words, and before it was over as he often did at these showings Doyle had unzipped and pushed down his jeans and masturbated himself, pushing his hips up off the settee and sighing as he came, uncaring or unaware of Bodie's hard, brooding stare all the while; and afterwards they must have slept because Bodie awoke, cramped and chilled and uncomfortable, in the depths of the night and took himself off to Doyle's spare room with a pounding headache and a crick in his neck to boot.

A funny kind of loving, to be sure...

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Who Gave Us Delight

Sebastian

A post-Facelift story. I fell in love with Zax - so beautiful! so flawed... ! and so in need of a partner for this strange universe he seemed to have ended up in. A story simply had to be written to put right his solitude. HG did it longer and much better, but mine was faster ;)

=====|||=====

The magician's soul, fettered by silver, fled only to the outer reaches before eternity and grew rich there, feeding.

At night, the woman left the stage and the cult audience applauding a ghost and walked to the shabby dressing-room cluttered with the tawdry remnants of his life. In front of his mirror, his paints before her just as he had left them that night he was beaten to death by those who once had loved him, she stared, first at her own face, then at the silver bowl which held more than air, and less than substance.

A soul cannot be bound by time and space....

"I love you, Zax," she said aloud.

She spoke to him thus every night; and every night she heard nothing. Yet he was there; she felt him all around, the power of him awesome, but leashed.

The door opened behind her.

"Show went off well tonight," Bob said, stripping off his bright shirt, polished teak skin flashing. "You were good."

"I know a little of his craft," she answered him. "A few tricks to make them gasp. But his art-- his art was all his own."

Fools, all of them who came to see, and mourn as she kept his memory alive from night to night with his tricks; even they could not miss the difference, were even pleased by it, it confirmed their suspicions that he had been more than human. They had killed him; now they were being punished, because he was no longer theirs to love.

And she, who carried the greatest grief of all, also had the greatest guilt.

"No!" he had cried, and for a moment their hate-urged surging had halted, tottering under his power and their own long-held love; but then her own voice reaching them, slyly, malevolently stirring anarchy like quicksilver poison--

"KILLER."

And then it had become unspeakable.

Zax, more ruthless than she, would understand why she had done it, because she could not bear to see him go to another. It was she who could not forgive herself.

Zax, with his muddleheaded desperate need for automatons whose response to him he could counterfeit, spurning her warm, living love, had never found what he was searching for with such hunger. He would have another chance.

Because she was going to pay for her treachery, all he demanded and more.

Now Bob was spinning a golden ball along his arm, behind his back, catching it. "You know what they've got up at the Centre?"

"I'm not interested in the Centre."

It was not the small things but the great that kept coming back to her: the lean hard warmth of him silent and urgent in the night, enchanting her without need of magic save his own sexual mystery; his beauty, his eyes. Sometimes wakeful, she would stare at the ceiling and see them there, compelling lightless depths above triangles magenta and yellow, staring at her, mesmerising, summoning her.

I know. Not long now. I know, what to do.

Unaware of any silent promises made to the priceless simmering bound by a silver bowl, Bob was still talking, expecting perhaps that since Zax's death she had inherited along with his magic boxes his fascination with Numbers, "-- kind of a genetic throwback. Kind of like--a negative. Only not quite. Bruce finds him interesting. The other Numbers are frightened of him. He's not like them. Zax would--"

The name crisply ejected, echoed between them and fell drifting, wistful with bleak mourning.

She spoke softly, cradling the words to herself as she watched her own face in the mirror, and the black one behind.

"I'm going to bring him back."

He grabbed her shoulders from behind, fingers cruelly tight to punish her for promising what could not be done. Then, drawn like daylight through an opened drape, his gaze flew to the bowl on the dressing table, carelessly placed between an old rag and a jar of yellow paint, still with the brush sticking out of the top.

"You've got him there?" He answered himself as the certainty coalesced: "Yeah, I've sensed him. Felt him there. Thought I must be imagining it. Crackin' up, you know?" He gave a little, nervous laugh. "But bring him back.... You don't have the power to do that."

Even in the disbelief that emanated from him, it was still a question that she heard.

"He has." And she picked up the bowl, held it aloft on steepled fingers; above their uplifted gaze, ageless and unchanged it seemed to pulse with new light, new life.

Smiling, she held her own death in her hands.

The infinity that was not yet eternity was peopled more thickly at night. Shades that slept stalked unaware, and thought they dreamed.

The magician's soul prowled among these shadows released from the living taking all they knew and passing it back, unharmed. He grew strong, stronger; wise in the ways of nature and its physical laws, how to bend them to his own will. Soon....

Still so very alone, this unfrail spirit. Dark, it loomed menacing and moved on, leaving the sleeper in another dimension to shudder, half-waking, and draw the covers further over warm lax skin.

Until it found the one it sought. As dark as himself, as alone, as lost, he took it and made it his own and gave his own in return. And the essence of it stayed with him when it returned.

Now.... Now he was ready.

The blue shades that were there and yet not there swirled.

"You were created. You exist. It does seem illogical to try to deny that existence."

"I don't bloody deny it. I just don't enjoy it." The man paced around scowling, amid shifting blue all around, confusing, yet somehow secure. "What the hell's it all about, anyway? You know I don't fit in here. You created me for your own amusement--"

"Your difference was not detected in time. You know that."

"And if it had been," said the dark one bitterly, "you'd have destroyed it faster than it takes to blink, right?"

"There really is no point in talking in hypotheses. I don't think you know what you want, do you?"

"Probably not." He rubbed his eyes wearily with one hand. Blue eyes. Classic face. There the similarities ended.

"If you have any specific worries then it may help you to express them."

"No worries."

"Thank-YOU."

And as he walked the prismic laser paths to solitude, he wondered how he could explain his dreams to a mechanical mind which would not understand the compelling mystery of the wide-eyed sorcerer who waited for him at night with enchantment to offer; which, though bodiless, would never have a chance of comprehending how sweet the glide of skin, lying beneath a ruling tumblehaired fantasy that seemed more real than life.

She spoke to him before the mirror.

This once, he answered.

It was time.

The stage a colourful tzigane of music, dancing, a joyous celebration. The audience was alive, electric with emotion; they knew. Perhaps they felt him near, hanging ominous all around them.

Ina, ablaze with life, her eyes glowing with foreknowledge of triumph, strode to the centre of the stage, her red and gold cloak dropping in rich folds to the floor. They roared, and cheered for her; and when she gestured silence, all noise ceased.

"Tonight," she began, holding them with careful inflection, "tonight, my friends, you and I will perform the greatest trick the world has ever seen--for two thousand years."

Dramatic as tragedy the words drove home. There was not even a murmur. They waited, entranced. But when the musician at his keyboard struck sudden life into his instrument, then, they roared.

It was HIS music.

Vibrant, exciting, it resonated through the theatre, tremulous with hope, expectancy, thrilling them all, waiting for him to flash out of the darkness. Brightly-coloured bodies swayed together, hypnotic.

They called his name once, twice, a thousand times as Ina set the silver chalice steadily before her and summoned him back to claim his soul.

"Zax. Zax. Zax."

Fire from heaven like a thunderclap, and he was there.

Far-off, at the Centre, M4375 sat bolt upright and opened his eyes.

All there was was the sterile bare walls of his cell.

Now he was truly alone.

Lithe as a willow, his personality blazing forth, all his vitality flaunted like a cape, Zax leapt over the empty red-gold cloak crumpled on the floor, strode to the edge of the stage naked and spread wide his arms.

When the noise brought forth the black-helmeted police raiding, he made them vanish and became truly a god to those who loved him.

"M4375 is not responding."

"He really is finding it impossible to integrate. Certainly the experiment has not been a success. Should we let him go?"

"I rather think we will find he has taken that decision already."

"What data do you base that on?"

"He had dreams...."

"Dreams? You're talking in riddles. How do you mean, he HAD dreams? You mean he has them no longer? What's the relevance of that?"

"The magician, Zax, is said to have returned to the theatre."

"Zax? That's impossible. They kicked him to death. Good thing too, if you ask me. Very undesirable influence. He roused the Names-- too much." When they turned all that emotion back on him--

"If M4375 shows a desire to visit the theatre, I should advise you to let him go."

"What?"

"Thank-YOU."

Moving as if the angels of the apocalypse were on his heels, Zax strode into the dressing room and pulled on a pair of trousers. He looked no different: slight, muscled and silken-skinned apart from the downing of hair veering down his chest; he was a whirl of activity as he turned around the room.

Bob followed him in, shut the door. "Zax. I can't believe this." His eyes devoured him, hungry. He half-expected insanity.

"You'd better, since it's true," said Zax shortly. He opened a cupboard, saw effigies, disembodied female heads, eyes that blinked open to reveal glassy stares.

With one arm, he swept them all explosively to the floor.

Bob followed all this, bewildered, tense, a little frightened; but most of all, wonderfully exhilarated. Something miraculous had happened, but the best was still to come. Zax was here, whole and safe, sparking with life and something more.

He had to ask. "What about Ina?"

Zax didn't turn from his scrutiny of the littered floor.

"She died."

"Can we get her back? The way--"

--she did for you--

Zax whirled to stare at him, and now Bob saw that there was, after all, a difference. His eyes. Always compelling, now Bob felt they would hypnotise you, drown you, if you stared into them too long.

"Of course not," he said brutally, concisely. "Do you have her soul? Of course you don't." He swung back to stare in the mirror. "It was an exchange. Her life for mine restored."

Bob swallowed.

"Then she died for you."

"She knew what she was doing."

"Did she?" Bob asked, daring. "Like Veronica did?"

Zax turned his moody gaze on the pile of broken dummies, shattered plastic, blank stares from lifeless eyeballs. Then he looked again in the mirror.

"Yes."

And behind him, the pile ignited in a huge pyre, flames shooting to the ceiling in a sheet of yellow: Wax puddled into formlessness but Bob felt no heat, only a chill that struck through him as he realised the truth.

The old life was over; the new one begun.

Zax stared into the mirror, seeing anew his own unchanged face; and behind him the flames ceased as suddenly as they had begun, snuffed out, leaving only a handful of dust which soon drifted away on the air.

One more thing to do.

The theatre. A sordid backstreet building set in the squalor of the Names' dwellings. Outside, a worn poster proclaiming the bill of entertainment, long outdated. Zax had no need of advertisement: he was immortal. Inside, vivid with life, excitement, colour. Oh yes, the Names knew how to have a good night out. Presenting his offering M4375 went through the door and created a silence that nevertheless passed as a ripple; he was made way for then forgotten. For Zax was theirs, he belonged to them, the crescendo of their frenzied love had brought him back from the dead. No Number could ever challenge that and win.

M4375 leaned out over the balcony, his solemn intense face a contrast to the laughing ones around, animated with anticipation: yet for all that, take away the bleak white jumpsuit and he could be one of them. It was not so at the Centre.

The music began, wild, cheerful; and then the dancers.

One of them was known to M4375: a lithe black man he had once come across discussing religion with Bruce, thereby making the surprising discovery that Names need not be the simpleminded ne'er-do-wells most Numbers assumed them to be. He didn't care overmuch for the style of music, but the vigour, the cheerful bouncy rhythm of it was undeniably attractive as were the gay blithe dancers cavorting onstage. It was a joyous spectacle, two concepts alien to the denizens of the Centre; and it swept this one along with it-- although he was still unsure as to why he had come.

Then, the magician.

Into the dark silence, mercurial silver erupted with a flash and there was the magician out of nothing, bowing to the cheers. His head, adorned with long flowing locks, came up. A weird figure with bright painted symbols accentuating the strange beauty of his face, one arm sheathed in flowing silk, the other bare from the banged wrist to the shoulder, he stared up straight up, full into the wide darkened eyes of M4375 who now knew why he was here, and more than that,

why he had been born.

Then the eerie music, rife with a hint of danger, ran loose; and the magician sang hissing, his eyes darting like spears around the auditorium hushed with fear and delight.

"My name is Zax...."

Zax, thought M4375 dizzily, Zax.

Red streamers whirled from the magician's long fine hands; they turned into ribbons of silver moonlight which spread thin on the air and vanished.

Fire flew from the magician's fingertips as he, with a flourish, turned lead into glowing gold which melted like butter and stopped at his command.

Sultry-eyed, aloof, he presented himself for their approval of his heroism; they roared it back at him.

A white dove sprang from a carved box the size of a die and spread wings to fly, its call haunting; when he plucked it from the air and showed it to them he held only a square of fine white silk, shimmering as it caught the light.

Head tossed back, in arrogant stance with one hand on his hip, he made a dramatic gesture at the air: thunder clapped, and a silver zip of lightning streaked above him and poured itself into a multicoloured rainbow which arched the auditorium.

It was beautiful.

Thus with such dazzling illusion he seduced adulation and awe from them, that and the sheer force of his own charisma, in just the way he turned and called forth explosions from the floor with one commanding, pointing finger.

"Zax's theatre of glamour and magic will take all your blues away--"

He stood on the edge of the stage, bare arms raised high and outspread, accepting their standing acclamation, their love: over the dramatic pose of arrogant grandeur his eyes were wide and steady, incurious as they stared out at nothing, encompassing a vision of eternity.

Dizzy, on legs that shook, M4375 moved through crowds that parted like waves for him down the narrow dark corridor, to the door marked out with the single word Zax flanked by two stars.

He could feel the magnetism pulling him this way. His palms were sweating, his heart knocking staccato in his ears as he passed across the threshold, the door opening for him as he raised one hand to it.

Thus he entered the small cluttered room that held his own infinity. Unseen, the bolt slid across

behind him, and at last they were together.

The magician Zax was sitting at a dressing-table, smooth bared back turned his way: his skin translucent, honey poured over a glass skeleton. The long wig straggled over a stand: his own hair was revealed to be a riot of chestnut curls that first made M4375 wince at the disorder of it, then smile at its incongruous appeal. Carelessly, Zax held a cigarette from which a thin white trail of smoke drifted: he was staring with off-handed concentration into the mirror, scrubbing paint from his face. Even in the unreal mirror image it could be seen that his cheeks had gone faintly pink from the abrasion of rough cloth.

"You took your time. I've been waitin' for you."

Twin eyes lifted to meet his in the mirror; the magician sucked thoughtfully on his cigarette, and blew smoke-rings upward. He seemed smaller than he had done on stage, extended there by his arts, and the magnitude of his strong will reaching out: here he seemed infinitely less frightening.

Some of M4375's racing tension, his sense of unreality, began to ease. He unclenched his fingers, slowly; moved up behind the magician, staring down at the dusky-curled head. Beyond it, in the mirror, he could see some of his own reflection, his white bodysuit fresh and antiseptic in the crowded shabby room.

"I don't understand any of this," he said abruptly. "Who the hell are you?"

The magician slapped the cloth briskly around his shoulders, reaching out to stub his cigarette in a saucer. "You know my name." His voice was as deep, but rougher than the hallowed tones he had used onstage to summon the occult mysteries of the Orient.

M4375 sighed. "Life doesn't get any bloody easier.... I thought it was bad enough, not bad for chrissake, I mean confusin', when I was havin' the dreams."

"So you remember the dreams?"

The magician turned in his chair, head tipped back to study him. He was every bit as beautiful as M4375 remembered, seeing him now for the first time outside a fantasy; his loins crowded with sudden sweetness. The magician saw it and smiled, a smile as flawed and as appealing as his soul.

"Then you do know who I am."

M4375 rubbed an irritated hand through his jet-black short-cropped hair. "Of course--I think. How the fuckin' hell did you do all that just now? On stage?"

The sorcerer smiled again, a little crooked though his teeth were very white; he tilted his head to one side.

"Magic?" he suggested.

"Oh yeah," said M4375 bitterly, "magic. I see. Well, if you're so bloody powerful, send a little my way, will you? I could do with it."

And yet, he half-believed it, even before the magician snapped his fingers, an electric pistol-crack pointing gun-wise at him and a tingle shot through M4375, alerting every nerve to stimulus close to extreme pleasure, or pain.

"That's just suggestion," M4375 said, flatly, over the echoes of enchantment.

The magician raised an eyebrow in polite disbelief; then his expression changed to beguilement. "If you're THAT suggestible," Zax murmured, promise dark and gleaming behind his lowered lashes, "then when I touch you--" his hand halted in the air.

A shiver not of magical origin shot through M4375; again, that strange sweet feeling in his groin. "Oh, sceptical one," said the magician mockingly and held out his hand, open-palmed. His fingers fell shut; then he seized M4375 by the elbow.

A jewel dropped into his hand and lay there, glistening. M4375 stared at the fragile diamante drop, and then hurled it overarm across the room. It hit the porcelain washstand and bounced off, arcing to the floor where it lay forgotten.

"I don't want jewels, for christ's sake."

"What do you want?" Zax asked softly.

The taller man stood, unconsciously lithe and powerful in the white jumpsuit, sleeves rolled up to reveal dark-downed forearms, muscles bunching, blue veins standing out on tender white skin as he clenched his fists very tightly. His good-looking face was screwed up with puzzlement. Eyes a summer storm at midnight--

Zax dwelt his queer green gaze there, hungry, yearning.

"I don't know," said M4375 abruptly, turning away. "And don't do that, I don't want to be hypnotised into anything, thanks all the same."

Unseen, the magician's face twisted as the barb, consciously cruel, struck home. Lithe and quick, he bounced to his feet, the sunburst medallion on his bare chest swaying, then coming to rest.

"I wouldn't do that to you," he said low, staring at the defiantly hunched back. When it refused to turn he said: "I love you. You know that."

And shut his eyes, bowed head drooping, suddenly braced for defeat. Very afraid.

After a frozen silence M4375 swung around, surveying the absurd creature before him, bare

brown nipples bravely flaunting erotic charm beside the silver vee of the chain; the line of dark hair disappearing to the dipped navel; black trousers skin-tight, feet in ridiculous slippers, one yellow, one blue, planted apart--

"Yeah: yeah, I do know that," he said more gently and took a step forward, then stopped. "But my head's spinning with all this," he made an expressive gesture with his hand. "I just need time to think about it."

The magician's head jerked up. "How much time?" His voice sank to a whisper as he stared past M4375, ageless in his anguish: "I've been alone for all eternity: must you make me wait any longer?" His hand reached out, sketched a caress; but M4375 evaded it because he knew, he knew for sure that if Zax once touched him, he'd be lost.

"I could make you," Zax said steadily. "Force you into thrall and into my bed more easily than fashion a jewel from the air. Oh yes: now I have you here, it's very tempting." He stared into twin pinpoints of frozen blue, willing understanding from him. More than anything, Zax needed understanding. "But I wouldn't do that. I want you to come to me. But if you choose not to, then you're free to walk away. I'll beg you not to, of course, but that's human enough."

Nervous, he reached into the air without looking, plucked forth a lighted cigarette. M4375 stared down at the long-fingered hand that had fallen back from so nearly touching him with such grace; a beautiful hand, that of a craftsman or an artist, one used to working delicately, precisely, with intricate things.

Like joining fine wires to animate an automaton.

Without warning, the sudden mental image slotted into place. Here, in this room--

He stared at the magician with amazement, disgust, pity--and fascination.

"You've done that? Used those--THINGS, sexually?"

The magician's head stayed up, though his face was suddenly leached of all colour.

"Yes."

"Why, for godsake?" M4375 paced around, unwilling to find such evidence of Zax's weird kinkiness arousing--yet, there was something--

"I needed to." No defiance, now.

"And what was it like?"

The question took Zax by surprise: but then, he and this one were well-matched for just that very unconventionality.

"It was like however I wanted it to be," he said slowly.

"Oh, sounds great, why don't I try it too?"

The grim irony filtered through; Zax hardly heard it, struggling to bare his soul to the one so desperately important to him.

"Yeah--just how I wanted it to be.... She'd shiver when I touched her, and beg me to do it: she'd tell me I made her feel good, better than anyone else ever had--" He gave a small, wry smile, acknowledging his own and all males' pathetic need for such things. Then the smile abruptly died out. "But, even so--everything was missing.... Everything. Tenderness. Understanding. Love. But it was all I had."

He had had Ina. But she, not his equal in anything, had never come close.

M4375 was drowning; fighting it but weakening. "And that's what you want, is it? Tenderness. Love." Oh how he had meant to be mocking, but Zax's sharp-eyed honesty, those high-planed cheeks flaming with colour, had destroyed him; he was lost, after all, and without a single touch. "All you had...."

He took the step forward, and Zax was there.

The sweet feeling of him held close was so familiar, well-remembered from his dreaming; and yet it was shocking, electrifying. Plunged into arousal, every nerve alight and tingling, he tore free from the warm bare arms encircling him, breathing ragged.

"It's death, to touch a Number."

He didn't know which of them had spoken, nor if they had voiced it aloud. Zax did not smile at him, stayed where he was. The black trousers kept him a mystery, but M4375 was miserably aware of his own arousal, pushing hot and urgent at the transparent fabric of his clinging suit. Awkward, he looked away.

Zax, using no art, none of the powers at his command, said simply, "Then we must give you a name." He stuffed long fingers into his curls, lifting the hair in an absent gesture which revealed the fine-haired hollow of his armpit.

M4375 did not move.

"I know your name," said the magician, with a confident surety that owed nothing to prescience and everything to a needy devotion so deep he would die for it with no hope of rebirth.

He told M4375 his name.

Never heard before, it nevertheless felt familiar. It settled into the fabric of his memory as if it had always been known to him.

He nodded, accepting it.

"You belong with me," Zax said.

He accepted that, too.

The long-fingered, beautiful hands touched him then, sliding away clothes to draw subtle glory on sensitive skin.

He stood naked, shivering.

"Are you cold?" Zax asked him softly.

He made the startling admission, meeting the lucid woodland eyes half-ruefully. "No-one's ever touched me before."

The magician kicked away his trousers and stood, flamboyantly naked before him. "Even if they had, it wouldn't have been like this." And then, the feel of him close, skin against soft skin, belly pressed to belly, caused sensations to surge through the dark man's sensitised nerves, dragging forth an involuntary sigh:

"Ohhh...."

"Yeah, I know, that's good. Gonna be better still..." promised the sorcerer.

Suddenly urgent, he tried to thrust himself between Zax's muscular thighs; Zax gripped him there comfortingly. He shut his eyes as Zax's enticing, wilful mouth touched the tender skin of his throat.

"No magic," he managed.

"No magic," Zax confirmed, "only this." And his lips touched a nipple, delicate tongue-tip flicking over it, arousing shivers in the other man.

Arms still circling him he sank to his knees, cupping the rounded curves of flesh behind. He opened his mouth.

The shocking pleasure of the warm tongue folding round all his aching need was too much.

"Oh please, yes, please do that...."

His hands kneading bare shoulders suddenly gripped: his eyes were wide with astonishment, as his unseen seed pulsed from him strongly, that such beautiful cascading sensations could exist.

Too soon it was over. When he came back to himself, he was in Zax's arms lying on a rug, Zax's

fingers stroking gently through his hair.

"Oh yeah, you liked that, didn't you," the magician said softly, and then suddenly buried his lips in the silky hair. "Been needing someone to feel that way about me so long..." he whispered, gripping him in hands that bruised, his eyes squeezed shut.

When he lay peaceful again, the dark man stared curiously into his green-eyed sorcerer's imperfect face. "What did it taste like?" he asked, half-shy, half needing to know.

"Beautiful," Zax said, and kissed him deeply, salty tongue searching out all the secret places of his mouth and making him drink, warm and sweet.

Stung into arousal, his body lifted again. With lips made slightly tender, he kissed the corner of Zax's mouth and pulled a little away, looking down at himself.

"Is it supposed to happen again so fast?"

"I dunno," Zax said lazily, tightening his hold. "It always does to me." He drew a fingertip down the line of his lover's nose, stopping at the beautiful mouth, twisted now into an expression of great tenderness, the deep blue of his eyes above lit with sweet temper. "Means I turn you on," he added, liking to hear it said aloud. "Excite you."

The mouth stretched into a smile. "You'd turn on an ice-berg, you would. You should sit out there among your audience..." He lifted the medallion from the furred chest, held it warm from Zax's skin for a moment, then lifted it over his head, carefully disentangling the chain when it caught in a mass of curls. "Fancy you like hell, they do. Men, women and inbetweens."

"That's the idea," Zax agreed with no visible smugness. He lifted his head, watched his new-christened lover trail his hand down Zax's chest. "Oh yeah," the magician whispered, struck with new urgency, his erection rising hard and taut over his belly. "Touch me..." he said, unashamed to plead.

"Where?" said the dark one, with a glint of love-inspired teasing. "These?" He rubbed small brown nipples between a gentle finger and thumb.

"Yeah," Zax breathed, eyelashes falling shut, "oh yeah...." And, fists clenched like a baby's up beside his shoulders, he was coming, face turning to one side, milky spurts shooting up his belly, the first landing on his own taut throat, then falling shorter, shorter.

The other man stared fascinated, bewildered that so simple a touch could produce such intense response. The truth when it occurred to him nearly brought him to tears. "Oh you did need it bad, didn't you fella?" he murmured, moved beyond anything he had ever felt that such a proud, arrogant man who could dazzle with his powers should be such a small, needful, hurting entity inside. "Didn't anyone ever love you before?"

Zax, still panting from the force of his coming, seized him by the upper arms, dragged him

down to rub their skin together, pressing him desperately close. "I love you," he said fiercely. "I love you."

Power surged through him when he summoned it: he turned his head, the lights blinked out.

"And I love you, Zax," his lover whispered into a curved, intricate ear tasting the unfamiliar name. "Forever." So vulnerable, stripped of his vestments, his magic quiescent; pared down to the lonely whispers in the dark.

"You won't go back?"

"Of course I won't bloody well go back. They couldn't tear me away if they tried, mate." Lovingly, he wrapped himself more tightly around his naked, soft-haired enchanter.

"And will they try?"

He frowned. It all seemed a dream, that other cold loveless life, viewed from this small cluttered room where love flourished like a warm, living thing.

"Nah--Bruce more or less said I should get out. Just didn't have anywhere to go, before." He shifted. Even cushioned by Zax, the floor was uncomfortable. "Do you have a bed? Or, don't tell me, magicians sleep on a plank studded with nails, right?" He grinned against Zax's sweat-and-tear damp cheek. He smelt sweet, of something faintly exotic; spice in a scented tea-chest, or summer herbs dried in the sun.

"I'll carry you there," promised the magician, yawning.

"That WOULD be magic," he said, pretending awe, his hand finding and encircling one narrow wrist beneath the silver bangle.

When, later, Zax pierced him to the heart with a sure thrust, heaven and hell became one: it made them both weep with the pleasure of it.

Entwined body and soul, the magician and his acolyte slept.

-- THE END --

Zeroplanic

Wonderful Tonight Part One - (Sexual) Involvement

Sebastian

Without a doubt my favourite of my own stories: I loved making it tie in with the episodes so it follows loosely the structure of the series, I loved elaborating on the enigmatic Kate Ross and the whole psychological set-up with its opportunities for seeing the Bodie-Doyle relationship through other people's eyes, I loved the freedom to explore alternative sexual practices that arose quite naturally for these two men who love each other with no limits. And I love the upbeat, no holds-barred, exuberant ending. Yes, they do live happily ever after.

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The meal had been a good one, Italian, they must surely reek of garlic, but it didn't matter. If you'd had it yourself you never noticed it on someone else.

They split the bill 50/50, after a bit of an argument because Bodie claimed Doyle's starter (langoustines) had cost unacceptably more than his own (tagliatelli), but Doyle had defended with the contrary evidence of Bodie's liqueur coffee and extra helping of garlic bread. So all was settled amicably.

"You comin' back with me?" Bodie asked quite casually as they reached the door. Doyle had wondered whether the offer might be forthcoming, and whether he would accept it if so: now he found himself agreeing. For better or worse.

Back at Bodie's flat—Regency, all high ceilings and ornamental plasterwork—Bodie made him a coffee and watched him while he drank it. He was looking, Doyle decided, particularly attractive tonight, his classic dark good looks accentuated by the smart suit he wore, the crisp blue shirt—"You goin' on somewhere tonight, Ray?" Bodie asked him, and Doyle made wide eyes at him over the rim of his mug.

“Wasn’t planning on it. But I can if you want me to.”

Bodie shook his head dismissively. “Nope. Just thought you might be planning to pay a call on Linda.”

“Susanna,” Doyle corrected.

“Susanna now is it. Whoever.”

Doyle shook his head, made expressive eyes. “Too tired.”

Bodie shot him a glance. “Really?”

“Not that tired,” Doyle amended with a smile, inwardly disturbed. Bodie was so unpredictable; you could never guess what he intended from one day to the next, and the rules seemed to change with the turn of the wind.

“Nice meal,” he said at last, sitting down and swinging one leg up and down gently.

And Bodie the amiable buffoon of the evening had shed that mask the instant they walked through the door here.

If it bothers you so much, Doyle decided, still rocking in his seat, why do it at all...

“Yeah, it was okay. Filled the right holes, anyway.”

But that was one mystery he had never come close to solving.

“Drink?” Bodie jerked a moody eye towards the bottles on his bar.

They had had a fair bit already, in the restaurant. “Depends,” Doyle said, and risked a little upwards curl of his lip, chipped tooth flashing, and then it was gone again as he leaned back in his seat. From across the room Bodie eyed him, the intensity of his scrutiny affecting Doyle, making him act for it, stretching a little, playing with a button on his shirt, undoing some, slipping his hand inside.

“Just yes or no’ll do, Doyle,” Bodie growled, and Doyle’s mood shut like a door. —Okay, that was it.

“Just no, then. About time I was going, I reckon.” He began to rise to his feet, chilly with rejection, but Bodie was there beside him looking down with such brooding trouble in his eyes that Doyle sank down again with a sigh.

“Look, Bodie, do you want me to go or stay? I’ll do either, only spell it out for me, will you. Reading your mind’s never been my strong suit.”

Reading his body was easier. He slipped his hands around Bodie's waist and Bodie stayed still for him. So he unbuckled Bodie's heavy leather belt, taking his time over it, letting it swing loose; button, zip followed. It made a little rasping sound as he drew it down. No action from Bodie: he stood there with his head averted, his eyes on some distant thing, but it was clear by now he was going to let Doyle do it.

Doyle released Bodie's cock from its musky nest, let it spring free and jut proudly forth, stiffening further at his touch until it perched bolt upright against his belly, strung on its own taut suspension. He ringed it with one hand, rubbed rapidly up and down. With the other hand he undid his own jeans, thrust a flat palm inside, propping himself in a half-sitting pose along the couch.

"Was beginning to think you weren't interested," he said caustically as his hand laced a delicate path around Bodie's swollen cock, pinched the foreskin up between finger and thumb, mirroring the actions of his other hand on himself.

Bodie gave a short, harsh laugh. His eye wandered to the opening of Doyle's jeans; with a grin of understanding, Doyle said to him, "Want to see, do you?" pushing himself up, dragging his jeans down his thighs. Bodie shuddered: his cock wept a tiny, glassy teardrop.

"Closer," Doyle told him, and leaned out to kiss the drop away, dipping the point of his tongue into the slit with a little murmur of pleasure. He slid his hand around behind Bodie now, pulling him closer, opening his mouth.

As Doyle lapped at his cock, eyes closing, mouthing the tip, the desperation in Bodie grew; his eyes darkened as they passed from one thing to another, from the lush pink mouth closing over the dusky helmet of his cock, to Doyle's hand moving lazily inside his own jeans; his eyes lingered there, the sight of Doyle jerking himself off always an intense and violent thrill for him. Holding on the wooden back of the settee he leaned over the other man now, pushed himself deeper, began to fuck his mouth with a fast, hard rhythm. Within moments the deep, dark sweetness focused and flowed out of him down the warm grip of Doyle's throat; he felt Doyle swallowing, and swallowing again, each convulsive movement pulling out of him the last, the very last drop of pleasure.

He stayed there for a moment, heart thundering in his chest, the pulse of blood heavy in his veins, Doyle's mouth resting gently against him, then turning his head to watch the other man's hand on his own cock. As his eyes rested there Doyle's flying fingers stilled with a jerk, and Doyle sighed, intense, as the white stuff hurled itself out and upwards, landing on his tipped-back throat, his rumpled shirt, his own dark pubic hair. One droplet landed on Bodie's hand; he stared at it for a moment before bringing it up to his mouth, tasting it and swallowing it with a casual voluptuousness noticed and stored away by Ray Doyle even as he gasped for breath, forcing himself to breathe slower, his heart slowing with it as the pleasure echoed fainter, and more faintly still.

His eyes dwelt on Bodie, narrowing as Bodie turned his back to rearrange his own clothing,

following him as he began to walk away. He flung one hand up over his eyes.

“Tissues,” he commanded tiredly, and some landed by his head. He swabbed himself off in silence and then chucked them in the bin. He could hear Bodie singing away in the bathroom, which didn’t surprise him; the aftermath of sex always seemed to lighten Bodie’s mood even as it darkened Doyle’s.

He was sitting up, hands behind his head, when Bodie came back into the room wearing his dark red dressing gown. Doyle tipped his head back, met Bodie’s eyes.

“Think I’ll go on home,” he said; after all, there was no point staying now.

“Yeah?” was all Bodie said.

Doyle shrugged. “Might as well. Got a few chores to do.”

On his way out past Bodie he stopped, took hold of his wrist, looked deep into his eyes. Bodie offered a cool resistance, both to the look and the hold.

“Got anything to say?” Doyle asked him, curious, and then dropped Bodie’s wrist, shaking his head. “Forget it, forget it. See you tomorrow.”

He flew down the steps three at a time, opened up the Capri and swung himself inside. As he did so he glanced upwards at Bodie’s window: nothing, no light showed.

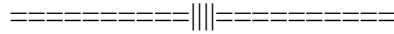
His teeth showed in a grim smile. Well, he hardly expected Bodie to be there, calling over the balcony perhaps, imploring his return: —‘It is the nightingale, and not the lark!’— He turned the key and the engine sprang into life. And as he pulled away from the kerb into the dark London street he did not look back again.

It seemed to him that Bodie’s tension coiled up day by day, hour by hour, a little at a time: sex with Doyle defused him at a stroke. Tomorrow his mood would be cheerful, gleeful even. But dark introspection had already begun in Doyle; why did they do it? He asked himself that every time: release of tension, after all, could be as speedily achieved alone with one’s right hand and a bottle of body lotion.

Bodie had even asked him once: Doyle’s moody silence had prompted a little, bitter smile from him and the comment, perhaps a question: “I don’t know why you go along with this, Doyle. Don’t enjoy it much, do you?”

He had not answered, because Bodie did not need an answer, knowing as well as Doyle just why they did it: because having started it, they could not stop.

Doyle turned the car onto the long wide sweep of the North Circular Road; joined all the other cars in convoy, all the lights of London spread out low beneath the sky.



—How had it started?

Bodie was thinking this, looking out along the empty darkened street: remembering the first time.

Routine stuff really: he had infiltrated a ring where the punters were introduced to some temptation, drugs, underage prostitutes of either sex, then offered a gambling circle to get them out of it, nothing so very much out of the ordinary and scarcely of interest to CI5, except that the poor punters tended to have Home Office links. Cowley, on the scent of some triplethink espionage connection, had set himself and Doyle onto it: Bodie as one of the unfortunate punters, presumably because he looked more likely to have ministerial connections than his scruffy partner, who was assigned to the other side, a recruit to the ring itself, a pimp with a whole string of tasty little chickens in his stable.

Only someone had rumbled Doyle, or thought they did, though he had played the part with ease, hardeyed and ruthlessly indifferent to perverse sexuality; sentenced to death in someone's flat by a firing squad of two he had kept up his facade to the end, fighting and protesting to the very moment he was left, blindfolded and tied, against the wall.

Then he had gone quite silent.

Bodie, sweating ice, did not have to imagine what that silence cost him; he was fighting the same battle. Clearly Doyle was thinking along the lines he was: that the whole execution setup was a bluff, to get Doyle talking. But if it was not—?

He would blow the gaffe on Cowley's op. just like that, no question of it, if it would save Doyle's life. But it seemed to Bodie that there would be no spirit of generous forgiveness in the room. And then they might both end up dead.

So...they had sweated on it. Ice and blood.

Eyes on that jeaned figure against the wall, defiant and cold to the last, perhaps ten seconds away from death with the barrels of two Lugers trained on him, Bodie would not have blamed Doyle for breaking down, falling to his knees, crying out for mercy; he had seen the strongest of men turn into children when they realised death was there for them. But Doyle had shown the deepest, steadiest courage: he had simply waited, without a word, or a breath.

And nothing had happened.

Having failed to break him or out him they had hit him about a bit and thrown him aside. It was all over by nightfall.

Bodie had driven then after midnight to Doyle's flat, found him there awake in the dark. Still in darkness, in silence, they had come together, found something which had taken them both by

storm.

Something they had not been able to leave behind.

Bodie turned away from the window, and the night, and went to bed.

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Susanna was a nice girl, not long out of some boarding Seminary for Young Ladies, and keen to make up for lost time: Doyle was only too willing to help her. Clearly, by the way she clung on to Doyle's arm and hung on to his every word she had never met anyone quite as rough, quite as hard, quite as carelessly sexy as Ray Doyle before, and Bodie could imagine from the way Doyle looked at her from time to time just how all that toughness would turn to sweetness when they were alone, how he would undress her with the gentlest of touches, how careful he would be not to hurt her, how he would take care to please her. Susanna had glossy dark hair and sweet brown eyes which followed Doyle everywhere he went, a neat little figure and expensive dress sense.

So different from his own girl-child, here reluctantly at his side tonight; she had wanted Bodie to take her bowling tonight and instead been dragged here for a drink with Ray. Mary was her (unsuitable) name, a lankhaired blonde with a pale sullen mouth and sexy brown eyes. Beside Susanna's elegance her cheap leather skirt and net stockings looked cheap, tarty.

Not that Bodie had one moment's doubt as to who had the better deal here. Girls like Mary were the type to get you going, every time: you had to work on yourself to appreciate the likes of Susanna. Pity really, but that was the way it was. Despite the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off Mary's creamy black-netted thigh, Doyle obviously felt he had to rise above such base impulses and persevere with some less exciting, classier material. Personally Bodie felt he was making a big mistake, but there you were.

The pub was a Kosy-Korner type of place, all inglenooks, dark wood and mock log fires. Mary was bored, lighting her eighth Silk Cut of the evening from a green plastic lighter, having downed her first gin and tonic very quickly. Bodie and Doyle were nursing pints, while Susanna was halfway down a fruit-juice and saying very nicely to Doyle:

"I don't think it would be convenient this month. Perhaps in April?"

Doyle was looking disappointed. Fancied a free weekend in the country at Mummy's expense, no doubt.

"You ashamed of me?" he drawled.

Her instant denial flowed like balm. "You know I'm not."

Of course he knows you're not, sweetheart.

"Don't ever think that, Ray."

He doesn't, sweetie. He knows quite well you think he's the bees knees, wings, arse 'n' all—not to mention the honeypot.

“I don't know why you want to meet Mummy anyway. She's incredibly boring,” Susanna said, the clipped brusquery betraying of her breed.

“He wants to put the make on her, darling,” Bodie drawled. “She's nearer his age than you are.”

“The thing is, there's a bit of a family crisis at present.”

“Do tell.” Bodie veered near her conspiratorially. Baiting Ray's girlfriends was essential to him. This one didn't like him.

“It's Sebastian—”

“Sebastian!” Doyle sucked in a breath, rolled his eyes.

“My brother. He's got tangled up with this artist chap from Cambridge, and, being my brother, he can't keep it to himself and wait for things to die down, he has to come home and announce to my parents that he's gay, the whole Oscar Wilde. And Mummy is wildly upset.”

“Well, she would be,” Bodie approved. “There goes the family name.”

“—Threatening to throw him out of the family altogether unless he goes into therapy—”

“Quite right too. Filthy little bugger,” Bodie enthused, rubbing his hands together. Doyle's eye sought out Bodie's, but found it evasive.

“Well, Mummy certainly thinks so. And so do I, actually,” Susanna said briskly. “Even if he does get—feelings like that, he should jolly well—he should pull himself together and do the right thing.”

Mary withdrew her distant gaze from some bowling-alley vision, exhaled a thin stream of smoke and said in her husky little voice, “What's wrong with it? Poor bloody guy. Leave him alone.”

“Well, tolerance is all very well in principle,” Susanna said crisply, averting her head from the trail of smoke particles, “but I can assure you, one feels rather differently when it's a member of one's own family.”

“Yeah,” Bodie said with an aristocratic snort. “Not in my backyard, thank you.”

“Bodie.” Doyle gave him a quelling look.

“Used to kick queers round the camp barearsed,” Bodie said, quite unrepentant. “Who wants those filthy buggers eyeing up your kit when you're not looking? Should bring the death penalty

back for it. Trouble is, they'd probably enjoy it."

"Bodie."

"I suppose, during your sheltered life on the beat, you never encountered any cases of autoerotic asphyxiation?" Bodie winked at him kindly.

"It's not funny, Bodie," Doyle said, deadly quiet.

"Who's joking?" Bodie met his eyes dead on. "Mummy's right in this case. Little Sebastian should keep his unpleasant tendencies to himself."

Doyle looked at Bodie carefully, noting that his partner did not seem to be joking, had trotted it all out without a trace of humour. Something very odd here. At least it was distracting him from Mary—so irritating, that his cock moved like a magnet at the sight of her, cliche though her style was. He'd just bet she was wearing suspenders, the full tackle, beneath the short, tight skirt—and yet not only was she Bodie's bird, but he actually preferred the cool elegance of Susanna, by a mile.

Trouble was, old JT down there didn't seem to agree with him, wishing it were in Bodie's place with all its might.

Feeling disloyal, he put his arm around Susanna's shoulders, squeezed her tightly. His eye engaged Bodie's boldly, chased it when it evaded his, held it firmly. "You hate queers, do you Bodie? Funny. I never knew."

"Every proper bloke hates queers," Bodie growled.

"That's not the fashionable way of looking at it these days, though, is it?" Susanna agreed with Bodie, for about the first time ever. "*It's all tolerance and we understand and you get on with it, chaps*, these days."

"Yeah, and why not?" Mary chipped in, flicking the ash off her cigarette onto the floor. "Don't harm no-one, do they?"

Doyle would have let it drop, but he was intrigued by Bodie's attitude. He leaned forward a little. "Yeah, come on, Bodie. What's wrong with it?"

"You've never heard?" Bodie said smoothly.

"Oh *Ray*," Susanna said, unwillingly on Bodie's side, "It doesn't bear thinking about—what they do."

"Sodomy?" Mary said, and gave an excited little wriggle.

"What the hell's it matter what they do? It's noone's business what they do in bed but their own."

I'd say the same about any of us, wouldn't you?" Doyle said very deliberately.

"Ah, come on, Ray." Bodie said soberly. "You gotta set some standards."

Doyle gazed at him in disbelief. Bodie must be very trusting, very trusting indeed, that Doyle was not about to blow the lid off all this hypocrisy with a few well-chosen words. All he had to say was—

"What I've never understood," Susanna said, "is why any man should want to muck about with another man."

"Well, quite a lot of 'em do, sweetheart," Doyle drawled. "Must be something to it, mustn't there?"

"Can't see what you're getting at." Mary addressed herself to Susanna. "*You* like to muck about with a man, don't you? Why shouldn't another bloke get as turned on mucking about with Ray as you do?"

That was when Bodie chipped in happily with: "Maybe that's what he's trying to tell us."

Susanna gazed at Bodie with ill-hidden contempt, but Doyle did not see that; looking out over her head towards Bodie with cool deliberateness he said: "Got time to listen?"

"Drink, anyone?" Bodie was on his feet, blue-eyed and gallant and collecting glasses.

"Mine's a double," Doyle said, and his mood remained dark, introspective all evening despite everyone's attempts to cheer him up.

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The phone rang at about one: cursing, Doyle rolled over in bed and grabbed it, three-quarters asleep.

"Doyle," he growled in the most surly manner possible.

"Don't sound so pleased, will you? I could have been Betty, finally got up the nerve to ask you out for a date."

"Well, you're not, are you?" he said sourly, and dropped his head back on the pillow, nesting himself further down in the warmth with the phone still clamped to his ear. Bodie's voice came tinnily and cheerfully down the line:

"Just as well, mate, or she'd have hung up by now. But I'm not so easily put off."

"Don't tell me—you're ringing to ask me for a date?"

“In a manner of speaking—”

“Dunno how you’ve got the nerve, after your little performance tonight.”

Bodie slid out of this gracefully. “Nothin’ wrong with my performance, mate. Mary’s not complaining. How about Sus—hanna?”

He would never, he knew, get Bodie to talk about it. There was a dark tangle of thorns inside Bodie, no admittance without the magic sword. He cut through Bodie’s loud and fairly tuneful rendition of ‘oh—Susanna—won’t you marry me—dadadadedadedadededa, me banjo on my knee—’ with a forceful, “No complaint either. At least, I never heard one.”

Bodie’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “Was she wearing a bra, under the cashmere?”

Doyle smiled to himself, cradling the phone against his ear. He knew this game of old. “I’m not playin’, Bodie.”

“Ah, c’mon.” Bodie sounded disappointed, then his voice swooped down salaciously. “I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

“Too tired. Out of juice. Whatever.”

“Out of juice!” Bodie’s voice came across astonished. “Not you, Ray. Never. How many times was it, tonight then?”

He had to grin. “Three. How about you?”

“Only once,” Bodie countered immediately, “but once with Mary wrings as much out of you as three times with any other bird.”

That he could believe. “What was she wearin’?” he heard himself asking, but Bodie’s introductory chuckle dragged him instantly to his senses. “No, don’t tell me, Bodie, I’m too tired for this. It’s nearly mornin’ for godsake.”

“Pity,” Bodie said, crestfallen. “You mean I stripped off for nothing?”

Doyle spluttered down the phone, grinning broadly to himself. “Surprised you expected anything different, after your attitude tonight.”

“Nothing wrong with my attitude, old son.”

Straight over Bodie’s head again. *I just do not understand you, Doyle thought, you are just such a mystery to me.*

“If that’s all—”

“No, it isn’t. What are you doing next weekend? Bank holiday and all that.”

“Why?” Doyle asked cautiously.

“Mary’s cousin works as a steward in one of those lodge complexes up beyond the border. Cowley country, y’know? Time to time he gets an empty one to pass on to friends, family, what have you. She thought we might go up there next weekend, and it sleeps four.”

“Me and Susanna?”

“Yeah.”

“*Mary* wants us to go in a four?” Doyle tested, in case it was one of Bodie’s crazy ideas.

“She suggested it, yeah. She likes another bird around for a bit of bird-talk—can’t screw all the time and she doesn’t like darts.”

“She does. But—okay then. Don’t see why not. I’ll ask Susanna but I reckon she’ll go along with it okay.”

“Eating out of your hand.”

“And other places,” Doyle said; he put the phone down.

Bodie’s warm chuckle was still reverberating in his ears as he turned over to go back to sleep, shrugging the covers up over his shoulders, feeling warm and relaxed. Talking to Bodie on the phone in the middle of the night had an intimacy about it he found comforting.

Also, exciting.

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The miles sped past the window.

“Gonna be bloody cold up there,” Bodie said cheerfully, one hand on the wheel, one resting on the gearknob. “Pack your sporran, did you, Ray?”

“We must be mad,” Doyle said glumly. “Beyond the Tartan Curtain—in *February*?”

“I’m sure we’ll have a lovely time,” Susanna said bracingly.

“It’s free, innit?” Mary added.

“So’s a dip in the Thames,” said Bodie, meaningfully.

“Ooh, look!” Susanna squeaked, thrusting her face up against the car window. “Lambs—look,

Ray—”

Secretly, Doyle was beginning to find the extreme exuberance of youth an irritation. Get this weekend over—give her a really good time—and then—

“Yum yum,” Bodie slavered. “Mint sauce, anyone?”

“Should get there by tea-time,” Mary yawned, and curled up on the rear seat for a nap.

Bodie slammed the car down a gear then gunned it up again with a tremendous roar. “Lunchtime,” he promised evilly.

The miles went on speeding by.

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They arrived at the holiday estate about three and were directed to their accommodation by the receptionist. It was possible to drive to the door, through straight roads. The whole place reminded Doyle of a lego town—neat, artificial. Each lodge was designed in the shape of a wooden triangle rather like a Swiss chalet—but less pretty. The lounge area was large, being at the foot of the triangle; the two bedrooms, at the apex, were tiny. Both were galleried—clearly the target inhabitants was your average nuclear family, two adults and two small children.

“—Togetherness!” Doyle nodded upwards.

“Don’t you worry, Ray. We’ll keep our ears plugged.” Bodie pulled Mary to sit on his knee. “Won’t we?” Fortunately Susanna was across the room in the kitchen area, making a cup of tea.

“Gerroff, Bodie, I wanna fag,” Mary was brushing off his wandering hands briskly and tumbling to sit beside him. She was wearing today another short, tight skirt, black leather boots with long pinpoint heels, and a little T-shirt. Over this she was wearing one of Bodie’s thick chunky sweaters, onto which her thin blonde hair tumbled untidily. Devastating.

Susanna, sensibly attired in jeans and a pink sweater, arrived with a tray of tea. Mary’s cigarette smoke began to curl thinly and bluely through the air; the girls began to fuss about with the tea. Bodie’s eye travelled around the room and came to rest on Doyle.

“Glad we came?” he said, beneath the chatter and the clattering of cups, and Doyle made an expressive face at him.

“I’ll let you know.”

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At night, they left the little house and went to the Leisure Centre in the main complex; considering it was off-season it seemed quite busy and cheerful, though the main area had all the

atmosphere of a school dining room, long wooden trestle tables, hatches, that school-dinner smell. Fortunately there was a bar, which gladdened the hearts of at least three of the party. Most of the room away from the bar was taken up with a bingo game, very popular; Mary, an aficionada, was determined to join in. Surprisingly, Susanna took to it instantly. Doyle played out a few cards himself, but got bored with it quickly; as for Bodie, he looked half asleep after the long drive.

“Shall we go?” Doyle tried at about 9PM. There was a boxing match tonight on ITV and he rather fancied settling down in front of it with a can or two of lager, a packet of crisps—

“Oh, not yet, Ray,” Susanna said in surprise, setting up her cards for the next round. “I’m really getting into this,” and Mary did not even look up from hers.

Bodie drained his pint of beer and set down the empty glass. “Leave ’em to it, Ray? Holmes v. Ali in twenty minutes.”

Amazed as ever by the way Bodie’s mind and his, essentially wide apart, moved along the same lines, Doyle nodded, pushing back his chair and getting up.

Bodie made the girls a sardonic bow. “Take as long as you like, ladies.”

Mary shushed him vigorously as the teller’s sonorous voice intoned the starting ritual “Eyes down everybody—” and Mary said, “Just bugger off if you’re going, will you?”

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Out in the chill night air Doyle shivered. “S going to be bloody cold in there.”

They were walking down a narrow track between the lodges. It was very dark, the sky pitchblack and aggressively parading stars.

“Chilly, sunshine?” Bodie’s voice in his ear made him jump. He turned to look at him, and Bodie slipped an arm around his shoulders as they walked on, without breaking stride. “Never wear enough clothes, that’s your trouble.”

Doyle shivered again. A vision came to him of those two small bedrooms, side by side, open to the gallery. Bodie and Mary—

Bodie squeezed his shoulder tight, tighter, bruising him; then let him go as they got to the door, searching in his pocket for the key.

“Think the girls’ll be all right walking back?” Doyle asked, looking back from the doorstep at the long dark trail.

“If they remember the chalet number,” Bodie said, and opened the door.

The rooms were very cold and Bodie went to switch the heating on at the kitchen unit. Without putting the lights on Doyle ran up the open-plan staircase in the centre of the room, tossing back to Bodie: "Going to have a shower before the fight starts, okay?"

The water was unexpectedly hot. It sang in his ears; he squeezed his eyes shut as the scalding needles prickled his skin and gave himself up to vigorous washing. When he opened his eyes again, it was to see Bodie standing there, leaning against the door, deep, dark eyes trained on him. A big man, brooding, and powerful.

"Didn't hear you come in." His heart, indeed, was thudding with shock.

Bodie stirred a little; his eyes did not leave Doyle. "Funny time to take a shower."

"Save time later."

Bodie smiled at him then, the look which dwelt on him warm and the words which followed low and sensual, "You think you're going to get lucky, yeh?"

"Reckon I might," Doyle said, with a little smile, and he stood his ground as Bodie approached him. Water fell on Bodie's navy army sweater and lay there glistening. Doyle looked at Bodie's square, strong hands that reached out for him, took hold of him, settling comfortably around his waist, slipping around his back.

"Very lucky," Bodie whispered to him warmly, passionately, and began to kiss his shoulder, his neck.

"Bodie, no," he said. "Don't," but made no move to stop him, his head tipping back and a deep sigh escaping him as Bodie swiftly knelt, pressing his face against Doyle's loins, turning his cheek against him and closing his eyes. We shouldn't be doing this, he thought, watching the top of Bodie's dark head, too dangerous; but at that moment he felt Bodie's lips brush against him sweetly, and the last resistance in him dissolved away as he looked down at his own body, and Bodie's mouth, and bliss gathered inside him like a storm.

Afterwards Bodie seemed oddly buoyant, while Doyle himself felt a vague dissettling anger which he did not bother to hide. Bodie clattered about cheerfully and energetically, clearly feeling he had scored some point too subtle for Doyle to see; his eyes were bright, his air provoking.

"Why are you looking so damn pleased with yourself?" he asked sourly and rhetorically. He sprawled out on the sofa and watched the television, whence hoots and cheers and catcalls emerged as the two fighters danced around each other on screen as the bell rang and the bout commenced.

"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, Doyle." Bodie mimed a few sharp punches where he sat.

"Yeah, that's your motto all right." He still felt quite dangerously moody; when the girls

returned he was hardpressed to summon a smile for Susanna, let alone anything else when eventually, after too many cans of beer, they got to bed.

“What’s the matter, Ray?” she whispered to him, into the dark.

He lay on his back, openeyed. “Nothing. Tired, ’s all.”

“Okay,” she whispered, sounding very quiet, very young, and turned onto her own side of the bed.

Sorry, darlin’.

Definitely she was too good for him. Guilt was about the last thing he needed. He could hear Bodie and Mary giggling as they half fell up the stairs, exchanging some sort of hilarious banter over the barmaid who had caught Bodie’s eye earlier—

“Look, don’t let me stand in your way, Romeo. I swear she was giving you the eye.”

“Are you kidding? See her moustache, did you? I’d rather go to bed with you—” A noisy kiss.

“Sure?”

“Come to that, I’d rather go to bed with Ray!”

This was said right outside the alcove where Doyle and Susanna’s bed was situated. It seemed to strike both Bodie and Mary as exceptionally hilarious.

“At least I wouldn’t have to say ‘I love you’,” Bodie mimicked himself in a cruelly light falsetto.

Well, no, there was that.

“Thanks, Bodie,” he heard himself, unwisely sharp and clear. “Course you wouldn’t. Wouldn’t want me to get the wrong idea, would you?”

More scuffling and hilarity. Well, he was glad to have amused them. Nice to know his existence wasn’t a total waste of time.

All of a sudden he became aware that someone was standing in the archway, a dark silhouette. An unsettling image for a man who lived by shooting at shadows; although he knew it must be Bodie still he found it disturbing.

“Okay, mate?” the shadow murmured.

“Oh, yeah.”

Bodie's shadow stayed there a moment longer, head turned towards him eyelessly, then it slipped away. Doyle lay tensely, wakefully at the edge of the bed, and listened to Mary's giggles, the slaps and scuffles and whispers. Which, some time later, became either in his imagination on the edge of sleep or in reality whimpers, then moans; the rhythmic creak of the bed. Doyle touched himself restlessly, head turning to one side on the pillow. Susanna was asleep beside him, breathing deeply, evenly.

Feeling unreasonably alone, Doyle shut his eyes and blocked out the world.

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Next day was bright, if chilly; they drove to a beauty spot on the nearby hills, and went for a long walk. Doyle held Susanna's hand in his and breathed in the fresh Highland air and felt content, fit, good to be alive. Susanna was in a sweet, serious mood; she looked good and she smelt good and he had spent the night with her and made love to her this morning, and yet still Doyle could not rid himself of the sense of utter detachment from her: the sense that if he never saw her again from this moment on it would not trouble him at all.

What's wrong with me.

Maybe nothing. Maybe just a sign that it was time to move on. Bodie had his arm around Mary and his head very close to hers, whispering—secrets?— perhaps, and Mary was giggling, chewing gum, running with him over the springy grass when he urged her on and shrieking when he ran too fast. Doyle felt odd watching them, an outsider.

Why the hell did I come, that's what I want to know.

Back at the leisure complex they studied the notice in the reception area to see what activities were on offer. "Oh, look, Mary—" Susanna had discovered a projected visit to the local film set for some Highland soap opera. Doyle rolled his eyes at Bodie.

"Not my idea of a perfect afternoon."

"You surprise me." Bodie was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking dark and moody and bored. Susanna and Mary were hard at it discussing the acquisition of tickets.

"Looks like we're going, though," Doyle added, resigned to it.

"No way, mate. They want to do that, they're on their own."

"What about us then?" Doyle asked, grinning at Bodie's scowl.

Bodie's eyes met his, a darkly vivid flash of blue. "We'll think of something."

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“What are you and Bodie going to do?”

“Maybe go fishing—” he kissed her offered lips as they stood waiting for the coach, liked it, kissed her again— “shoot on the ranges, something like that.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Course we’ll be all right. You’ll be back by evening.” Another kiss. Over her shoulder he could see Mary, locked in an embrace with Bodie; from the waist down she looked like a forties film star, seamed stockings and high heels. “Here it comes,” he added, releasing her, stepping back as the coach drew up at the kerb.

“Don’t sit with your backs to the engine,” Bodie added, materialising with Mary.

“That’s trains,” Doyle enlightened him, and “Enjoy yourself, sweetheart,” to Susanna, who didn’t seem to want to let go of him, though Mary was already climbing up the steps. Doyle’s eye dwelt on her slim thighs in the short, split skirt, and met Bodie’s cynical gaze watching not Mary but himself, watching her.

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They waved the coach off and went back to the lodge to collect their shooting gear. The activity amused them for an hour or so but the afternoon seemed unnaturally cold and grey, a raw wind shrieking around them on the exposed ranges, and they were the only people there, which took half the fun away: only each other to show off to.

Eventually Doyle rubbed his numb fingers briskly on his jacket. “Go back for a cuppa?” he said through chattering teeth, “Warm ourselves up a bit,” and Bodie agreed, shouldering the borrowed rifles to return them to the office while Doyle jogged back to their lodge and put the kettle on, whistling to himself as he got out a packet of mini swiss rolls bought at the on-site supermarket that morning. For no obvious reason he felt happier today, settling in, ready to take things as they came. He heard the lodge door open and close, bringing with it a draught of chill air.

“Watch this, Bodie,” he called, and as his partner appeared he tossed a swiss roll upwards, tipped his head back and caught it in his teeth like a rose, posing for applause.

Bodie gave him a slow clap or two, then strolled over and stole the cake with his mouth, swallowing it down in one go and pulling Doyle close to him, twisting one arm behind him in an arrest grip. For a moment, eyes dark, unreadable, he stared down into Doyle’s face. Then he kissed him on the mouth.

Bodie tasted sweet. “Mmm,” Doyle said, amused, savouring the taste thoughtfully, “Not bad, these, are they?”

Bodie held him there a moment longer and kissed him again, the front of his body thrusting hard and arrogantly against Doyle’s. Just as Doyle began to close his eyes, opening his mouth, giving

himself up to the kiss, Bodie pulled abruptly away from him and walked into the lounge area. Abandoned, Doyle dropped his head back, exhaled hugely. He was getting tired of trying to second-guess Bodie: the other man's moods seemed to wax and wane like the phases of the moon, only not half so predictable.

He finished making the tea and took it in through the archway. Bodie took his with barely a grunt of thanks; his eyes were fixed on the TV screen, some afternoon chat show. It was already four o'clock, and getting dark quickly; too late to bother with anything much except wait for the girls to get back. Doyle briefly considered going for a swim in the large indoor pool back at the complex, but he didn't much fancy the idea, barely warm yet from the brutality of the sojourn outdoors. He wrapped his hands around the hot mug of tea, slumped on the settee a fair distance from Bodie, but it turned out he had misread Bodie's mood one more time, because Bodie said, "Come here," in a gentle sort of way, and put his arm out. Doyle leaned against the solid warmth of him and sipped slowly at his tea, resigning himself guiltlessly to laziness.

After a moment Bodie plucked the mug out of his hands, set it on the floor, and leaned over him. Sensing what was coming, Doyle's heart began to pound, leaping as Bodie began to kiss him again, every nerve in his body tingling in its instinctive, blind response to the smallest things Bodie did to him, to the hardness of his lips pressing Doyle's against his teeth, the taste of his mouth and the scent of his skin. Bodie kissed him into another world, another mood, where desire was the only sense he had, so that he lay there exposed and wanton and hungry for the hard, sure exploration of Bodie's hands, the liquid warmth of his mouth, the warm press of his body.

Caught in some nuance of pleasure, his eyes wavered open, travelled from the dark top of Bodie's head beneath his chin to the windows beyond; dusk was gathering, he could see their reflection in the glass. The coolness of sanity intervened: he hit Bodie's side. "Curtains are open," and when this produced no response he moved sharply, dragging his nipple out of Bodie's suckling mouth with a shocking pang of pain, pleasure. "*Bodie*. Anyone could look in."

"Let them," Bodie said lazily. "Not illegal, is it?" His slowly questing mouth searched for and recaptured its prey.

"Not officially, maybe. But I'll just bet Cowley's got small print on the matter. *Bodie—!*" He removed Bodie's mouth again, with difficulty, from where it strayed.

"What's up with you?"

"Don't keep doing that."

"Ah, you love it."

"Yeah, all right, I know." He shut his eyes as pleasure unsettled him, lanced down to his cock. "You'll make me come..." he whispered.

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Bodie's low voice caressed him, arrogant and amused, and his hand

went to the fly of Doyle's jeans, pushing inside the open zip. Doyle summoned every last little atom of reserve and pushed him away.

"Upstairs. Upstairs, Bodie."

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Bodie, stripped already and lying back on the bed, watched through half-closed eyes his partner undress. Head drooping, knee turned outward, Doyle fiddled with each button of his cuff in turn, then his shirt buttons, taking his time over it, finally shrugging the shirt off. His hands moved to the buckle of his belt, unfastened it, let it swing loose as he found his zipper, easing it down, pushing his jeans down his thighs and then off. Lastly his pants—dark green— which he kicked off and lobbed gently toward the bed so that they landed across Bodie's face.

"Mm," Bodie said, muffled. "Warm—smell of you—"

Doyle vaulted neatly onto the bed and whispered close to Bodie's ear, "Would really, wouldn't they?"

"Think they'd fit me?" Bodie plucked them off and tried them against himself for size. His cock was hard up over his belly, rigid and extended, weeping a diamond tear which trailed in his navel like gossamer.

"Not at the moment," Doyle said kindly. "But you can wear 'em tomorrow, if you like." He himself loved to wear Bodie's shirts next to his own skin and borrowed them often. He leaned up on one elbow next to Bodie, let his eyes trail over his face; perfect, familiar, it hid its secrets well. As he leaned over to kiss him he noticed a flash of pink beneath the pillow, pulled out Susanna's nightie and tossed it aside.

Bodie noted its path with a languid eye. "God, Ray. Is that what she wears?"

"Think it'd look better on me, do you?" Doyle said. His hand wandered down Bodie's chest, pinching up his nipples on the way, travelling swiftly down towards the dense dark hair at his groin. As his hand approached Bodie's cock lifted and swung up off his belly, a blind move Doyle found both exciting and also touching: watching him, following his gaze, Bodie murmured with a lick of lazy fire, "It likes you, poppet."

"Yeah, I wonder why?" Doyle answered in the same soft tone. At moments like these he knew how easy it would be to love Bodie, really love him, to the exclusion of everyone and everything else in the world.

Bodie's hands twined in his hair, seeking to push him down, seeking the rapture of his mouth; Doyle resisted, ducking his head away, wanting Bodie to ask, just for the sheer kick of it.

"What d'you want then, Bodie? Eh?"

“Go down on me, you little cocktease,” and Bodie’s voice was a rich sexual purr which shivered down his spine like a shower of stardust.

“And then what?” Dropping his head he kissed the tip of Bodie’s cock, savoured it, kissed it again. “What will you do for me?”

Bodie’s voice stroked him again as his hand stilled itself, and flowed instead through his hair and over his scalp:

“Then I’ll suck you to kingdom come.”

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They stayed in bed for nearly two hours, drifting in and out of sleep and sex. Then they got up and showered in good time for the girls to come back, Bodie cheerful, clowning around, while Doyle was pensive, depressed almost, by one throwaway remark of Bodie’s in answer to his own malicious comment;

“They’d never guess how we spent the afternoon, would they?” and Bodie had looked at him, one eyebrow quirked, eyes cool: “What?” he had said, just as if nothing had happened.

As if he had never touched Doyle, never closed his mouth over Doyle’s and kissed him deeply as he came, sweetly, violently, never shared with him some rune of possession, madness, passion.

Now Bodie kept two feet away from him and would not talk.

The comparison drew itself for him: he had been through it many times himself with countless forgotten lays. It was exactly as if Bodie had had what he wanted from him and now he had lost all interest, dead, cold.

Could not even stand Doyle too close to him.

For now.

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So Doyle withdrew as well, wrapped himself in his own dark thoughts, and they stood together in silence on the cold exposure of the drive and waited for the coach to sweep around the corner and bring their ladies back to them bright, chatty, and excited.

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“Last day tomorrow,” Susanna yawned. She was full of Doyle’s best party-piece pasta. Bodie and Mary were washing up, giggles and shrieks punctuating the clatter of pots and plates. Obviously Bodie was feeling frisky. Chasing her around the table with a dishcloth, or something.

“Mm,” he roused himself to reply.

Susanna looked at his taut profile, the sultry pout of his mouth. “Ray?”

“What?”

“Is something the matter?”

He rallied himself with an effort. “No—sorry. Just—tired.” He summoned a smile for her. “How about an early night?”

Quite honestly, he fancied she looked less than thrilled. Well, there you were then. Back to the singles bar.

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The last day. They spent the whole of it touring around the local beauty spots, stopping for a pub lunch. Two pints at lunchtime always turned Doyle sleepy. He had his arm around Susanna, her dark, sweetscented hair on his shoulder. Bodie was wrapped around Mary as usual, hand roaming under her little black leather jacket. Watching Bodie’s macho heterosexism, his possessive way with her body, Doyle felt a streak of something unreasonable that made him turn his head away from them, concentrate on Susanna.

“Don’t think much of this, do you?” he said, picking the lasagne over with a fork.

“It’s not as good as yours.”

He threw the fork down. “You cook at all?” he asked, making conversation.

“Not really.”

She was quiet today. Relaxed and affectionate with the beer he pressed himself closer to her, and felt immediately her resistance.

“No domestic science at Roedean, then?”

“Only the thickies do it.”

“Right,” he said, put in his place.

“Dunno what that says about you then, Doyle,” Bodie said, eavesdropping unashamedly as he nibbled Mary’s ear. He wasn’t, Doyle noted sourly, having half such a difficult time with her as he was with Susanna. Well, breeding would out. Mary was a little trotting show-pony, bedecked and beribboned. Susanna was a racehorse, nervy, moody, apt to rear.

“Right little Fanny aren’t you?” Bodie was adding. “Craddock, that is.” He withstood Doyle’s poisonous glance with some style.

“What time we leaving tomorrow?” Mary asked with a yawn.

“Not too late, I hope,” Susanna said. “Because actually, I’m quite looking forward to getting back.” And Doyle answered her with a little chill, a little edge:

“Homesick?”

She looked at him without smiling. “Not exactly. But I haven’t seen as much of you as I’d expected this holiday.”

What? “We’ve been together all the time,” he defended himself.

“When have we?”

“Today.”

“Yes, okay, today. But there was yesterday—”

The injustice of this stung like vinegar on a graze. “You didn’t have to go, you know!”

“Well, you knew *I* wanted to go. It wouldn’t have hurt you to come with me. Not to mention the fact that you and your *mate* have left the bar every single evening before the dancing started—”

“Didn’t know you had any interest in dancin’, sweetheart. It’s the bloody bingo you go for, innit? Dunno how *Mummy* would rate that, I really don’t. Not quite up there with bridge parties, is it?” He was angrily amused by all this: why hadn’t he seen it coming?

Well, no mystery there. Truth was, he had been far more interested, excited, caught up by, his other affaire of the heart to notice much, or care, what this girl was thinking. A streak of remorse softened him after his bitter selfdefence, taking hold of her averted chin in his hand and saying with lowered voice, a little tenderness, “Look, I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“Sorry isn’t much good. It’s too late now, we’re going home tomorrow.”

“Oh dear,” Bodie leaned forward solemnly, “Reckon she’s sussed our little secret.” He looked mournfully at Doyle, whose heart leaped and began to pound violently.

“What?” he said, to buy time, mind flying on; he didn’t trust Bodie, didn’t trust him one iota, not to come right out with it and say it, for mischief alone.

“Can’t leave your beautiful body alone, can I?” He leered in at Susanna, who flinched back. Bodie eyed her delightedly. “He didn’t give you that old ‘partners’ line, did he?”

“Is that supposed to be funny, Bodie?” Doyle exploded: trouble from Susanna, Bodie playing with fire, everyone against him. He hunched himself up tighter and glowered defensively.

“I’ll bet he has got a beautiful body, though,” Mary said, and he loved her for that, stepping in to save him, taking the heat off.

“I’d tell you, if I could remember,” Susanna said, with more cool wit than he would have given her credit for.

Doyle stood up, pushing the table back. One knee bent outward, one hand on his hip he slouched, moody, withdrawn. “Shall we go?”

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The day improved a little as they walked along some beautiful coastline scenery, but not that much. Susanna was obviously punishing him for some slight, real or imagined, and he didn’t feel inclined to press it. They made little conversation, and only on the subject of the views (breathtaking) the weather (bright but raw) and history, since apparently some famous naval battle had been fought along this strip of coastline. Bodie had brought a camera, and photographed Ray and the girls sitting astride a huge cannon mounted on the cliff top; he kept commanding Doyle to smile, which at last he did, laughter finally dragged out of him at the sight of Bodie’s bug-eyed face.

They ate chips along the front of a little off-season seaside resort, sea dark grey and rhythmically pounding the harbour wall, hands so cold they fought over who was to hold the hot paper bundles. Then the drive back to the lodge. Looking out at the dusk, the sparkle of the moon on the sea, Doyle hardly spoke a word all the way home.

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Back late, they got ready for the potential battlefield of the evening out. Doyle washed his hair in the shower, paid great attention to his personal hygiene, put on his smartest trousers, a clean shirt, tie and jacket, ran his fingers through his curls, and looked in the mirror.

“Ugh, horrible.” Bodie’s reflection loomed up darkly behind him and admired itself over Doyle’s shoulder. So there they stood, Bodie just the taller, short dark hair groomed, satanic gleam in his eye, a little, cynical smile. And Doyle, odder looking altogether beside Bodie’s heroically masculine style. He scowled at himself and turned away, thereby missing the moment when his stilted self-conscious pose turned itself into a casual, abstract beauty, though Bodie did not, tracking him with his eyes.

Susanna was looking very lovely tonight, in a long flowing skirt with a pretty blouse. In a few years she would be the classic Home Counties wife, well-dressed, aristocratic bone structure, well-styled hair. Mary wore a little black dress, and managed to look like a pert French maid even without the frilly apron.

There was a band playing tonight, smooth MOR, and a crooning singer. Doyle danced with

Susanna, holding her close, her head on his shoulder; the softness of her body aroused him, and the scent of her skin, the youthful sheen of it: she was so young. Too young for him. He had blooded her, and now he was going to have to let her go, to some undeserving Yuppie type. That was the way of the world.

He relinquished Susanna to Bodie when hassled to do so, and found himself dancing with Mary instead. A different proposition entirely.

Where Susanna, shy, would hold herself a little away, Mary went straight for it, hustling her hot little body up against him, thrusting her belly in exactly the right spot. She knew, all right, knowing little minx, and laughed throatily in his ear when he pressed involuntarily closer.

He closed his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

She was ready for him, delighted to play. "Not before our first date."

"How about tomorrow?"

"You'd have to go through Bodie."

Doyle grinned, smoothed back the lank ashblonde hair at her temples. "You think I'm afraid of Bodie?"

"No, I think he's afraid of you." Her reply came quickly, leaving him not knowing if she was serious, or not.

"Maybe we could share you?" he offered, and she looked at him soberly, brown eyes, gypsy eyes. He wanted to kiss her.

And knew he could not.

The music was slowing, coming to an end, and he released her, not without regret. "I'd better let you go, sweetheart. But if ever you get tired of the Tarzan treatment, just let me know."

Bodie relieved him of Mary and delivered him Susanna in one swift and easy exchange: his sharp eyes swooped in on Doyle, malicious. Doyle knew Bodie had not missed a thing, was savouring every moment of his reaction to Mary. Not that that mattered: but it did matter about Susanna, who was looking at him quietly, uncertainly. So he took her in his arms for the next dance, and was attentive, even affectionate, for the rest of the evening.

At one time both girls went off the the Ladies' to refresh themselves. Bodie leaned across the table towards Doyle, almost avuncular in his manner: "You enjoying yourself?"

Doyle shrugged. "It's okay." And then, at Bodie's faintly disbelieving stare, "Maybe we've just been on holiday too long."

“You want to get back to work?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I do.” Actually, he was suddenly sure about that: his job was something he was uncommonly good at, and although by definition the job of a CI5 agent had no parameter and no safe houses, he was at home there, he knew what he was about.

And Bodie knew exactly what he meant, nodded at him over the glasses of beer between them. “Fish out of water, aren’t we. Tell you what though,” he added, “I wouldn’t wish tonight over too soon.”

“Why not?” Doyle took a drink of his lager, looked at Bodie.

Bodie gave him a slow, satisfied smile. “Mary’s a little goer, isn’t she? And don’t tell me you don’t fancy her. I saw the way you were dancing with her.”

Doyle smiled, looked into his glass. “Okay, so I fancy her.”

“Pretty obvious, that was. Surprised you didn’t wear a hole in her dress.” And he grinned at Doyle’s quick, involuntary glance down at himself.

“You noticed how they always go to the loo together?” Doyle said to change the subject.

“Discussing our technique, probably. A very short discussion, in your case—” he ducked so that Doyle’s halfhearted swat went past his ears—“and I tell you, mate, you wouldn’t last long under Mary’s regime. What she’s got planned for me tonight—”

“Well?” Doyle glanced over at the door of the Ladies’ Room; it was just opening. “What has she got planned for you tonight?”

Bodie smiled down at the table. “Special treat,” he said laconically, and he would say no more.

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Back at the lodge, Bodie and Mary turned down coffee and went up to bed, claiming extra tiredness: an early start was planned for tomorrow. Doyle could not get Bodie’s comment out of his head; he was listening, he realised, all on edge for sounds from above; and that, he knew, was just what Bodie had intended, telling him half the story, leaving him guessing.

All right, so he would love to be up there watching.

And, Doyle gave a little inner smile, Bodie would like that. It gave both of them a kick, a real charge, to watch the other getting off. Bodie would agree to it like a shot. Even Mary might. But Susanna, now...

Out of the question.

Well, he had brought the girl along with him; he owed her this one last night. Jaws was on the television again; he'd seen it before, but Susanna seemed to get into it, shrieking rather appealingly at the scary parts, clutching on to him. It was like his teenage years, being with his girl in the back row of the pictures on a Saturday night. One foot up on the coffee table, Doyle sipped from a can of beer and kept an arm around her; by ten when the film finished he was kissing her, losing himself in her sweet pink mouth, hot little thoughts running through his head.

“sanna,” he murmured, his lips seeming to want to cling to hers, burying his face in her hair. It smelt summery. Like a meadow.

She was pushing at his chest. “Ray.”

“What?” He opened his eyes.

She was pulling away from him, evading his searching lips. “I want to watch this. The golf. It’s being transmitted from Daddy’s club this week.”

“Okay,” he murmured, and heaved a sigh. He settled back again, one hand on her breast, feeling the smooth heavy contour of it, immensely arousing, intriguing, to any male. He could imagine the soft, creamy skin beneath as he reached over to undo the buttons of her blouse, slipping his hand inside to caress the lacy frill of her bra.

“Ray.” A definite cool warning there.

He desisted, shut his eyes, tried to be good. He could always think about work. For example: the Bader-Meinhof setup, the cache of weapons CI5 had discovered two weeks ago:

But then again. Time enough for all that tomorrow. His thoughts went back, inexorably, to Bodie. Bodie and his special treat. Mary had promised him a blowjob tonight, perhaps? Bodie turned onto that like nothing else, well, what man didn’t.

Couldn’t be that simple. He’d just bet Mary blew Bodie every time he felt like it, no inhibitions there on either side. Nothing out of the ordinary about fellatio, not among consenting adults: only the very young balked at it.

Susanna, for example, had never offered, and he hadn’t pressed it.

He ran through a few more options, from a little light bondage (Mary would definitely look the business in handcuffs) all the way out to watersports and back again, and rejected them all as incompatible with a borrowed bedroom, clean white sheets, and two other people just a stairwell away.

Well, Bodie would probably tell him. Would definitely tell him, either to boast, or because he knew it would turn Doyle on to hear about it.

It was one of those nights when sex and sensuality seemed to suffuse through every physical and

mental sense he had and leave him hypersensitive; at home alone he would have tossed off by now and got it over with. He didn't want to wait any longer. He undid Susanna's blouse again, gently so as not to disturb her, and stroked the soft skin of her bare breast as he saw it in his mind's eye; round, swelling, a little pink nipple puckering pertly to his touch—

As if in a dream he leaned over her to seek her mouth, trailed his lips down her throat to the sweetly perfumed skin inside her blouse, shutting his eyes in pure pleasure.

“Ray. Don't. Please. I'm trying to watch this.”

But he was urgent this time and not to be denied, closing his mouth softly over her nipple while his hand roamed over her body, towards the top of her skirt.

It was then he became aware that she was really resisting him now, trying to push him away hard, saying more loudly, “Ray. *Ray*. Stop it.”

He drew back half an inch. “What's the matter?”

She was looking at him seriously, without any hint of a smile. “It's been such a lovely evening. Do we have to spoil it?”

Took his breath away. He gazed at her narroweyed, his pulse thundering in his ears, his body throbbing almost painfully as she went on, almost petulant, “Can't we even sit here and watch the television together without you getting ideas?”

They were—so far apart. He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth, said with a flash of vivid anger, “Look darlin', only today you were complaining we hadn't been together enough.”

“Yes, I want us to be together. But it seems to me the only times we are alone together your mind's only on one thing.”

He threw himself back on the settee, closed his eyes, fighting to get himself together.

“Christ, Susie.”

Women. His mind briefly juggled with notions of capricious injustice while his body thrummed sweetly, insistently with desire and would not let up on him.

To compound the lack of understanding, within moments she was squeezing his hand in an anxious kind of way; his own, sullen, did not respond.

“Ray.”

“What?” He opened his eyes, bitterly. “Well, what *do* you want us to do? Discuss Shakespeare? The meaning of life? Nice game of backgammon, perhaps?” And his teeth briefly showed in the flash of a smile with no humour at all; had she known this man in his other life she would have

seen the danger and begun to run.

But she did not know the Ray Doyle of the streets; she drew his head down for a kiss. He held back for a moment, then gave in to it, his mouth opening to hers. Instantly his body was on alert again, kicked right back into play.

That was when she pushed him away for the third time. And this time it was harder for him to rein himself in.

She looked into his eyes, a little nervous now, trying to explain. “Ray, I’m not in the mood tonight. It’s not that I *don’t* love you. I just want to sit here with you and have a nice cuddle, without—well. Without it leading to anything else.”

Dark thoughts, the darkest, swooped in on him. Her clothes were flimsy, her skin fragile: so very vulnerable against his own masculine strength. She had been a virgin when he had taken her first, blood on his cock. It would be so very easy for him to push past her reluctance now; there really would be very little she could do about it.

And then she saw the look on his face and guessed what it meant and fear flashed across her whole body, her eyes going wide and frightened, terrified.

He let go of her at once.

“Okay,” he said, breathing hard and fast, trying hard for control.

“Sorry. I’m really sorry. You do understand, don’t you? You don’t mind too much?”

Mind.

“You pick your moments, that’s all.” He gave her a small cold smile: encouraged by her answering one he took the hand he still held in his own and moved it down the front of his body. Okay. So she wasn’t in the mood. But upmost in his mind shrieked the primitive male instinct that she had got him into this state and it was unfair of her to cry off. Well, she didn’t have to get involved: he still felt she owed him something.

She touched him reluctantly, but he didn’t care about reluctance, if anything it made it sweeter. After a minute he unbuttoned his fly and pushed her hand inside, closing her fingers tight around his cock, but she had never got the hang of this, too halfhearted, and he was too strung out by now to fantasise his way through some inept groping; he needed something hard and direct.

Running on pure instinct, he cupped his hand around the back of her neck, began to push her down. Some sixth sense alerted her to what he was wanting.

“No, Ray. I can’t.”

“Yes you can.” Nothing about this was pleasurable to him any longer, he only needed to get it

over with as quickly as possible. His body no longer seemed to know what was going on, he had been there, not there, there again, and now his insides were beginning the heavy throb of pain he remembered from teenage years.

“I can’t. Honestly.”

“Course you can. Come on, it’s not that bad,” he soothed her, urged her, stroking the nape of her neck. “I won’t come in your mouth, I promise.”

“I just don’t—”

“Ah, please, sweetheart. Do it for me.” Her head lowered, and he felt something wet fall upon his belly.

That was when, belatedly, he heard the previous note in her voice, categorised it, saw the panic in her eyes, already beginning to resolve itself in angry, frightened tears.

However old was she? Eighteen. A teenager.

What the hell was he doing?

Sanity drenched him in a rush and froze him up. He took his hand away from her, completely away, and spread his fingers out around his own eyes. Selfcontrol was easy to come by this time: brought to the brink once too often his desire had fled high and tight inside him, hurting him, tying his guts in a knot, but very far away.

“Ray?”

He ignored her anxious query, opening his eyes, pulling his shirt down and tucking it in, buttoning his jeans over his rigid cock, swift, precise, everyday actions.

“Ray, I’m sorry, I really am.”

He jumped to his feet, not bothering to reply.

Her voice rose in a teary wail. “I wish I could make you understand. It’s just—I feel sometimes— you only want me for one thing.”

He bit down hard on the cruellest answer and went to the front door, dragging on his leather jacket as he moved.

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

He slammed the door, hard, on her reply, left her sitting there crying in the dark, in front of the

television screen where a green-trousered golfer paddled his feet, sighted in the ball, raised his club, and struck.

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Upstairs, Bodie came wide awake at the sounds, the reverberation of the door downstairs slamming. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and reaching for his clothes.

“Wha’ wazzat?” Mary spoke drowsily at his side.

“Sh. ’S okay.” He was already onto his sweater by now.

“You goin’ somewhere?”

“Sshh. Go back to sleep. Won’t be long.”

On his way to the door he passed the settee where Doyle’s bird lay all in a heap and crying into a (no doubt) lace handkerchief. He spared her no more than a glance as he snatched up his jacket from the hatstand, checked his pocket automatically for car keys. For the second time that night the door slammed.

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Doyle had not gone far before Bodie caught up with him on the moonlit paths around the lodge complex; unmistakable, the sight of him in the shadows, he always had the faint look of a hustler beneath a lamppost even when he wasn’t skulking the streets at midnight.

“Oi. What’s the matter?”

Doyle turned away from him, kept on walking. “Sod off, Bodie.”

Bodie grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him round. The first impression he had had, the midnight hustler, was only reinforced: the swollen mouth, the hazed look about his eyes told their own story to Bodie, who had seen Doyle that way before. He shook him a little, not ungently.

“Doesn’t she love you tonight, sunshine?”

Doyle shivered, and shivered again in the cold night air. He wore only a thin shirt under the leather blouson. Bodie slowly released the handful of Doyle’s jacket that he held, put his hand in his pocket, jingled his keys:

“Frigid little cow,” and the chill contempt in his voice startled Doyle, lifted him out of inner obsessions, made him look at Bodie with attention.

“Come on,” Bodie said, and touched him lightly, turning back towards the Capri parked by the

side of their lodge. With the ease of long partnership he did not look back to see if Doyle followed.

In the car it was no less cold than outside. Bodie put the key in the ignition and the fans leapt into action along with the engine: he didn't put the car into gear, just sat there with the engine idling for a moment.

Doyle clenched his hands together in his lap. The tension knotting deep inside himself was a real, physical thing. When Bodie leaned over towards him with the best will in the world he could not prevent himself from flinching away, all his nerves on edge. "Sorry," he said, looking away from Bodie, out of the side window, seeing nothing. "Not good enough for you tonight, am I?" Bodie asked him, head cocked, a humorous quirk to his lips, and Doyle felt a little warmer, a little less estranged from reality. That was the thing about the two of them together: there was, beneath everything that was between them, an intuition verging on the psychic. Bodie would not play the wrong card.

He even managed an answering smile. "Too far gone. You know how it is. She got me so worked up I didn't know if I was coming or going—"

"Hmm."

"—Now I feel I'd just lay one on anyone who tried to touch me."

"Lover's nuts," Bodie assured him sagely, and he put the car into first and drove off, gunning through the gears in true racing style. "We've all been through it, Raymond, believe me."

"Yeah?" Doyle asked, grinning a little despite himself. "Gotta magic cure?"

Bodie's reply was swift and succinct. "No, I mean it," he added with a sidelong glance when Doyle only snorted. "Just get yourself off, sooner the better. Want me to stop the car?"

"Something makes you think I can't do it going along?" Doyle challenged.

"Come to think of it, I know you can," Bodie said softly, reminiscent; and Doyle's mind flashed back to a wild incident of some months past. But even the twinge of pleasure at the memory hurt him deep inside, and he folded himself over, one arm across his tender belly, cradling it.

"Look, I just couldn't right now, okay? Hurts too much." He felt as if sex would be the last thing he would ever want in his life again. Hanging onto the door strap as they rocketed around a corner, the disaster of the evening replayed itself in his mind again— "Must've lost my touch with women," he said bitterly, looking out into the dark: he expected Bodie to join in on this theme, mock him and his sexual technique with the fairer sex, but Bodie did not, frowning out into the dark, following the maze-like trail out towards the open road, prompting the question from Doyle, "Where we going?"

"Just sit tight, sunshine."

Not that it mattered. The last thing he wanted was to go back to where Susanna was; give him time to cool off a bit. Bodie's company was helping him already, he felt Bodie's sympathy around him, but Bodie not making a big deal out of it, no fuss, the 'it happens' attitude calming him down where pity would have tipped him over the edge.

He had calmed down enough to talk about it now. So he began to recount to Bodie the battlelines of his own private war of the sexes, beginning with 'you don't spend enough time with me,' all the way up to 'It's been a lovely evening—*don't let's spoil it—*'

At this Bodie, who had listened silently until now, shifted in his seat and said: "Bitch. Bloody little bitch."

"Yeah," Doyle said wryly, "Makes you wonder if birds come from the same planet, doesn't it?"

Kings would give up their thrones for it, women got headaches.

"It's not as if I was laying anything heavy on her—" his resentment surfaced again.

Bodie's voice had a naughty lilt to it. "Nothing extreme, Raymond?"

And Doyle shook his head, still remembering. "'Spoil it'. I ask you. She obviously didn't enjoy it much all the times before, did she?"

The note of strain was back in his voice again. Bodie glanced quickly his way: sexual ego was a fragile thing, even Ray's presumably. "She didn't deserve you, sunshine," was all he said. "Next bloke up she'll realise how lucky she was to have you." He flicked the indicator on, left.

"Yeah, try telling her that." He felt bruised, wounded by rejection.

"I might just do that." Bodie's voice held no obvious threat and yet the quiet tone of it chilled Doyle to the bone. He backtracked quickly:

"Ah, forget it, Bodie. What does it matter, after all? I'll get over it."

Bodie smiled at him then, a smile of such sweetness it lit up his eyes and his whole face and was reflected in the softness of his voice as he answered Doyle: "I know you will." He pulled the car up beside the kerb, and the rasp of the handbrake broke loudly into the sudden silence. "I thought it was somewhere here," Bodie said in another tone entirely, opening the car door.

"Thought what was?" Doyle squinted out of the car window. Naziras Stores, read the sign above the little shop; all its lights were on, and it was 11.30 p.m.

"Never miss a chance of a bit of business, Pakkies. I mean," Bodie added, bending down to look in the car at him, "our coloured brethren."

Doyle watched Bodie push through the door of the shop, tall, dark, broadshouldered. And racist. Even his black girlfriend of a few years' back hadn't cured Bodie of that. He could see Bodie through the shop window, behind the exercise books and the paintbrushes clustering up at the glass; he was talking to the Asian shopkeeper. Bodie was shaking his head, both hands flat on the counter. But whatever it was Bodie wanted it was obviously not on view, because the man was disappearing now out of the side door.

Booze and fags, that would be the main trade at this time of night. Or something else, perhaps.

Doyle shut his eyes, put his head back on the seat. His insides still ached, to the very entrails of him, a steady, dull pain locked up inside him. He felt tense, edgy, unreal... He sat up with a jolt as the car door opened and Bodie eased himself into the driver's seat, tossing something onto the back seat, turning the ignition key all in one go.

"The things I do for you, Doyle."

The shopkeeper was looking out through the glass at them. Bodie gave him the smoothest, most ironic of smiles, and accelerated the Capri away with a burst of speed James Bond would have been proud of.

"What?" Doyle was canting his head towards the back seat. The cover of a glossy magazine glinted there in the dim light. He couldn't quite make out the title, but the picture was—interesting. "What the hell's that?"

"Bedtime story for you."

Pornography of some kind, obviously. His heart began to beat faster. "D'you know, if I'd been guessing, I'd have said it was dope you were after."

Bodie's hand stilled on the gearstick. "Want some? Could go back."

Doyle considered it for a scant second. A joint might be just what he did need, they could share it here in the car, get high and relaxed together.

"Nah," he said, not without regret, and Bodie began to urge the car on again, changing up from third to fourth. "Reckon if I get the drug habit, it might stick with me."

"Pot?" Bodie said scornfully. "They'll legalise it one day."

Doyle said calmly, coolly, "It'll still be a drug." Bodie might be safe. But Doyle had always recognised in himself an addictive personality.

The car streaked on, far too fast as always, out into the night. "Where we goin' now?"

Bodie's brow furrowed. "Bit of a problem, that one. Unless—" He grinned at Doyle. "Got your gloves with you, Raffles?"

Doyle told him he was mad. He was still telling him even as they stood in the dark outside one of the empty lodge houses, Bodie wielding one of the select little tools they always had about them. The flimsy lock of the holiday home proved to be a walkover; they were in.

“It’s going to look very good if we’re caught,” Doyle said, vaulting up the stairs behind his partner, imagining the list—breaking and entering; possession of obscene material; possible indecent acts to follow.

“Could have been worse, Doyle.” Bodie appeared from behind the bedroom door, enigmatic and unsmiling.

“Could it?”

“We’d have been carrying, wouldn’t we, if I’d gone back for that dope?”

“One sin off my conscience, anyway,” Doyle said with a wide, slow smile at Bodie as he kicked the door shut behind them.

The bedroom was freezing, but otherwise comfortable, made up ready for visitors. They had the lights very low and the curtains tightly drawn in case by some miracle the security guard, seen every night in the bar totally ratted by 10 PM on mild and bitter, should take it into his head to patrol the grounds in the middle of the night. Doyle stripped off all his clothes except his T-shirt and got into bed, sliding between icy sheets, watching Bodie kneel before the gas fire, feeding it with 10p pieces. A rush of affection for the other man stole over him: this tough dark fighter, his partner, here with him, loyal, sorting him out, chasing his blue mood away with the genius of intuition.

“Look after me, don’t you?”

“Try to,” Bodie answered him, rising to his feet and turning; and Doyle was struck by the deep dark blaze of Bodie’s eyes, the blue of the deepest ocean, narrowed in attention on him. Some little part of him felt disturbed by the intensity of it, the way Bodie’s gaze seemed to sight him in, ready for the kill. He also felt a leap of the most thrilling excitement, for at that moment there was as much power, as much attraction, about Bodie as he had ever sensed in his life before

And then Bodie’s smile, creeping across his face, dissolved away the air of danger about him as if it had never existed.: Doyle breathed again, slowly settling back. Bodie was adding, “Not easy sometimes, the birds you land yourself with.” He was stripping off his clothes now, leaving, like Doyle, only a T-shirt, black, tight, his muscular arms shrugging off his gun and holster: a manhunter.

Doyle picked up the magazine that lay with them on the covers and flipped it open at random. “Think she’d suit me any better?” He held it open for Bodie to see. *She* was about fourteen stone, with an unusual liking for vegetables.

“Mm,” said Bodie admiringly, getting in beside him. “Well, you’ve got leanings that way, haven’t you?”

His bare, strong thigh touched Doyle’s under the covers. Doyle pressed back against it, hard, with his own. He gave Bodie an arch, flirtatious look from beneath his flicked-up lashes: “Have I?”

Bodie smacked him on the cheek. “I *mean*, your cupboard’s always full of that healthy stuff.”

They arranged themselves comfortably in the bed, Bodie propped up against the headboard and Doyle leaning back against his chest, lying between Bodie’s legs. Bodie’s skin was warm against his own, and he could feel the tender press of Bodie’s genitals against his back, Bodie’s arms wrapped around him, Bodie looking over his shoulder. Doyle propped the magazine in his lap and had both hands free to turn the pages.

“Did he ’ave any more of these? We could go back with ID and raid ’im in the morning,” Doyle said with a copper’s righteousness, pausing at one particular page. “Reckon this is definitely a prosecutable item, Bodie.” Certainly the page in question showed a prosecutable act, though Doyle couldn’t remember any convictions offhand. The magazine was most definitely hardcore, catering for every possible taste, none of it new to him, but it was not the sort of thing he usually scanned for kicks and for that very reason it made it mysteriously exciting to gaze upon these astonishing depictions of bizarre sexuality, find them arousing and feel no guilt, Bodie here with him to share the experience.

He paused for a long time at one page, bondage with a hint of blood and worse.

“Like that one?” Bodie said in his ear, soft, quiet, curious, no more.

“It’s—pretty—”

Bodie’s teeth grazed his ear, sending shocks along his skin. “Which one are you?”

Doyle smiled, remote, faraway. “Oh, either, I should think.” The next page made him wince. “That looks painful, dunnit?”

Swift as a snake, Bodie’s stroking hand struck at his nipple, pinched it up tight in his fingertips. The arrow of pain resolved itself in his loin, fierce as pleasure. Bodie smiled at the gasp of reaction, the grimace.

“I dunno, Doyle. I reckon you’d get off on it.”

His tone was admiring. Doyle sighed, arching back into his partner’s arms. “Do it again.”

His nipple looked pretty, reddening in Bodie’s fingers. Bodie went on to soothe it, petting it as he gazed abstractedly at Doyle, mulling some preoccupation, deciding to speak it.

“How far *would* you go, Ray?”

“How d’you mean?”

“Anything you wouldn’t do?” Bodie asked, clipped and precise.

It was the wrong time to ask, if some serious answer was required, for at the present time, when his body was alight and blazing his instincts were not to deny it any thrill at all.

“Don’t think necrophilia appeals to me.”

“That’s all?” Bodie prompted after a while.

“Coprophilia?” Doyle offered, a rich pageant of perversion running through his mind.

“What’s that?”

“Page 15,” Doyle told him succinctly, and Bodie flipped through, found the place.

“Oh, I dunno.” Bodie smirked.

“You *are* joking. Well, you can try that one on your own. Or with Mary, since she’s so obliging—” and that reminded him, and he stared up at Bodie, eyes wide, limpid. “That reminds me. When Susanna was busy pointing our relationship towards a higher plane, I suppose Mary was givin’ you your special treat as planned?”

For some reason, he could see that brought Bodie up short, that he didn’t want to talk about it; but that only made him the more determined to know. “Well? Did she?”

Finally Bodie conceded him a grin. “Yeah, we got there.”

Doyle was in there like a rat up a line. “And? So? What was it? You’re going to tell me, Bodie, or I’ll never lie to George for you again, I swear it.”

Bodie evaded him for a while, but had to give in in the end. “The old Greek thing,” he said lightly, pulling Doyle’s curls through his fingers, not looking at his eyes. “You know... look, there was a photo of it somewhere. Centre spread, I think.”

It turned out to be Doyle’s prosecutable act. Doyle gazed at the picture, not speaking; the girl’s skin had a lovely sheen to it, the curves of her body so beautiful it scarcely mattered that you could not see her face. The male, all grace, all strength, like a powerful cat sprung on her back, the joining of their bodies stretching the unaccustomed orifice wider than seemed possible. The picture moved him strangely, strongly.

“That’s what Mary let you do tonight?”

There was a pause, then Bodie said softly into the silence, “Yeah.”

Doyle’s gaze searched him out, and held him, transfixed, his eyes so wide and so clear that while what he was thinking was the very opposite of innocence, yet it was not depravity Bodie read there but a perfect clarity, a kind of essential truth. For a while, lost there in the remoter places of Doyle’s psyche, Bodie forgot to breathe for a while. Then:

“Want me to tell you about it?” he said gently, and Doyle did not reply, did not need to, lying back in Bodie’s arms while Bodie’s soft voice spoke to him of what he had done, and Bodie’s hands coaxed sweetness out of him slowly, surely, returned him to the point he had left behind hours ago, unlocked him at last. So it was only moments later when he came, easy, endlessly across Bodie’s fingers, and when it was over he draped himself over Bodie, panting, his sweating forehead on Bodie’s shoulder, his arm flying around him, gasping into Bodie’s ear:

“Do it again.”

“Now?” Bodie asked him, laconically.

He nodded. “Yeah. Do it hard.”

His eyes opened wide and stared across the room as Bodie’s hand struck magic down through his cock again, and he felt the ghost of something wonderful— only just out of reach—

“*Really* hard, Bodie.”

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Doyle wandered into the Quiet Room and stood for a moment watching Cowley and Bodie at work. His hand was wrapped around a mug of tea, from which he took an occasional sip. He was wearing a cream linen shirt casually unpoppered to midchest, its sleeves rolled up to mid-forearm, his gun in place. Tight, faded jeans and white leather Kickers completed the picture of a scruffy young tough, selfconfident, prone to violence, and very very fast on the draw.

The man in the chair noted all of this: *Oh Christ. Another one.*

“Who’s come to play today, then?” Doyle wondered aloud.

“This is Jimmy Edwards, Doyle.” Cowley answered him. “But he’s not playing—yet.”

“Doesn’t seem to understand the game,” Bodie chipped in; he was always in tune with Cowley, just exactly as if Cowley was the leader of the gang, a bit smarter, a bit more intelligent than the rest, and Bodie his favourite thug. Bodie played to this role no end, much to Doyle’s disgust.

Cowley, he sensed, did not like him one tenth so much as he did Bodie. There was just— something— about Bodie which Cowley especially loved. Well, that was all right by Doyle. He wanted to be free: to question Cowley every step of the way, if he had to.

“It’s hide and seek, Doyle,” Bodie told him, eyes never leaving the man. “Jimbo here knows where our friend Anwar’s gone to ground.”

Doyle screwed up his eyes and considered a long mental list. “Anwar. The butcher, the baker—or Anwar the bombmaker?”

“That’s the one, Doyle. Only part of what he does for a living, though,” Cowley said, disagreeably. “I won’t go into it all, it would spoil the taste of your tea.” He directed a look at the mug Doyle held.

“Sorry, sir. Did you want one?” He took a last sip, unhurried, and set the mug down on the tools table. Then he moved over, softly, to the chair where the man sat.

Hardeyed, bullet-headed, no pushover here; he looked up at Doyle with cold defiance.

“You on for the game then, mate?” Bodie asked of his partner, smiling gently.

“Might as well. Nothing better to do.”

The man was not fettered in any way, but he was not fast enough, unlike George Cowley who had stepped back at just the right moment out of reach as Bodie and Doyle moved into action together, working as one unit: Bodie tipping up the chair as Doyle dived for the man and pinioned him in place with a friendly hand on his windpipe. Bodie beamed down genially into Jimmy’s purpling face. “You’re going to tell us, you know.”

Doyle released the pressure, just a little, in case anything useful should be trying to emerge. “I want my lawyer,” the man gasped, “entitled—civil liberties—”

“Sorry, mate,” Doyle shook his head regretfully, “Didn’t quite catch that. Got your knife, Bodie?”

“Why, gonna sharpen your hearing?” Bodie quipped, and found himself very amusing as he dangled the knife in front of Doyle’s nose.

Doyle took his time over extracting the thinnest, sharpest blade, watched by three pairs of eyes, two dispassionate, one wary. “Where d’you think I should start?” Doyle enquired delicately of Bodie.

“I’ll never forget you at catering school, Doyle.” Bodie chuckled, shaking his head. “No-one could flay a fish closer to the bone than old Doyle here!” he informed the man genially. “Think yourself lucky, mate. Some of the butchers we got round here, and we got in an expert, just for you.”

Doyle spun the knife, a little bit of circus artistry. “Tongue?” he suggested.

Bodie said, scarcely moving his lips, “My grandmother was Jewish, did I ever tell you?”

“Really,” marvelled Doyle, testing the blade over the skin of his thumb, wincing—

“—I promised her, on her deathbed. As many converts as possible.”

“Only natural. Ease her passin’ moments. Well, that’s it, then. Deathbed vows are sacred.” And, watching the approaching knife, the smiling violence in the eyes of the men who held him, the nodding, avuncular approval of the older man—

“Unzip ’im for me, will you?” Doyle asked casually, and Bodie moved to do it: only stopping as the outburst from the chair scaled new heights around them—

“All right! All *right*. Put the fucking knife away, will you?” and Doyle tossed it, caught it by the handle, sheathed it, not without regret.

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Despatched afterwards to deal with the new information they had won, Doyle caught Bodie’s arm on the way to the car. “Hey. Want to come round to my place tonight?” He hadn’t seen much of Bodie off-duty since the Scottish trip last week.

Bodie shook his head without looking at him. “Sorry. Busy.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Got a very busy week, mate. Some other time, hm?”

Doyle stared hard at him, but Bodie was already ducking his head in under the doorframe, getting in ready to drive off. After a moment Doyle did the same, and made no further comment, though his mind was racing on it: such utter indifference. However else could it stand, but at face value?

All right then: he would leave it.

But even doing that gave all the power over into Bodie’s hands.

He supposed Bodie saw him as a passing sexual fancy, one he could access whenever the heat was on: *oh, good old Ray, he’ll come across for me tonight, no questions asked*. Well, fair enough. Up to a point, that suited Doyle too.

But he was not willing to be used whenever Bodie felt like it and cast off when he did not. Treated, in fact, exactly like some tarty bird hanging around, okay for a poke when you were so desperate a letterbox would do.

The instinct for revenge was fully developed in Ray Doyle; he stored every little arrow Bodie

sent his way, if not consciously, certainly instinctively, and this day's rejection sent them just one step nearer a crisis.

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“Press the next number in sequence.”

Doyle frowned as he concentrated. Through the grid he could see Bodie, who always looked supremely happy as he did these tests, chuckling to himself as he flexed his fingers over the keyboard. Just as if every single answer came to him pat.

Curious, Doyle had once made the effort to get a look at Bodie's intelligence profile, and found it almost identical to his own in overall quotient, Bodie scoring more highly on certain areas of verbal ability, and Doyle on spatial awareness, but for the most part they were just about a match. Both a high average: not genius material, but no way dim, either. So Bodie's projected confidence was an act, no more; he must be struggling just as Doyle was struggling, to choose one of six silly variables to continue a pattern. Doyle shrugged, recklessly chose. Across through the grid Bodie did the same.

Doyle sat on Dr Ross' desk when it was over, Bodie behind him. She had always seemed quite immune to their charm but that was no reason to stop trying. Her glacial good looks appealed to him, and she was certainly a challenge: his natural male instincts were intrigued by that and determined to engage him in combat.

“Well, you've both achieved your usual score,” she said, with that natural condescension which made one feel that the score was deficient in no small way. “Which of you boys wants to go first for the interview?”

“Oh, I think Ray can go first, while he's fresh,” Bodie murmured, looming in over Doyle's shoulder and fixing Ms. Ross with a dark, malicious eye. “No staying power, this lad.”

And it was directly to this point Dr Ross led him once they were alone and after he had dutifully drawn his House-Tree-Person icons for her inspection:

“Does it ever annoy you, that your partner continually puts you down in the company of females?”

“Bodie? Hadn't noticed.”

She registered disbelief by a narrowing of the gaze. “Come on, 4.5. He does it all the time: he makes subtly, correction, not-so-subtly, degrading references to your size, your sexuality, your success with women.”

He fixed her with a cool stare. “It's not important. Just his way of going on.”

“Yes—but a particularly consistent one, with a main theme of building himself up at your

expense.”

“Well, that’s just Bodie. No-one takes it seriously. Look, what is this? You tryin’ to put me against him, or something?”

“Not at all. Quite the opposite. I’m trying to establish whether or not it bothers you. And if it doesn’t, then its relevance to you is zero—its relevance to Bodie, of course, what his motivations are, is another matter. Let’s look at it another way. The nicknames he has for you.” She read them slowly, through pursed lips, making a meal of each one. “Goldilocks. Doyli-carte. Sweetheart. ‘The boy’. Doubtless there are others. Do you begin to see a common theme here?”

Some of the things Bodie called him in private would interest Dr Ross quite a lot more than those. Doyle coldly played the idiot card. “No.”

She was never at a loss for words, old Kate Ross. “So. You’d say, from your point of view, that you were getting on well with Bodie.”

“I’d say so, yes.”

“Just as well as ever?”

“I said—yes.” Unlike some lines of questioning she took, he could actually see that this one had some relevance; naturally Cowley would want to be fully *au fait* with any ripples in the partnership which might affect the teaming. But he was bored now, he’d answered the question, and his eyes slipped past her to the open spaces beyond the window.

“You’ve just been away together, haven’t you?”

“Yeh. With Bodie’s bird and mine,” he added.

She was looking back through her file, leafing through several pages. “Let’s recap, 4.5. The last time—no, the time before, I think—that you underwent this psychological profile, in the course of your ‘Partner—Relationship’ evaluation, you told me that you and 3.7 were regularly involved sexually with each other.”

His heart began to pound. Hadn’t seen that one coming. He leaned back in his chair, flipping a pen in his fingers. “Yeah,” he drawled. “So I did.”

She looked cool, unconcerned. In her job, she’d heard it all before, and many times worse. “Is that still the case?”

“Yeah.”

She was making quick checks on a chart. Her well-cut dark hair swung around the pale curve of her cheek; impatiently she brushed it back. “But, presumably, this sexual involvement drops off whenever either of you has a relationship going with a girl.”

“Not really, no,” he said, thinking that if that were the case he and Bodie would never get it together at all, since one or other or both of them was always involved with a girl. Usually several.

Dr Ross’ head came up, with that slow intent stare which meant that something he had said had engaged her attention. “So, are you saying, that this sexual contact with your partner isn’t just a substitute—a stopgap, shall we say—between heterosexual relationships?”

“No.” Was that wrong? She was writing at speed now, pen flying across the paper, dark strands of hair flicking as she wrote. He tried to read it upside down, but as usual could not.

“But, for example, when you were on your holiday with the two girls last week, presumably your sexual relationship with your partner receded into the background—”

He hesitated. “Couldn’t say that exactly.”

“Elaborate for me,” she said, dark eyes intently dwelling on him, and he took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and told her.

Half way through his account—truthful, but edited—she laid down her pen very carefully and sat quite still. And when he had finished her gaze remained fixed on him, as blank and unreadable as a camera lens scanning and scanning for information.

The silence began to make him uneasy. He didn’t think he’d told her anything all that shocking, no details: just times, places, frequency. None of the emotive words of sex and passion there, no mention of lust, desire, fellatio, nothing about the way he had whispered Bodie’s name as their bodies touched in the night, the way Bodie’s kiss had lingered, with love, on his lips—

“Let me get this quite clear,” she said at last, quiet and uninflected, “You and 3.7 take two girls away for, what, four days. In that time you have sexual contact with your girlfriend, twice, and with Bodie, six times.”

Put like that—

He shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, but it wasn’t—” It was all far too complex to explain. *‘Bodie took me by surprise.’ ‘The girls were out.’ ‘Susanna wasn’t in the mood.’* all sounded in the analytical light of day like poor excuses indeed.

“Anything wrong with that?” he asked aggressively, going all out for attack.

She shook her head briskly. “How you manage your personal affairs isn’t a matter for me to make moral judgements on, Doyle.”

He picked on the word instantly. “So you *are* sitting there thinking I’m immoral?”

“Morality is of no concern to me,” she said coldly, “except as to how it affects you. And more specifically, how it affects your performance in the job you’re paid to do, ergo how it affects your relationship with your partner. Just one more question, 4.5—”

He grinned at her, mocking. “Got it in one. You want me an’ Bodie to take you away for a weekend in Scotland.”

“—which of you usually takes the dominant role? I mean here,” she added, pen poised, “in a purely sexual situation.”

“Neither of us. Either.” She was always hinting at some sexual ambiguity in him: fortunately it didn’t bother him one bit. If you played both sides of the line you had twice the fun, that was how he saw it. But he was damned if he was going to give her what she was angling for and confess that he played the girl in bed to Bodie’s he-man, because it didn’t happen to be true.

He left the session feeling, as always, vaguely moody.

What went on between Bodie and Kate Ross he didn’t know: they were supposed to keep their sessions confidential, and for the most part Doyle was happy to go along with that; the woman had a way of digging out of you points of character you would prefer to keep to yourself. But he did ask Bodie if Dr Ross had asked him about their Scottish weekend.

“Yeah, she touched on it,” Bodie said, eyeing Doyle’s sandwich.

Resignedly, Doyle tore it down the middle and handed Bodie half. “Not liver sausage again,” Doyle queried, and let Bodie take the first bite, only risking his own when Bodie said thickly, “Ham.”

“What did you say?” Doyle asked. They were in the CI5 canteen at the time. Formica tables and a very grumpy tea lady, illnamed Glad.

“Ham,” Bodie repeated, and Doyle kicked him under the table.

“To Kate Ross.”

“Forgotten now,” Bodie said uncommunicatively.

Doyle shared out the other half of his sandwich. “Better get back. Cowley said ten minutes.”

“Man’s a bloody workaholic. Have you ever seen him eat?”

“Don’t remember it. Probably sets up an intravenous drip while he sleeps.”

“You still seeing Mary?” Doyle asked as they walked together out of the canteen.

Bodie was making a polite farewell bow to Glad the tea lady. “Yeah. On and off. You still got

that hooray, henry bird?”

Doyle grimaced. “You are joking, I take it. It would never have worked out.”

“I could have told you that.”

Doyle shot him a glance. “Was all right while it lasted.”

“Yeah, yeah, course it was,” Bodie agreed faintly, to humour him.

Doyle was still looking at him. “Come to that, I haven’t seen much of *you* lately.”

“Only every day, eight till six.”

“You know what I mean. Gone off me, have you?”

He meant it to be humorous, but Bodie only twisted around to see if anyone else was in earshot, then gave him an obscure look, “Drop it, Doyle, will you?”

Doyle raised an eyebrow, shrugged. Inside him an instinct for trouble stung. Because something was offkey in his relationship with Bodie at the moment. Bodie was cool with him everywhere but in bed, and he found himself following Bodie’s lead, contradictory and snappy, not particularly goodhumoured beneath the joky veneer. Yet he could not pinpoint the moment or the phrase which had turned the course of things. It was—just a feeling. That everything was not all right with their world: or at least, with Bodie.

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“—what the—”

Startled awake, his eyes sprang open and searched the darkness, every nerve tense and on alert.

“Ssh.” Bodie, moonlight on his naked skin, pulling back the covers and getting into bed with him. “S only me.”

“Mad bastard,” he grumbled thickly, relaxing, stretching, turning over in the bed. “Made me jump.” It was the middle of the night, the luminous green numerals on his alarm clock reading 2:14. Bodie was covering Doyle’s body with his own, pulling Doyle’s rumpled T-shirt up and out of the way. Their cocks kissed sweetly, lushly.

“Mm—you’re warm—” Bodie murmured into his ear, between nuzzles at his neck, his ears, his throat. Bodie smelt faintly of alcohol and faintly of Aramis: his sensual assault on Doyle was tender, knowing. Through rapidly spinning senses Doyle tried to fix onto the notion that he was annoyed with Bodie, and should be saying no. It was impossible: his body was already going along with it, nipples erect, stirred by Bodie’s firm chest, cock up like a lightning rod and seeking to snub itself blissfully against Bodie’s belly.

Saying no was off. He was slipping hazily back into fantasy, the echoes of a dream still with him. Bodie a sheik, come to his tent in the middle of the night, to ravish him; yeah, that was a good one. The darkeyed, silent stranger would be merciless, despite his struggles. In the bed, he struggled.

Bodie spread his thighs, pushed them back to his shoulders, kneeling up over him. Heart pounding violently, Doyle dug his nails into Bodie's arms, sweat sliding on sweat, Bodie's harsh fast breathing a counterpoint to his own. Bodie and Mary flashed into his mind, the images which had haunted him; frailty and innocence overcome by brute force, the slick and savage invasion, the melting of resistance into sudden, shocking rapture—

Let it happen.

Fervently imaginative, strung out, he waited, on the very edge of tension. And when Bodie knelt up again and kissed a trail down Doyle's stomach on the way to suck him off, Doyle opened his eyes wide into the dark. As Bodie's mouth paid sweet attention to his cock he twisted himself away, taking hold of Bodie by the shoulders, pulling him up the bed. Bodie had frozen, offput by such unusual resistance: Doyle pulled him down fiercely into an embrace, pressed himself hard against Bodie.

"Not that way. Let's really go for it."

Bodie raised himself a little, one palm flat on the bed either side of Doyle's face, his eyes a glimmer in the darkness. "You know, like you did it with Mary," Doyle said softly, flat on his back, looking up at him. "Ever since you told me, I've been thinking about it."

"Christ, Doyle."

"Come on."

Bodie said nothing, but his cock was ironhard, moving a little instinctively, pressing against Doyle's between their bodies. Doyle shoved himself upwards, hard.

"Come on. You did it with her, where's the difference?"

"You're not a bird, that's the difference." Bodie's voice was a little husky.

"What the hell does that matter? I swear to god, I can't get it out of my head since you told me. Just do it, Bodie. An' don't be too gentle."

Bodie seemed quite still, shocked perhaps; but his mouth came down to fasten on Doyle's, kissing him with just the kind of savage possession Doyle was after. He opened his mouth to the kiss and drank Bodie down with a powerful thirst for the man, the masculinity of him; his body lying open, defenceless beneath his weight. Still kissing him, snatching at his mouth in a fury or a desperation, Bodie rolled them both over so that Doyle lay on top of him; he brought both

hands down to Doyle's hard lean buttocks. They thrust together for a while, finding the same desperate rhythm. Bodie's hands traced thrillingly around his arsehole. And when he stabbed inside him with a thrust of possession, aggression, Doyle cried out throatily as he came, his body spasming all over, clenching around Bodie's finger in strong convulsions of delight as his cock spat rivers of fire across Bodie's belly.

A mindless while later, still panting for breath, struggling to order his boneless body he got to his knees and discovered that Bodie had come too; he lay down again and made himself comfortable in the loose circle of Bodie's arms. And later, much later, Bodie half-woke him, made love to him again, easy this time, and gentle, a draught of simple water to a thirsty man.

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"I could get used to this," he yawned, in the morning. Bodie, fully dressed and shaven was setting down a mug of coffee on the bedside chest. "How d'you fancy marrying me?"

Bodie was very pale, very darkeyed this morning. "That a serious offer?"

"Oh yeah. Cowley could be Best Man."

"—oh, and I had him pegged for bridesmaid."

"Which one of us would he be givin' away though, that's the question?"

"Oh you, Doyle, no question of it. After your performance last night." Bodie didn't say it particularly lightly, not out for a laugh, but not in a macho, scoring-points sort of way, either.

Doyle didn't take it seriously. Why should he?

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"I'm concerned about this pairing, as you know."

It was Major Hannay's turn to put in his penn'orth. "Well, I have to say, George, I can't think why Dr. Ross is concerned. Physically and mentally they're the best team you've got. Timing, training, fitness—it's all there. And, begging your pardon Doctor, that seems to me more vital than any airy-fairy paper test failures."

Cowley was paying them both his best attention, thoughtful and alert. In a long, long list of facts and figures and statistics, Bodie and Doyle's scores did set them consistently ahead of the pack: both Cowley himself and Major Hannay would have been more than happy to dismiss them and move on to the next partnership up for review.

But Dr Ross disagreed.

And, Cowley reflected, while that undoubtedly had its annoyances, that was after all why she

was employed—to give his operatives a battery of psychological testing, to see a different view, to look beyond mere physical statistics to the men beneath.

“What’s the nature of your concern, Doctor?” he enquired, rather disagreeably—psychiatrists needed no excuse, he had found, to become longwinded, and must not be unduly encouraged.

The octagonal conservatory where they held their meeting was an attractive and elegant setting, with mossy green carpets and stylish wicker furniture. The sun fell through the huge glass panels onto Kate Ross’ hair. She moved her head impatiently to be free of it.

“You’re aware that 3.7 and 4.5 are sexually involved with one another.”

“I’m aware of it, aye,” said Cowley impatiently, “because you brought it to my attention in one of your previous briefings. Otherwise, the two of them keep it very much to themselves, I’m glad to say.”

The Major chuckled. “Never seen them so much as holding hands in the gym.” One freezing glance from Cowley informed him that he had not, after all, been open to lighthearted repartee.

“My stand on this,” Cowley said, addressing the psychiatrist, “is as I made clear to you at the time: far better for them to resolve that kind of feeling than to let it fester—You remember Aisling and Browne— that sort of thing. Very unhealthy.”

“Well, I’d agree with you,” Kate Ross said. “That really is the essence of any therapy—to bring out what’s hidden, to face up to it, to learn to live with it comfortably. 3.7 and 4.5 have taken the first step— they feel a strong sexual attraction towards one another; ergo they have sex together. So far, so good. Now, if we take them individually—4.5 is dealing with things really quite well. I’d expect that from him: he’s generally quite secure in his self-image. He has his moments of doubt, the ‘why-am-I-here’ syndrome I call it, but on the whole he feels at home with himself, he believes in himself, he thinks he’s on the side of the angels, as it were.”

She paused. “The story with 3.7 is rather different.”

“Och, Bodie’s all right,” Cowley’s voice broke in, stopping Dr Ross in her tracks. “The man’s not had the easiest of lives, you know; he’s doing just fine despite that.”

“Mm,” Ross said noncommittally. “But I think you’ll see what I mean if I show you—” she leaned forward and did something to the video machine on the cabinet, and the familiar rounded profile of Ray Doyle was suddenly captured there on the large TV screen, half-face to the watchers, looking not to the camera but across the desk to his inquisitioner.

Here in person, she turned up the volume in time for her own recorded voice to filter into the room, saying: “*Do you feel any sexual attraction to your partner?*” and then she froze the screen again to explain coolly to the two Majors— “This is the first time I’ve put this question to him, so one would definitely be looking for some reaction here.”

And yes, the film had perfectly captured the man's surprise, his extreme stillness; and then the caution in his voice as he queried it— *“Are you askin’ me—do I fancy Bodie?”*

You could only admire the matter-of-fact, almost impatient cant of her interrogation: *“Yes, that’s essentially what I’m asking.”*

Auburn curls drifted through restless fingers, and Ray Doyle hitched one denimclad leg up across his other thigh. He said, with half a smile, a look almost flirtatious, *“Bodie’s a very attractive man. You’d have to be—very straight up and down—not to notice Bodie—”*

Immediately Kate Ross stopped the tape and the screen went dark. “There. Notice how quickly he recovered from the question—which I introduced deliberately out of context, so that he wouldn’t have a prepared response. And here’s an interesting thing: you must have noticed the ease with which he surmounted the most difficult part of it: he isn’t uptight, it doesn’t stress him at all to admit that he isn’t ‘straight up-and-down’ himself, as he puts it. Many, in fact the majority, of people with bisexual inclinations, would have found that much more difficult than he did.”

“Yes, yes,” Cowley said irritably. “Fascinating. And your point is—”

Unfinished, she withdrew the tape and slotted in another. There was Bodie, now, up on screen, in all ways a contrast to his partner: bigger, darker, smoother, more masculine. Whatever that meant. Cowley found himself wondering just what it did mean, in the light of Kate Ross’ excursions into the dark world of the male psyche.

She was fully into the swing of it, leaning forward. “Now listen to this. And watch the man’s body language; that can sometimes tell you a hell of a lot more than words ever could.”

Even to a lay observer it was clear that Bodie was very tense; leaning back in his chair he nevertheless managed to look as if he was on the verge of drawing a gun on his tireless questionmaster.

“—do you find him attractive?”

Bodie’s voice was low, cool. *“Yeah, I suppose so. Gets his share of the birds, anyway. Suppose that pathetic look brings out the mother in ’em.”*

“I said—do you find him attractive?”

At this point, Cowley could only admire Bodie’s restraint. Instead of landing one on her, Bodie pointed a finger at his own chest, looked pitying, superior, shocked.

“Me?”

“You’d say you feel no sexual attraction towards your partner?”

Bodie still looked pained. *“I dunno whether you’ve noticed this—easy mistake to make, what with the curls and the bangles an’ all. But Ray,”* he said, slow and clear and mocking, *“is a fella. No doubt about it. I’ve seen his—passport.”*

“But some men do, of course, find other men attractive.”

“Maybe,” Bodie growled. *“But I’m no poofter, Doctor.”*

Bodie’s face a study in grim refute, Ross froze the image there, then killed it as she turned back to the other two men in the room. “You can see that the difference is very marked. He isn’t happy with the subject, he’s dodging round the question. He doesn’t actually lie about it, which is in itself interesting, but he comes damn close. I tried a few more angles, but it wasn’t leading anywhere, and he was so uncomfortable with it he was getting more and more defensive.”

“I thought myself the man was remarkably restrained,” Cowley said, all brighteyed challenge, “considering how much he must have yearned to tell you to keep your nose out.”

The Major, more at home with the honing of bodies than minds, was following all this as best he could. “Wouldn’t it just be easier to say to him that you know that he’s carrying on with 4.5?”

Kate Ross shot him a cold, cold look of condescension. “Easier in what way? I know he’s having sex with 4.5, and he knows it too. He doesn’t know that I know that, of course, but that’s the only missing fact, and scarcely a relevant one.” She continued, spelling it out, carefully and precisely, for her IQ deficient audience, “The point of interest is not whether or not he is in fact having a sexual relationship with his partner, because we know that he is, but why he is at such pains to make the very idea seem unthinkable.”

“Well, and what are your conclusions?” Cowley asked her briskly. “Is he ashamed of it, is that it?”

“I don’t know why, yet,” Kate Ross replied. “Although of course I could make a guess. But until I know for sure, I strongly suggest you keep a ‘watch’ notice on those two, despite their apparently good condition, and don’t hesitate to call them in for a reappraisal ahead of schedule if you’ve got the slightest worry.”

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This particular photograph never made the papers: Cowley had strong views on his agents appearing in the press. So Bodie calmly relieved the pressman of his camera, spooled out the film, and handed it back.

“You can’t—” protested the media man, astounded.

“Just did,” Bodie said, flashing out his ID and then palming it away again. “D-Notice.”

“As of when?” The photographer glowered at him, and Bodie smiled affably back.

“Five minutes’ time.” He wandered over to join Doyle, guarding the door to the Minister’s apartment.

“Pity,” said Doyle, watching the exchange with a laconic eye. “Think he got my best side.”

“Nothing to choose between ’em, darlin’,” Bodie drawled, pocketing the film.

“Anyway, I could always take it to be privately developed.”

It might even be worth it. There was Ray Doyle, disrespectfully leaning on the door with his arms folded, legs crossed. Jeans, a scruffy linen shirt, cuffs folded back, one thin silver circlet drooping down his left forearm, he looked about as tough as you could get, on high alert, on line to whip out his gun and kill anything that tried to get past him, and yet there was something unusual about him, something exotic, fey perhaps. The contrast was fascinating.

“Don’t let this get in the way of your draw, will you.” He picked up the bangle off Doyle’s wrist between finger and thumb—and found himself looking down the business end of Doyle’s Browning. “Just testing, just testing.”

Doyle spun the gun lefthanded and rehoused it. “What’s going on in there, anyway?” Bodie nodded at the door.

“Go in if you want to,” Doyle gestured him past. “Old man’s got Forensics in there, but it looks like the usual.”

“No suspicious circumstances?” Bodie queried. At that moment Cowley appeared at the door, his face grim and set— “Bodie!” and Bodie waggled his eyebrows at Doyle.

“Love you and leave you.”

“What’s the password again?” Doyle called after him.

“Sal’s home phone number,” Bodie’s reply floated back to him, and Doyle grinned to himself, and closed the heavy wooden doors with the big brass knocker and leaned against it again, on guard, ready to defend it to the death from thrillseekers, pressmen, gossip columnists, all jostling for the details of the death of a Minister in circumstances widely rumoured to be sordid.

He joined Bodie in there later, once Forensics had done their stuff and the ambulance men had carried out the red-blanketed body on a stretcher, and the press presence had dwindled to one or two night watchmen.

Inside, the flat was very swish in a Mayfair kind of way, all mahogany and dark carpets and cabinets of porcelain ladies. “Ah, Doyle,” Cowley greeted him, “I’ll leave the clearing up to you and Bodie.... More your style than mine, I think.”

The old man had his glasses off, was rubbing his eyes; only for a brief second, but you could see he was tired. “Any message for the press, sir?” Bodie was asking.

“Och, it’ll come out soon enough. Leave it.”

“Any foreign connection?” Doyle asked, wandering over to join Bodie by the wardrobe.

“No sign so far. Looks like a straightforward suicide. Reason or reasons unknown.”

Bodie turned round with a large brassiere in his hands. “Oh, I don’t know, sir. If I were a 44-inch E-cup I think I’d feel like topping myself, wouldn’t you?” and while he and Doyle cracked up, Cowley gazed at them with distaste.

“He was a good man, in his way,” and they sobered under his quelling eye. “Good in his job, a good family man. Look through everything—with respect, if you can manage it.” And with that he left them alone in the dead man’s flat.

“All very well. But how can you respect a man who thought he looked good in a ballgown?” Bodie produced one with a flourish, huge red satin frills, on a hanger. Doyle ran the stuff of it absently through his fingers, poking his head around the door of the wardrobe. It was a transvestite’s paradise in there, wigs, dresses, corsets, very large sling-back shoes.

“I’ve never understood this,” Bodie pursued the matter with distaste. “How could any fella get a kick from dressing up in women’s underwear?”

Tired of mucking around—he wanted to get home, start ringing around for a date—Doyle pulled out a drawer, began a systematic search for anything Cowley might be interested in—blackmail notes from the Eastern bloc being top of the list.

“Well, it’s sexy, innit?”

Bodie’s question had been rhetorical. “What is?”

“Women’s underwear.” He felt Bodie’s gaze on him and wheeled around to meet his eyes. “Isn’t it?”

“Only,” Bodie said economically, “on women. Christ, Doyle! he must have weighed 15 stone. Can you imagine what he must have looked like?”

Doyle looked at the enormous suspender belt Bodie dangled at him and had to agree, it looked capable of strapping up the Eiffel Tower. He laughed some more when Bodie slipped into a huge pair of red patent highheels and tripped about with his hand on his hip.

It was a long time before they had searched everything to their satisfaction, and then it took some time to replace everything in order. All ready for the relatives. Well, they had some surprises coming.

“How did he do it?” Doyle asked, shutting the wardrobe door on the finery within.

Bodie, who had seen the body, grimaced. “Strangled himself. Not a pretty sight.” He was closing drawers with a firm snap.

“Funny way to go. If I were going to top meself,” Doyle mused, “I’d go for a nice quick bullet through the back of the head.”

“Yeh, but he didn’t leave a note. My guess is he didn’t mean to do it. Strung himself up for kicks, and it went too far.”

Doyle shuddered. “Now there’s a kinky way to get your thrills.”

“It’s the pressure,” Bodie said seriously. “Gives you one hell of an erection.”

“Tried it, have you?”

“—so I’m told.”

Doyle stood in front of the huge dressing-table mirror and frowned at himself. “Nope, I still don’t fancy it.”

“You’d prefer the women’s underwear?” Bodie asked behind him, with no particular emphasis.

Doyle grinned at himself. “No question.”

“I worry about you sometimes.”

“You don’t have to, it doesn’t bother me.”

“Doyle.”

Doyle answered him, in the same deadly serious tone. “Yes, Bodie.”

“—forget it, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeh, c’mon, say it.”

“I said, it doesn’t matter.”

“No I haven’t,” Doyle said, amused. He could see Bodie in the mirror behind him, a dark and brooding presence hovering there.

“Haven’t what?”

“I thought you were goin’ to ask me if I had a deep dark secret. Like, pink Janet Reger underneath me Levis.”

Bodie exhaled behind him. “Well, can’t blame me for wondering.”

The room was darkening as dusk drew on, the heavy drapes at the tall windows caught back and bunched at each corner. There was by now a certain quality of silence in the room. Doyle said to him, low:

“I think you really go for the idea. Don’t you, Bodie? It turns you on.” And as he said it he entertained for a mad moment the idea of dragging Bodie over to the huge fourposter bed and having it there and then. The thought that Forensics might yet be back, pick up on it, was the only thing which stopped him.

Bodie was right there with him in thought too; Doyle closed his eyes as his partner took hold of him, bruised his lips with a searing kiss. and when Bodie broke the kiss and whispered to him, just his name, no more than that, there was an urgency, a raw longing in the harshness of his voice. For a moment, the facade cracked, and a depth of yearning yawned between them—

“Doyle—”

Doyle wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. “Wha—?” he murmured. Opening his eyes he looked full into Bodie’s face, catching an expression there which astonished him: a sort of hunger, a despair even, the like of which he had never known nor understood. “What is it?” he said, soft. “What’s the matter?”

“I want you,” Bodie said abruptly, almost coolly, but his body was hot and hard, demanding.

Doyle broke away after a moment, having to fight seriously for freedom, backing off— “Bodie. *Bodie*,” fending off the hands which reached for him, “Leave it. We can’t do anything here, just use your bloody brain.”

“No,” Bodie said, quite sensibly, but he followed Doyle and was all over him again. Breathing in the heady scent of Bodie’s aftershave as Bodie kissed his throat, his cheek, his ear, Doyle briefly entertained the notion of tossing Bodie off where they stood— probably wouldn’t take long—then he shoved Bodie away again, hard, meaning it.

“Look, we must be mad. I wanna keep this job, it’s the best I’m likely to get. Bloody press outside the door, Cowley might take it into his head to come back any minute, Forensics going over the place with a microscope. Come round to my flat.”

“Time?” Bodie asked through compressed lips, his hands falling empty to his sides, clenching into fists. He was breathing as fast as a runner in a race, his pale skin flushed and damp with sweat.

“Bedtime?” Doyle suggested; the look he flashed his partner was very come-hitherish, and they

walked to their separate cars alone, tense, disquieted, simmering,

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“Who is it?”

“Me,” came the low voice over the intercom, from two flights down.

Doyle grinned to himself as he answered, “Which me?”

“Don’t piss about, Doyle, it’s pouring out here.”

Bodie sounded plaintive, and certainly when he appeared through the door he was wet, droplets of rain running down the black gleaming cap of his hair and over his leather jacket. His lips were cool and wet, too, as Doyle came close for a kiss. “You eaten?” he murmured against Bodie’s mouth.

“Yeah.”

“Wanna drink?”

“No.”

“Good. Come’ere, then.”

He had no premonition of disaster, and anticipation had only sharpened his desire. Bodie’s too, it seemed; it was as if the intervening hours had never happened, Bodie’s hands, his mouth, as demanding as they had been in the Mayfair flat. On the stereo some mournful voice was softly singing to someone that they looked wonderful tonight; a sad, sweet, eerie tune that forever after when he heard it brought Doyle back to this night, to now, to the clothes he wore, the scent of Bodie, the dark sexual tension in the room as Bodie’s possessive hands swept over him, inside his shirt to roughly caress his nipples, and then, inside his jeans.

Apprehensive, he closed his eyes in sheer, heartstopping delight as Bodie’s arrogant hand pressed through the satin, his bonehard cock sliding and slipping inside, blissful, silky.

Bodie made a noise, some inarticulate sound; he wrenched at Doyle’s jeans in a frenzy and Doyle kicked them off and away; his heart was pounding at Bodie’s extreme reaction, and yet this was the very thing he had courted. Because he had seen straight away in the Mayfair flat that this was an intense thing for Bodie: maybe, who knew, the deepest, most hidden desire he had ever had. Playing with fire he knew it had been, but he had counted on himself to be able to handle Bodie. He could always handle Bodie. Only not this time.

And as the man sang sadly that it was late in the evening, Bodie threw him almost casually to the ground, came down on top of him, eyes glittering, snatching a fierce and hurting kiss that left his mouth bruised; then moved down his body like a trail of lightning to kiss his cock through

black satin, Bodie's eyes falling shut as he mouthed him through the silky stuff over and over.

Winded, breathless, Doyle lay flat on his back, violently excited, way beyond caution himself. Even when Bodie yanked the damp panties down to his ankles so that they manacled him, pushed his knees back to his shoulders, Doyle only squeezed his eyes shut until he saw stars, heard the music wail in his ears, love, longing, loss. And stars exploded inside him too as he felt Bodie's cock thrust at him and into the tight entrance to his body; and that was all it took.

The violence of his orgasm shook his whole body, lifted him and racked him with whitehot ecstasy; he was still coming in small, sweet throbs when Bodie scooped Doyle's own come off his chest and roughly wiped it on his own cock, the scent of it rising all around them, sweat and sex.

Won't be enough, Doyle's waking senses warned him, but it was enough, at least to get Bodie inside him with one hard plunge; and Bodie came almost straight away, five, six, short and brutal thrusts and then his cock shuddered inside Doyle's wincing, tender body.

"I love you. Oh christ, Ray, I love you," Bodie murmured into his ear as it happened, quite lost, quite beyond himself; and Doyle heard the words but lost them afterwards forever in the face of what happened next.

For one moment, there was peace in the room. His heart pounded strongly in his ears. Bodie was heavy on him, hot, sticky.

My darling. You were wonderful. Tonight...

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Then Bodie scrambled up and away from him as if he could not bear to touch him at all in the horrid aftermath, painful, awkward. His body raw and stinging, Doyle watched his partner thrusting himself back into his clothes in indecent haste; his own ankles were manacled still by the scrap of twisted satin, and he kicked it off. Bodie turned then and knelt and picked the panties up, looking at Doyle with a hard, cold stare, a face of stone which chilled Doyle's heart.

"These yours, are they?" Bodie asked.

Doyle cleared his throat, tried out his voice. "Come off it, mate. Sandra's, I think."

"Pity," Bodie said, in that same dead, cold tone. "They suited you. But then, they're tart's knickers, aren't they? And you—"

"Bodie—" He was getting to his feet now, touched, clouded by Bodie's dark, tumultuous emotion, finding his jeans—

"—are a tart, aren't you, Ray?" His mouth smiling, his eyes violent, Bodie slid the words out like silk, but every one struck home.

Doyle grimaced, raising his hand in a gesture of utter rejection. “Just fuck off, Bodie, if all you can do is spit filth.” His voice rose. “I don’t wanna hear it, okay?”

And the strongest will in the world could not prevent the wince as he moved, because Bodie had bruised him somewhere inside, and Bodie did not miss it, tracking his expression with a flicker of his eyes, his own face twisting as he said, “That’s what you get, Ray, if you play dangerous games.”

Doyle held his chin up, stared Bodie out bitterly. “I’m not complainin’, am I?”

Bodie spoke softly, contemptuously. “You could have got your guts ruptured, mate.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a good job you only lasted five seconds then, innit?” He turned away from Bodie, weary, low in body and soul.

“You got what you asked for, Doyle.”

“Yeah, and like I said, I’m not complainin’. Now fuck off, will you, and leave me alone.”

“Are you okay?” Bodie said abruptly, staring at his back.

“Oh yes, bloody wonderful, never better. Thanks for all the kind words.” He turned and went to the bathroom, slamming the door loudly behind him, giving Bodie plenty of time to leave.

Which he did.

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Doyle was in ahead of Bodie the next morning, already in Cowley’s office, perched against a radiator by the wall. Bodie’s eye leapt to him and wouldn’t leave. Doyle was pale, heavy-eyed, the session he had had in the bathroom that morning not one he looked forward to repeating. He met Bodie’s eye with cool steadiness and then looked away. Cowley took something off his desk to show them, took stock of them then favoured them with a glare over his glasses.

“Och, wake up the pair of you! You both look half asleep this morning—” and the briefing began.

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In the car afterwards everything was much as normal; they had always, right from the start, been able to divorce the job from personal emotions. They did the day’s work. And the next. The weekend came and went. Nothing.

Well, Doyle was wary now, keeping his distance. Bodie had used him, then blamed him; the age-old story. Doyle wasn’t setting himself up for that again, thank you very much. Bodie’s fury

had had something unnatural about it, something disproportionate. Okay, they had dabbled in deep waters. Doyle didn't see that a lifetime's purdah was necessary, even so.

Soap opera would have had him say, with a deep and earnest tone, "We've got to talk about this, Bodie—" But soap opera wasn't dealing with characters like Bodie, who, if he did not refuse pointblank to talk at all, could not be relied upon to say what he meant, always assuming, that was, he had the necessary insight into his own reactions to know what he did mean; and certainly would let slip nothing at all close to his heart.

And what was close to Bodie's heart—?

Loyalty, there was that. As partners they were just about as good as you could get. He and Bodie stuck up for one another, they looked out for one another; back to back against a world that was out to get them.

And Bodie fancied him; that was beyond doubt.

Half Bodie's trouble, that. If Doyle led him on, he would follow.

So: in bed they were dynamite; professionally they were a perfect team.

In between these two extremes it seemed to Doyle that they had no common ground. A wasteland.

Bodie wanted it that way.

Doyle knew that to his cost: as happened when you sensed that here there could be something particular, some completeness of attraction, he had thrown in his line a few times with Bodie, just to see what he would get. But the line always came back to him empty. Message loud and clear. Bodie didn't want to get involved.

So, no happy ending: no promises. No forever hints.

But then, what was he expecting? Bodie to declare undying love? That was a laugh.

All the same, the shock of it all had troubled him enough to make him consider, half seriously, telling someone all about it. Kate Ross, for example. After all, the woman knew him well, she was trained up to the eyebrows in human behavioural psychology and must have read all the right case studies. It might not yet be the thing over here, but in the States finding yourself with the map supplied by your therapist was considered not a mere luxury but essential to a fruitful life.

And how would he put it?

"Thing is, Dr, we went a bit too far—"

“We had this thing with women’s underwear—”

“—yeah, I know, sounds bizarre, but—”

“See, the thing is, Bodie really went for it. In a big way—”

“He all but raped me, to be honest—”

“And then he couldn’t face up to it. Couldn’t take his share of—”

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Well, we’ve all been there, Doyle recognised: the delight of the really dirty act, the thrill of the taboo. The joy of, say, a four-year-old, peeing secretly in the sand—Doyle himself, aged seven or eight, playing doctors with Melanie Seaton next door—She had taken her role of nurse very seriously, probed his cock with various instruments culled from her mother’s manicure set, so exciting him that he had had a delicious, terrifying orgasm and fled the garden shed, feeling for days afterwards not only sore but a dogged sense of shame. Like any cheap thrill, it had not been worth it.

But it was Bodie’s reaction which had made it cheap, nothing else. It could have been—wonderful. The most intense things shared were the most special.

Obviously it hadn’t been that special for Bodie.

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Dr Kate Ross looked measuringly at the young agent sitting across from her.

“I’ll be honest with you, 4.5. Any breach of confidentiality here I take upon myself—”

Doyle said unsmiling, “I knew it. Cowley’s got a secret woman. He’s a dark horse, that one.”

“—I’m worried about 3.7.” she said directly. “Are you?”

That stopped Doyle in his tracks, made him draw in a sharp breath. He met her eyes, then slid his gaze away, wandering over the geography of the furniture. “Bodie’s all right.”

“4.5, you trust this man with your life. Every day of the week you go out there and it’s him you’re relying on to stop some assassin with your name on his knife. You don’t lead a charmed life, you know; very often it’s that man and no-one and nothing else standing between you and the underworld. So I’ll ask you again: are you happy about 3.7?”

“Look—I trust Bodie to the hilt. Can’t tell you any more than that. He’s as sharp as ever.”

Her gaze seemed to penetrate him, right through to the heart; he did not drop his own. Finally

she relaxed it, looking abruptly away.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Your professional appraisal should be as good as anyone’s; you’re the one who has to work with him. How is your relationship off duty?”

He had known this had to be faced, but he winced none the less, clenching his fingers tight for one brief second.

“All right. Not seeing much of each other, but—” he shrugged. “Bodie’s got several birds on the go— one for each letter of the alphabet, I reckon...”

“And you?”

“Yeah—one or two.”

“So your sexual relationship with 3.7.—”

He groaned, put his head in his hands. “Look, do we have to go through all this today? I’m not in the mood.”

“All right,” she agreed, surprising him. “Let’s go on to other things. Last week, for example. 3.7 was knocked out by a bomb blast, is that right? There was a trembler. 6.9 set it off with a wild shot when you were investigating a bakery on Ruston Mews—”

His face tightened. “Stupid fucking bastard. But Bodie was okay.”

“—minor concussion, they just kept him in overnight for observation, am I right?”

“Yeah. But he’s fully cleared for duty again now.”

“And, going back to the incident, you were there at the time, weren’t you?”

“Yes—” He saw it coming. What a bloody marvellous day this was turning out to be. “It’s all in my report.”

“Have you anything you’d like to add, to me?”

“No, goddamnit.” She saw the crease of serious anguish deepen in his cheek: he was upset about this, and no wonder.

“I wondered if, with hindsight, you might be able to shed some light on the matter. I think you’ll agree, your behaviour was difficult to understand, to say the least.”

“I can’t explain it,” Doyle said, tightly. “I’ve thought about it. But I can’t...”

She pursued him relentlessly despite the signs of distress. “Your partner, knocked out by a blast

ten feet away. Lying unconscious. Severely injured for all you know. What did you do?”

“You know fuckin’ well what I did,” he muttered, strung out.

“Yes, it’s on several reports, including your own. Ignoring the most elementary safety guidelines you rolled your injured partner onto his back and shook him. Now, if he had internal injuries—an injured spinal column—”

“I know, I know. For chrissake, I know. D’you think I haven’t thought about it?”

In every nightmare since, from the look of him. “What was going through your mind at that point?”

“I was worried sick, damn you! I thought he was—”

“Yes, I appreciate that. But losing control in the way you did—”

“Look, I’ve already had the bloody lecture from Cowley.”

“It’s not my brief to tell you what is and what isn’t acceptable, 4.5. I’m simply looking for motivations.”

“I really wanted to finish Bodie off, is that it? Turn him into a wheelchair case?”

He was at simmering point, ready to explode. Time to pass on. “Let’s look at something else. When you go in as a team, let’s say the old textbook standard, ‘place where there may be a gunman in ambush’—who goes in first?”

Diverted by the quick change of direction, he looked at her. “I do.”

“Why?”

“Bodie’s a better long-range shot. Can give me better cover than I could give him—”

She shook her head decisively. “Not on these scores, he isn’t. The difference is marginal. You can check them if you require confirmation.”

“Well, that’s the way we’ve always done it.” Narrowed eyes searched her, trying to get the point of this, see what she was probing for.

“Do you think it might all be part of the same pattern? Could it be that he sees himself as the dominant partner in your relationship?”

From the faint colour which had hit his cheek she guessed she had come close to home on that one, but then again, perhaps not, because he shook his head decisively enough in answer to her next question: “And is that how you see it?”

“No,” he said, “Can’t say I do.”

She abandoned that line of questioning and gave it to him straight. “The problem is, 4.5., despite the fact that many things are still going okay for you, all the indications I have are that the relationship is deteriorating, and the partnership in danger.”

“Oh, wonderful,” he said, listlessly. This interview had been a hard one for him. Kate Ross consciously relaxed her deep frown into a small smile for him.

“Don’t look so worried. It’s my job to worry about these things, not yours.”

Which was about the most human thing he had ever heard her say. “It’s my life,” he muttered ironically. “I have to worry about it.”

She was looking at him earnestly. “The thing here—you see, 4.5, I get the impression from you, consistently, that you care about your partner quite a lot. You enjoy being with him, you worry about him when he’s in danger; you actually prefer, quite often, his company to that of a female, or indeed, to anyone at all.”

“Nothing wrong with that, is there?” he said, offensively boldeyed.

“—I’m just saying that that’s the picture I get from you. But I get a very different picture from 3.7.”

It took a moment to sink in. He felt suddenly winded, as if she had lowered his guard then punched him in the stomach. His expression deepened to a scowl. “I get it. You’re saying you get the impression that Bodie—doesn’t care that much about me.”

Kate Ross noted with a frown of her own the way one hand came around himself, hugging his stomach absently. She felt abruptly sorry for him; this was a matter so delicate. So much pride and discretion and confidentiality on the line here. But she said what she could.

“It’s very difficult to get much out of 3.7 at all—”

He laughed, bitterly. “Oh, I can imagine.”

“—But you have to remember that for anybody at all, the most difficult things to talk about are the things which are the most difficult to face up to—”

He was off on his own tack now, scarcely hearing her. “No wonder the partnership’s deterioratin’, then; perhaps what he wants is a new partner altogether.”

And his smile was hard, artificial, every line in his body tense as he sat there not listening to her, mind racing on his inner concerns.

“Pay attention, 4.5,” she said impatiently. “That really isn’t what I’m saying at all. Since he can’t or won’t talk about his feelings, we can only use our intelligence and look at what’s there in front of us.”

“Well, what is there in front of you?” Doyle demanded, his eyes fixing on hers, searching. “What exactly does he tell you about me?”

“I can’t tell you that, you know I can’t.” Kate Ross regarded him with something like pity, but like all her emotions it was utterly detached. “And if I could, it wouldn’t help you much. Far more telling—”

“What?”

“—are the things he *doesn’t* say.”

Dr Ross took a deep breath. She rifled through her pages, pulled one out at random. “13th March 1979, oral sex in 3.7’s car. 17th March, similar incident off-duty. 25th March—training session—sexual incident followed—”

She looked straight up, straight into the hard green eyes blazing out of his pale face framed by those blessed curls— “I stopped detailing these incidents once they had established themselves as a regular occurrence. But every date, every time, every detail, I got from you, 4.5. 3.7 has never, not in any of his interviews with me since his sexual relationship with you began, given me any hint that it existed.”

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Doyle hefted down the most serious smg he could find in the armoury, took it out into the practice arena.

So, all his searching for complex explanations had been a waste of time: it was, in fact, all perfectly simple. Blind. He had been such a blind, stupid fool.

He faced the target, swung the gun up to his shoulder and kept his finger on the trigger, rocksteady as the recoil beat a pacy tattoo on his collarbone, the power of the thing vibrating in his hands as the bullets sped away and scythed through every target in turn.

Then he broke it in half, reloaded, lifted it again.

The pounding in his ears, the sounds of splintering wood right, left and centre, didn’t antagonise him one bit. It was better, after all, than thinking.

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Above the arena, looking down through a one-way glass window, Cowley rested his hands on the ledge before him and watched in silence.

“I hope it was the right thing to do,” said the woman behind him.

“Aye. So do I... ”

“But there really wasn’t an alternative. You’ve seen 3.7’s latest psychological evaluations, which I’m sorry to say only confirm my earlier predictions. He’s in really quite a disastrous downward emotional spiral, and the relationship with 4.5 is not only not helping in its current configuration, it’s actually making things worse. They have to break apart, resolve all these conflicts.”

Cowley mused, looking down at Doyle decimating plywood with high-velocity magnesium flashing, “Can they do that?”

Dr Ross came to stand beside him. For a moment she too looked down in silence, watching. Then she said, “He’s intelligent. Sensitive. Though today he was missing the point by miles.”

“He’ll get there,” Cowley said.

“Let’s hope so.” She turned to go.

“Look,” said Cowley. “Come here and look at this,” and she joined him again at the window. A tall dark man was moving out behind Doyle and as they watched Doyle turned, a conversation took place. It was of the briefest: then Doyle shoved the gun against Bodie’s chest, hard, hard enough to make him take two steps backwards, and pushed past him, hands in his pockets.

“They have to go back before they can go forwards,” Kate Ross said, but Cowley had turned away from the view, away from her, and left.

“Don’t talk to me.” Doyle thrust the gun into Bodie’s arms, hard enough to hurt him, and pushed past.

“—Ray—?” Bodie said, astonished. Murphy had come over to join him and they gazed together at Doyle’s stiff-shouldered retreat.

“What’s up with him?” Murphy raised an eyebrow.

“Wrong time of the month,” Bodie quipped, but it was the wrong joke, the wrong time, the wrong man. After a frozen moment Doyle turned around. His eyes on Bodie were very direct, chill as winter, a white line of pressure around his mouth.

“Never give up, do you Bodie?” He stepped in closer, fast, delicate. Seeing it coming, but unbelieving until the last possible moment, Bodie raised crossed fists in front of his face, blocked the kick, but the fast following punch floated through under his guard and thudded solidly, with all Doyle’s weight, into his belly.

With an *'oof'* of pain Bodie went down. Doyle spun immediately on his heel to deal with Murphy, who was moving in on him to restrain him, knocking his hands away, ready for more. The other agent backed off before the light in Doyle's eye.

But Doyle's smile was sunny, almost sweet, his hair flying in the breeze as he asked, "Done laughing, Murphy?"

"I'm not laughing," Murph said very slowly, very calmly: deliberately turning his back on Doyle he bent down to see to Bodie.

Doyle turned away from both of them and left, moving fast for the exit, not looking to one side or the other.

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It was after midnight when his doorbell rang. Just Bodie's usual time. Jarred awake, Doyle unpeeled himself from the sofa and then sat back down again, heavily.

Christ, he was tired. Drunk.

Had thrown himself with more than usual gusto into the mad disco beat of a London nightlife underworld, and it had helped him forget, for a while. But he had come home alone; didn't trust himself with anyone, not tonight.

The doorbell again. He crossed to the intercom. "Go away, Bodie."

"The hell I will. Look, Doyle: enough's enough. Let me in."

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Bodie looked in no better shape than himself, whitefaced, red around the eyes, whisky on his breath. "Where've you been all evening? I've been trying you since six."

"Madder music, stronger wine," Doyle answered, pleased with himself. "You know—dancin'..." He groped about for the rest of it, found it delightfully to the point. "Pale lost lilies, and all that."

Bodie stared back at him without expression. "What are you going on about?"

"Dowson—"

"Oh, I know Dowson, all right. Surprised at you, though."

"Why—got a monopoly on literature, 'ave you?" Doyle was pleased with the way he had got the tricky words out. "Whoops. Wait a minute. Isn't it supposed to be a girly sort of thing, poetry?"

That won't do, Bodie." He wagged a solemn finger. "Won't do at all. You'll have to give it up—take up the dogs instead. Ge'us a drink."

"Haven't you had enough?" But Bodie complied anyway and Doyle gulped at it in relief, feeling the fiery fronds warm the chill cast around his heart like a spell. Bodie came close to him then, too close for comfort. Doyle swung away, went to sit a distance away, gazed up at his moody dark partner with brighteyed malevolence.

"What you doin' ere, anyway? Feelin' frisky, were you?" He laughed, not pleasantly. "Stupid question. Why else would you be 'ere? Well, you can forget it. I'm not doin' business tonight. If I'd been sittin' in the window, red light on, hitchin' up me stockin's, well. Would have been different—"

"Stop it, Ray." Bodie's voice cracked out like gunfire.

"Well, you fuck off then," Doyle said, and took another long pull at his glass. It really seemed to help. Pity the effect was so temporary—about thirty seconds a sip, he reckoned. And if he stopped pouring it down his throat, then nothing would hold back the tides of hurt and anger; sadness...

"What's wrong, Ray?" Bodie paced round the room, hands in his pockets, very reined in.

Doyle hooted. "Oh, good one, Bodie, good one. Ask me what's right. Would take less time to tell you."

Bodie said in a tight, clipped way, "Is it what we— what I did the other night?"

Bodie had the guts to look at him anyway. Doyle pretended to consider, cradling his glass on his chest. "What was that then?" His eyes, mocking, ablaze, held Bodie's hard. Bodie took a step towards him.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. On my life, I swear it."

Doyle made a dismissive wave in the air. "Least of my troubles. Want to do it again, do you?" His hand went to the buckle of his jeans, opened them, halted. "Oops, wai'a' minute. You need me to wear the women's panties, right? Ge' me another drink and maybe I'll put them on. Suspenders too if you like. Drink first."

Bodie was watching him now with a hard, drawn expression; his mouth twisted. "You've had enough."

"Haven't had any at all," Doyle said, and laughed, and hiccupped, delightfully. "Maybe I should just get back to me beat after all. Turn on the red light, sit in the window awhile. Slack Alice, they call me, round the docks."

Bodie turned away; his shoulders slumped wearily. "Ray, you're not making any sense. I'll

come back—”

“Don’t bother,” Doyle said, and hurled his glass, with all his strength, at the opposite wall, right beside Bodie. “Not if you can’t even get me a fucking drink.”

In the aftermath of the explosion Bodie just stood there, brushing broken glass out of his hair. “Look, Doyle. The things I said the other night—I was— shocked. Didn’t know what I was sayin’. Shocked by what I did,” he added, staring dispassionately at his bloody palm, “Not you.”

“Yeah, you meant it though, didn’t you? Said it enough times. Think I’m a bit of a tart, don’t you, Bodie? You’re always sayin’ it. Ask Kate Ross. She knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Oh, but you don’t talk to her, do you? Made me look a right bloody fool, you did—” Bodie was turning his back on him, going out of the room. Doyle leapt to his feet, prowled after him, the rush to his head making him momentarily dizzy.

Bodie stood with his back to him at the kitchen sink, rinsing blood and water away. “And what exactly do you tell her, Ray?” The smooth, dangerous lilt was back in Bodie’s voice.

“Oh, I tell her everything, me. I thought that was the whole bloody point. I didn’t know it had to be a deep dark secret, stupid of me, I know.”

Bodie stood there, very still, with his back to Doyle.

“Yes it was. Very stupid.”

“Slackmouthed, that’s me,” Doyle remarked. “Slack everything, you might say. Turn around.”

And after a moment Bodie did, his face paper white, a deep bright vein of temper in his eye. Doyle took Bodie’s hand, looked at it: one quite nasty cut at the base of his finger, bright blood welling as he watched. He put it to his mouth, sucked it away, rich, salty sweet.

Then he dropped to one knee on the floor, looking up at Bodie’s face, provocative, dæmonic, Bodie’s blood on his lips. “What d’you want then? Blow job do? Be quickest. I tell you what, come in under a minute and I’ll let you have it on the house.” He rubbed one hand over his face, sniffed, sitting back on his heels all attentive for Bodie’s reply. Compliant and dutiful. Like the whore Bodie thought he was.

“You bastard, Doyle,” Bodie whispered, that terrible brightness back in his eyes and spilling over into his voice. “You bastard.”

Doyle was fully expecting a kick in the face, was braced for it, victory of a sort.

But Bodie simply pushed past him, gently enough, and left. Doyle stayed where he was for a

moment, listening to Bodie's footsteps, the door slam, and far off, a car engine exploding into life, roaring away.

He leaned his head against the kitchen cupboard, sick, tired, dizzy. Well, that was it then.

End of the affair.

Zeroplanic

Wonderful Tonight *Part Two - Wilder Justice*

Sebastian

Anson loomed behind him and whispered in his ear, “I hear your partner’s gone seriously off the rails.”

“Yeah?” Doyle was pulling off his black balaclava, stuffing it in his locker, getting out his biking helmet, gloves. “Well, for what it’s worth, Rob, his scores were still up on 95% of the section.”

Anson wasn’t impressed. “Word is, they’re considering standing him down.”

“Well, if they do—” he turned and gave Anson a blazing smile— “play your cards right and it could be you an’ me, sunshine.”

Anson shuddered visibly. Word had it that Doyle was only one degree less off the wall than his psycho partner. Doyle was rumoured to be holding the partnership together—just. Cowley’s favourite team were flying wild, close to the wind, at present. But they were still flying.

Doyle didn’t watch Anson go; he was looking forward to getting home, stripping off his clothes, getting into a hot bath. Afterwards he had in mind a pizza out with his current girl, followed by a session at one of the all-night dance clubs—

“Ray.”

He straightened without hurrying, turned around to see Bodie there. Doyle regarded him for a moment: Bodie was tense, preoccupied, wired-up, and whatever it all meant it sure as hell wasn’t helping his field performance.

“You wanna watch yourself, mate,” he commented, not unkindly. “Cowley and Macklin got their eye on you. Just a friendly word of advice.”

“Yeah, right. Doyle—I need you to do me a favour.” Bodie’s nostrils were flared, his eyes sparking, fairly fizzing with energy.

“What sort of favour?” They were walking out now, towards the carpark. Doyle turned towards his Norton, slipped on his gauntlets and straddled the broad leather seat, swinging his helmet by the strap as he waited for Bodie’s reply. Bodie patted the saddle behind him.

“I want you to ride in a race for me.”

“What for?”

“No questions, Doyle. For old times sake—okay?” Still on that high of suppressed excitement, agitation, Bodie gave him some scant details and took himself off, leaving Doyle pensive, restless.

Old times, eh.

Oh, Bodie. What went wrong with us?

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“Shusai’s opinion is that Bodie is very sick.”

Kate Ross spread her hands. “Haven’t I been telling you that?”

Cowley gave her a sharp glance, and made his reply as wordily pedantic as he could. “Indeed you have. But I feel I must point out, Doctor, that although you originally attributed 3.7’s emotional problems to his inability to come to terms with his sexual relationship with 4.5, the termination of that relationship has not brought about any noticeable improvement.”

“In fact, it seems to have accelerated some sort of a crisis,” Kate Ross agreed with him calmly, noting that Cowley sounded almost aggrieved. Just as if he thought that psychiatrists actually planted the emotional problems instead of simply reporting on what they found.

“So this doesn’t surprise you?”

“Bodie has a lot of conflicts to resolve before he can make any sensible decisions about his life, and at the moment, that doesn’t appear to include 4.5. In fact, both of them are pursuing new affairs—heterosexual ones—”

“Ah yes,” Cowley agreed. “Miss Jennifer Black... Unremarkable, I thought.”

“I don’t imagine he has any long term plans for her.” *A smokescreen. Like Doyle’s girl, and the one before, and the one before that. A little cipher of normality, safe and unthreatening.*

“Women’s Lib would not approve of 3.7 and 4.5,” she said aloud, and Cowley darted a piercing glance at her.

“What’s your outlook on all this, Doctor?”

“I’m not in the business of haphazard prophecy, Major Cowley,” Kate Ross said severely.

Cowley sighed and resisted the temptation to criticise: for all he knew, he would have liked to say,

3.7 and 4.5 had been handling the matter in their own way without interference, however well meaning. Now what was he left with—? One good man, the best, a handsbreadth away from compulsory standby status; and one step away from the breakup of the best team he had ever had.

Sad times.

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“Do you feel he harbours any resentment towards you?”

Doyle shifted in his chair. “I don’t know... Not on the face of it.” *He damn well would if he knew Cowley’d dragged it out of me that I wouldn’t be including him in my projected assault team—*

“And yet, in some ways, nothing seems to have changed—”

“Well, not for the better, no,” Doyle agreed ironically.

“—taking, for instance, the matter of the water pistol—”

Doyle groaned, hands flying up to rummage in his hair, tired of this one. “Look, we’ve gone over this before. He didn’t mean anything by it. It was a joke, for chrissake. I didn’t take it the wrong way or anything. Just Bodie’s odd sense of humour, thassall.”

The look she gave him was very direct. “You say you didn’t take it the wrong way. I’d say perhaps you did...if you accepted it as a simple joke.”

“Don’t tell me it had some complex hidden message. That’s the trouble with you lot, everything does. If I blew my nose you’d trace it back to something happened when I was five, wouldn’t you?”

“I can’t believe you’re so naive, 4.5, that you don’t see the symbolism,” she replied quite coldly.

“Look, you’ve spent a lot of time this year convincin’ me that Bodie really doesn’t like me all that much. Well, okay, I’m convinced. So when he shoots me with a water pistol, what he’d really like to do is shoot me for real, is that it? Well okay, I’ll buy that. If it keeps you happy.”

Kate Ross only shook her head. “You’re still missing the point, 4.5. And since quite frankly I don’t see any chance at all of matters improving before 3.7 resolves this current crisis of emotion—one way or the other—I see no virtue in continuing. All your reports confirm you as fit for duty. Mine will concur. This interview is terminated.”

She spoke these last words into her microphone, then snapped it off. Still he lingered, wandering over to the window, then back again to perch on her desk. Dark head down, she was writing furiously. He couldn’t decipher it.

Couldn’t decipher any of it. He only knew Bodie’s obsession with these bikers, with the red-headed girl, was bad news, indicative of some deeper blacker turmoil within.

“Are you worried about Bodie?” he asked her abruptly.

“Very seriously worried,” she replied. Well, that was reassuring.

And as he reached the door her last words rang out behind him:

“If you want my advice—”

“It would be?” he said without turning.

“Don’t let him out of your sight.”

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Over a half of bitter in the pub Doyle frowned to himself, replaying the interview in his head over and over, worrying. “*Don’t let him out of your sight.*”

All very well for her to say. He didn’t see that much of Bodie any more. Doyle had his own life now which he pursued with energy, and Bodie wasn’t a part of it any longer. He saw that as much Bodie’s choice as his own.

Mind you, he missed it. Wasn’t a day went by when he didn’t look at Bodie and be taken by surprise; his body remembered, too well, even though his intellect said no. Remembered the days he could throw out any little spark and Bodie would catch fire from it.

The sex had been magic: but what else did they have?

Well, what else was there.

Doyle did not even know, any longer, just what he was looking for.

“D’you think he’d have killed me?”

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Bodie was referring to Cowley, walking away from them at this moment, getting further away all the time.

“Yeh, I reckon he might have.” Doyle crouched over, recovering his breath.

Bodie exhaled, long and hard. “And since he didn’t—” Bodie turned to look at him, not really taking him in, very far away.

“Since he didn’t, *I’m* going to bloody well kill you!” Doyle exploded.

Bodie clearly didn’t understand this, looking at him as if he’d flipped, which was ironic, considering.

“Look, Bodie, I didn’t want to be any part of all this. It was your thing, your personal vendetta, your war, and I don’t pretend to understand any of it. But we’re—partners, so for godsake, I went with you some of the way. Nearly got myself killed for you in that stupid race—and just so you could score some sort of a point off a man with even less brain cells than you. And then I’m bloody stupid enough to throw in my lot with you, in *your* fight, when I see you’re way outnumbered, Well, just whose fuckin’ side did you think I was fighting on, eh Bodie? Eh?” He punched a vicious finger into Bodie’s chest, eyes positively sparking with fury. “I was risking a heck of a thumping, I knew that—eight big mindless thugs and only two of us. Of *us*. Hah. And then I hadn’t even reckoned on being swiped by the bloke I was wading in to help.”

Bodie had cottoned by now, was shaking his head. “Didn’t hit you—did I?”

“Of course you did, you dumb crud. Walloped me with a bloody great tree trunk when I was coming in to help.”

Bodie’s navyblue gaze was focused right on him, very direct, very serious. He rubbed the side of his nose as he said, “I swear it, Ray, I never meant to hit you. Just lost my head a bit, that’s all.” He tried to smile but it didn’t work as a smile, came across more as a cry for help.

Doyle grumbled, “Yeah, you’re not kidding. You need to get yourself together, you do, mate.” He glanced across at Cowley, deep in conference with Kate Ross. “An’ funnily enough I know just the person to help you.” Bodie looked that way and grimaced.

“I’m off,” Doyle said, leaning down, plucking his jacket off the ground. As he came back to the vertical he glanced at his partner and caught his expression. Bodie was pale, tightlipped, face set. “Ah—don’t look like that,” Doyle said, voice dropping, but the eyes which flicked up to meet his were still shadowed, haunted. Doyle moved in closer, the old, sick hunger in him, and he closed his fingers around Bodie’s muscular forearm. Bodie was trembling, deep and fast.

“*Bodie.*” Doyle enfolded him in a hard embrace, not caring if Cowley was watching. “Look, mate—if ever you need me—You know where I am.”

Bodie didn’t move at all, and didn’t move in his grasp; his nostrils flared a little, his lip curled as he looked down at Doyle. So Doyle let him go, slowly, and loped off through the woods to his car without looking back.

He thought about Bodie, that night, alone in his flat standing by the window, sipping at a beer, looking out into the night. Hell’s Angel. As an alter ego, it would have suited Bodie, whose alabaster skin and dark good looks were set off by black leather, huge gauntlets, a great bike throbbing between his straddling thighs. Anyone’s dream man, Bodie would be. So much power: and a soul touched by shadows. Magic. The black kind.

And not only that: Bodie intrigued him, yes, because he had that dark vein of otherness somewhere in him: but at the same time he was funny, amusing, silly in a way which appealed to Doyle. And in bed, he had seemed to answer Doyle’s every want, not always in a dramatic kind of way, just naturally, as if it came easily to him. Bodie and himself: the ideal partnership, in bed and out of it.

Doyle’s lips twisted in a savage little smile. Pity Bodie hadn’t seen it that way.

And yet, today, he had made the offer not out of desire but of simple pity. Bodie had looked so—alone.

But even tonight, Bodie didn’t come.

For the first time, Doyle knew he had lost Bodie, lost him for good.

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Doyle felt numbed, slowed down too much for any but the most mechanical of tasks; his insides felt heavy and tense with some dread that dragged him down so that he was dangerously close to drowning. Having followed him home Bodie said, “Make us a cuppa, mate,” and obedient even to the falsely normal tone of Bodie’s voice he trailed into the kitchen, picked up the kettle, took it to the tap, filled it, returned it to the hob.

His eyes felt full and heavy: his vision kept blurring, he had to keep blinking to sweep the haze away. He took down one mug, and then another, and then simply stood there, disbelieving. She had left him. She really had. He had loved her so much, and he had told her that over and over.

And still she had left him.

“You look all in, mate. I’ll do that.” Bodie’s voice came from behind him, rough with sympathy, and he took the mugs from Doyle and began to put together drinks with an efficiency Doyle could only detachedly admire. He kept breathing in, trying to ease the deep, sick feeling in his belly, but it stayed there like a lump of stone.

“Siddown,” Bodie said to him. “Drink this.” Some man on the radio was bemoaning in lugubrious tone—*somewhere, somehow, somebody must have kicked you around some...* and that was exactly how he felt, just as if he had been kicked. Kicked hard in the guts by some flying punch, kicked and left for dead or dying from some unstoppable internal bleeding.

He sat, mind numb, body in dread, hands wrapped around the hot mug of coffee Bodie had set in front of him.

“You look done in, Ray,” Bodie said again. “I’d get an early night if I were you.”

Yes, well. Certainly there was no point in going out on the town to celebrate.

His eye caught sight of a mark on the table. Tomato sauce. Not ketchup—the real thing. They had had pasta last night—he had made it himself, whistling as he put it together in dashing chef’s style. In return Ann had offered to clear up. Looking round, however, he could see that not only could she not cook, cleaning didn’t seem to be her forte either: he jumped to his feet, fetched a cloth, and wiped the table to remove the errant sauce stain, and then began on the cooker, which had either been done very sketchily or not at all. But then, they had had better things to do last night.

Bodie was watching him uneasily. “Look, Ray, don’t bother with that. I’ll have a bit of a cleanup for you if you like. You just go and get your head down.”

“Comes to something, dunnit,” he said, head down, still scrubbing. “When two bachelors make a better job of it than some bird.”

“Yeh, well, struck me she was far too much of a lady to get her hands dirty.”

Doyle absorbed that, heard the note in Bodie’s voice and something slipped into place for him:

“Look, I like Ann, okay.”

Bodie had been lying. He didn’t like Ann, not anything about her.

“Reckon you’ve put your finger right on it, Bodie. Yeah, that’s it. An’ if she’d have stayed with me, she’d have got her hands dirty all right, wouldn’t she?”

CI5, killing people, blood on his shirts that she’d have to wash out.

“—And she wouldn’t have liked that.” Head hanging down, cloth stilled, he stared at the cooker.

Bodie said, looking past him, “Can’t really blame her for that, Ray. How many of us find someone who sticks around for long? It’s not a job you can leave behind when you come in the door.”

“’S true,” Doyle agreed. He chucked the cloth into the sink. “And I obviously wasn’t worth giving it much of a try.”

Bodie said with an edge to his voice, “Not to her, no.” And when Doyle turned hard on his heel to catch his gaze Bodie faced him out, bleak and determined. “Well, someone had to say it. Truth is, Doyle, anyone could see little Miss Prissy Knickers wasn’t going to hang around longer than it took her to work out she wasn’t going to be able to change you into the sort of bloke she really wanted—9–5, white collar, 20K a year and a membership to the golf club. She wasn’t right for you, Ray. Writing was on the wall from the start.”

“Oh yeah,” Doyle said, and repeated it, anger, something, making him shiver violently again and again; “And what would you know about it? *Did* you bug my bedroom?”

Bodie met his eyes, unflinching. “I didn’t need to to see she was a bitch. Just a bitch, Ray. Like that other frigid cow you hooked yourself up to—one who made out you were too low to touch her tits.”

For a moment Doyle’s mind flashed back to that night in Scotland: Susanna might have been frigid, he and Bodie had paid her back for that, rolling riotously in the muck till dawn. And had she guessed—? No; but she had sensed—something, and he hadn’t cared, had flung that not-caring in her face: *you may not want me, darlin’, but someone else, someone better, does.*

Until Bodie had dumped him too, of course.

A long line of failed affairs: Susanna. Shelley. Sophie. Annabel. Claire. All the way down to the only ones who had really mattered to him: Bodie. And Ann.

He turned away from Bodie deliberately, saw himself in the mirror, watching himself without mercy: pale face, marked at one cheek by violence, too-wide eyes huge and overbright; unless you liked the frog resemblance, nothing special, not in any way.

“Yeah, should be used to it by now, shouldn’t I?”

Quite right, Bodie. No-one hangs around with me for long, christ, you’d think I’d have learned that by now. Should learn to keep me ’ands to meself, shouldn’t I?”

He saw Bodie’s sudden movement behind him, and Bodie said sharply, without pity, “We all go through it, mate. Listening to you, you’d think no-one else knew what it was like.”

“Oh yeah?” Bodie, who only had to lift an eyebrow to bring the hordes running, any female you

cared to name, Glad the tea lady, Mike the night porter, Cowley who loved him better than Scotland. Doyle looked at Bodie with a sort of envy, really looked at him, took in the classic beauty of his face and his eyes, the strength of his hands and his body— “Don’t pretend *you* know what it’s like, mate, because I’ll just throw up on you. It never ’appens to you.”

He had bid for Bodie, in the past. And lost.

“Of course it does,” Bodie said, cold, distant. His eyes swept darkly over Doyle. “You think you’re the only person who falls for someone who couldn’t give a toss for you when it comes down to it?” He waved a hand in the air. “Ah, come off it, Doyle. Rough justice, I’d say myself.”

For the life of him Doyle couldn’t see why Bodie was taking this line with him. It really was almost funny. Still, better anger than sympathy, any day. In another moment they’d be fighting, and that was just what he felt like. Yeah: slug it out with Bodie, nice end to the day. He’d get to sleep anyway; one good punch to the jaw from Bodie’s solid fist should do it.

“Thanks, Bodie. Ever thought of joinin’ the Samaritans? You’d be a natural. I’m telling you.” He went to the fridge. Wrenched it open. Knelt and looked inside. “Only trouble is, you’re supposed to be talking us away from the the overdose, not recommending a good all-night chemist.” Two cans of beer at the back. He reached in.

Bodie was right there behind him, voice unexpectedly low, almost gentle. Trying— “Look. I’m sorry Ann’s gone. I know you’re feeling terrible. I wish—”

“—what?” Doyle prompted. Carrying the cans he rose to his feet and turned to find himself pinioned in the circle of Bodie’s arms. And at the last moment Bodie did not move away. *I wish—*

Instant reaction. Doyle struck him off with a force and a violence which threw them apart like 10,000 volts.

“Ah, Bodie—*don’t start all that again.*”

It had cost him, after all, so many nights and days of struggle to come to terms with it, to realise that there was going to be no happy ending, that Bodie was never going to walk back in the door, hang his hat on the hook and come back to him. One little touch...was all it took to remind him. Bitterness. Hurt. And loss.

Strangely it was those very things he saw mirrored in Bodie’s eyes, before Bodie took a deep breath and struck at him—

“You little bastard. I wasn’t coming on to you. I was just—trying to be nice to you, for godsake.”

“*Nice,*” he sneered, rocking on his feet. “Well, don’t bother on my account. I’m not used to it. Shock might kill me.”

He paced around the kitchen, so restless, simmering, dangerously close to the sort of outburst he knew he'd regret and didn't care, announcing to the room: "What a bloody perfect day. The girl I wanted to marry dumps me. And my ex-lover offers me a mercy fuck."

He was flirting with danger now, actually courting Bodie's fury, but Bodie had his own little spurt of violence well in hand now, answering him quietly, black eyes ranging over him, "Yeh, I know. Hell of a day for you. Have a drink, Ray. Get to bed."

Bodie took the cans from him and set them down, reaching instead for the whisky bottle on the shelf. He poured them both a tumbler-full, and Doyle watched him, feeling suddenly desperately, threateningly tired. Trouble was, anger kept him going, flying out on a high taut line; but Bodie's softness he knew he could not take, he was in danger of letting go, to fall. To throw himself into Bodie's arms for the sheer...comfort of it. He sensed it was there, his but for the asking. It would be so easy.

And then he would lose every last shred of pride he had and weep out loud.

Not possible. Not allowed.

The drink helped a bit; he wandered, glass in hand, into his little lounge, sat on the settee where he and Ann had looked at photographs together. Before he had positively registered that some of the shivers which racked him were due to cold, Bodie was there throwing a sweater at him.

"You're blue. Not a pretty sight. Put that on." And Bodie sat down, safely on the other side of the room.

"I really loved her, you know," he said, struggling into the sweater.

"Yeh, I know."

"Why didn't she love me? Wouldn't have hurt her to try, would it?"

"These things happen."

"What do I do now?" He laughed, bitter, empty.

Bodie got up and filled his glass without being asked. Doyle drank it down and realised after a moment that Bodie was talking to him, answering his question:

"Give it a bit of time, eh? You'll find someone else. One day."

"No point to it though, is there? I keep on tryin'. Can't do any more. And it always ends up this way."

The alcohol released all his tight control in a rush; when he shut his eyes this time it was to stem

the flow of angry tears. He felt the settee dip beside him and Bodie's arm go around him.

"Look, it might seem that way tonight. You're getting maudlin, Ray, it's the drink. Just because one tight little bitch dumped on you doesn't mean you're high and dry forever. Just means she wasn't right for you. I keep telling you." Bodie's voice was very warm, very close.

He leaned against Bodie's shoulder. Pressed his lips tightly together to stop the involuntary quiver of his mouth. "Look, I wanna tell you something. When I think about it—you want to know something, Bodie? No-one's ever loved me. What do I do wrong?" Steeped in his own misery, a parade of people who had failed to love him stretching back as far as his mother and sisters, he took a while to realise that Bodie had left him. He opened his eyes to see Bodie standing in front of the window, back turned to Doyle, legs apart, hands stuffed in his pockets.

"Bodie—?"

Bodie said without turning: "You're a selfish bloody bastard at times, aren't you?"

"What?" Doyle said. His eyes and his nose and his throat were blocked with tears. He dragged his sleeve over his eyes and sniffed.

"Look, I've got feelings too, you know. Though sometimes I wondered if you ever knew that..."

"What are you on about?" The change of pace had left him utterly confused.

"Obviously I wasn't in her class. But didn't I count?"

"Count what?" He felt dizzy now, befuddled.

Bodie twisted around then and looked at him, darkly enigmatic. "Didn't I count at all? I loved you."

Doyle's heart began to pound unexpectedly, turning over sickly in his chest. He gazed at Bodie without saying anything. Bodie continued, looking at him, through him, into the past, "May not have been what you wanted. I know that. But you can't have it all ways. Can't sit here moaning *no-one's ever loved me* and expect me to nod my head and sweetly agree. Because I haven't forgotten... though maybe you have."

A new shock: he felt number than ever. An arrowstrike right in his heart: he would not feel the pain of it till later.

"I never knew you—"

Bodie interrupted him harshly. "For chrissake, Doyle. Of course you *knew*."

"I didn't know."

“Ah, come off it, Ray. Everyone knew. Cowley knew. Kate Ross knew. Wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a note on it in the Kremlin somewhere. The whole bloody world knew.”

“Well how the fuck was I supposed to know? You never said anything.”

Bodie was looking at him, eyebrow quirked, a little quizzical, as if not quite sure whether Doyle was having him on or not. “Look, Doyle, I didn’t need to stand singing under your window for you to get that I was hung up on you in a big way.”

“Look—I’m telling you—I *never knew*.”

Bodie tossed down the rest of his drink, harshly. “Well, now you do.”

Doyle looked at him, quite silent. Bodie met his eyes in a reckless, devil take it all sort of way. “Might as well spell it out for you, since your brain seems to have switched itself off. When I say, *loved you*, I’d have lain down and died for you. Come to that I still would.” He tipped up his glass again, found it empty, and looked into it, frowning as he said quietly, “Is that good enough for you? You didn’t win her, but you had me. Maybe you don’t reckon that counts for much, like I said. But there it is.”

Bodie’s voice was so quiet Doyle could hardly hear him. He couldn’t seem to think of anything to say. “I never guessed.”

Bodie cast him a look of irritation. “Don’t keep saying that.”

“Why did you ditch me then?” Doyle said thickly. He got to his feet and took the bottle from Bodie. Bodie didn’t let go of it. They stood there holding it between them.

“Get real, Doyle. Had to stop sometime. You were just leading me on, it was just a bit of fun to you.”

“I—” Doyle started, and shut his mouth on it, too fuddled to order his thoughts into coherent speech.

“So you’ll understand,” Bodie said smoothly, “not having managed to get over you entirely, I wasn’t too thrilled when you announced undying love for little Miss Prim, stars in your eyes, opening your big mouth and expecting me to give you a sympathetic ear. Knew *I* couldn’t have you, you didn’t want me, but that didn’t make it any easier for me watching her dangling you on a string.”

Yet he had said nothing. Been expected to align himself on Doyle’s side and fight George Cowley for the privilege of her hand. Even come round here tonight, because Doyle was miserable, because Doyle needed someone and had not had the grace to say so. And that must have been the bitterest thing of all: watching Doyle’s distress because he loved Ann Holly and could not bear that she had left him.

But Bodie had had the courage to do it.

Was that love—?

He was so desperately tired. Tired and sad and drunk. He rubbed his eyes with his hands, fiercely, alone in the middle of the floor.

“Go to bed, Ray. I’ll see if I can charm George into letting you have the day off tomorrow.” Bodie’s voice was getting fainter; he was leaving.

“And if you can’t?” he yawned, swaying, asleep on his feet.

“Then it’s business as usual, sunshine.”

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Almost usual, anyway. No day off granted, Doyle looked at Bodie sideways once or twice and wondered if he had imagined it.

Well, it made a perverse kind of sense, he could just about see it, how Bodie’s longing had reversed itself and denied itself so that it would never show. Rejection hurt. Doyle could testify to that.

Too raw, too vulnerable. Too proud. Too many failures in the past, Marikka, Claire. Yes, you could see why Bodie hadn’t exactly laid it on the line.

Doyle hefted the pint up from the bar counter and drank deeply, thoughtfully. The barman dropped change into his hand and Doyle muttered a syllable of thanks.

“Everyone knew.”

But he had not.

Had Kate Ross tried to tell him? All but written it down for him? He didn’t think so. Highly unethical, that would be, and she was nothing if not relentlessly by-the-book. But she was, however, always telling him tartly that he was missing the *point*. Probably it had all been there for him, if his eyes had opened just a little wider.

“Penny for ’em.”

Doyle started. Murphy, big and blue-eyed, swung himself onto the stool next to him and grinned. Dark and handsome. Like Bodie. Only unlike.

“Buy you a pint, Ray?”

“Thanks.” Doyle rapidly lowered the level of beer in his glass, swallowing fast.

“You okay?” Murph asked, studiedly casual. Instantly Doyle’s senses flipped onto alert. Murphy was here to check up on him. Make sure he wasn’t drinking himself into oblivion.

“Oh yeah. Fine. Just another bird, wasn’t she, when all’s said and done? Plenty more on the tree.”

“Good lad,” Murphy said with satisfaction. “Thanks, Barney.” He handed over the money and lined up another pint next to Doyle’s near-empty one.

“Yeah,” Doyle said, “After all, they’re all the same, aren’t they, when the light’s out?” He drained the first pint and closed his hand around the one Murphy had bought him, acknowledging it with a “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Murphy said. “That’s my boy. Go out and knock ’em dead.”

“What, the way I always do?” Doyle agreed caustically. It was on his mind to ask Murphy—

“Everyone knew”

—but then again.

“Seen Bodie anywhere?” Murphy was asking, obviously psychic, head swivelling from side to side.

“We’re not joined at the hip, y’know.” Doyle heard his own voice snap out and catch Murph unawares. Well, so be it. The other man had done his duty: here Doyle was, on CI5 premises, ungassed, undrugged, undead. He fell into a silence, frowning as he stared at his glass.

“Well, better be off now,” Murphy said kindly, uneasily, sensing the shutters closing. He finished his beer quickly. “Don’t mind, do you? Promised Stuart a game of pool. Join us if you want.”

“Thanks,” Doyle said, not intending to.

And where was Bodie, then?

Still freezing him out, obviously.

Par for the course.

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Doyle awoke from a shattering dream in which Bodie’s mouth, artificially reddened, surrounded

his cock in a scarlet ‘O’.

Or maybe it was his own mouth around Bodie’s cock. Either way it had lit unholy fires in him; he finished the job with a few trembling strokes, his whole body tensed and hushed and thrilled as the easy come shot away from him into his own fist.

He lay with his heart thudding, hand flung up over his eyes. Wonderful. A bizarre erotic dream about Bodie wearing lipstick on the morning he was due his regular quarterly interrogation with Dr Kate Ross. Word had it she was psychic—well, she was in for a treat then, wasn’t she?

He yawned as he threw back the covers, every pulse in his body echoing still with a far-off sweet and sensual note. In the shower he washed the sweat and sex away.

Lipstick. He couldn’t ever remember adorning himself with lipstick prior to blowing Bodie, though it was possible: they had done some pretty weird things when the fancy took them. He did remember Bodie finding some stuff under his couch—rolled there from some bird’s handbag—and outlining Doyle’s nipples in a shocking shade of crimson. He couldn’t remember what, if anything, it had done for him, but Bodie had obviously found it a turn-on. And Bodie unleashed was always such a thrill to him, that little nagging sense that Bodie out of control was dangerous...

He shivered as he stepped, naked and dripping, out of the shower feeling defiantly reckless. Let Kate Ross sort it out. He was just in the mood for her today.

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But as always, the cold reality of her presence imposed on him the usual sense of obligation: a duty to be honest, or the whole thing was a cheat and only himself to lose in the end. Maybe she hypnotised him or something. Whatever it was she did to him it obviously didn’t work on Bodie. Bodie who had dodged every which way to avoid any embarrassing disclosures. In any case, she smiled at him this morning, pleased with him, nodding.

“Field scores—exceptional. Fitness rating—in the superior range. And—” she paused, letting the paper drop pointedly to the desk— “*partnership* scores, the highest of the division.”

“Well, that’s something.” He could not repress a grin of pride.

“I’ll be making a formal note that the reteaming of yourself with 3.7 has been a success.”

“Right—”

“—that’s if,” she amended, “what I learn from you today doesn’t conflict with those statistical findings.”

“Right,” he agreed, more faintly.

“Statistics maketh not the man,” she sermonised gaily, drawing forth a scathing stare from Doyle: christ, but she was frisky today.

Her manner became at once more serious. Not unfriendly, just getting on with the job in hand. “Perhaps you can tell me why you think there’s been such an allround improvement? What’s changed in your life since I last saw you?”

What’s changed. A confusing jumble of thoughts popped up into his head. He tried to sort them into some semblance of order and meaning.

“Things have settled down...” he said in the end, vaguely: “The job’s—okay; doesn’t get any easier, but maybe you learn to deal with it better...”

“Oh, 4.5. A man who reads Hegel? I’m sure you can do better than that.”

She certainly seemed to be in a rare old humour today; even verging on the playful! Unbelievable. He ventured a smile at her: just a small one, and was a little disappointed when her expression cooled unmistakably.

“Well, 4.5. I have no worries at present regarding your mental health in respect of your ability to perform your job.”

“That’s all right, then.” He made as if to go.

“So let’s move on.” And he sank back with a theatrical groan.

“For one minute I thought you were going to let me get away early. Would’ve been nice. Cowley doesn’t allow lunch and therapy.” His eyes fell on her small rosebud mouth, and lingered there. Lipstick a dark plum colour. Very different from the dream Bodie’s. An erotic flash tingled in his nerves as the shadow of the dream touched him; for a moment, he was fully taken by the fanciful vision of Kate Ross going down on him, neat hair tousled, icy skin a little flushed as she mouthed the tip of him—gulped down greedy spurts of come—

Well, are you psychic, Madam Ross?

Evidently her powers in that direction had been overrated, because she remained quite unmoved by any visionary erotica, her composure exact as it ever was as she waited for him to speak.

He had completely forgotten the question, anyway.

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...For Kate Ross’ part, she was noticing that agent 4.5, name Raymond Doyle, was looking more relaxed today, more like the days of old before he had learned the rules, when he had tried

to flirt with her: give her that smile of his which would set out guileless, then metamorphosise into pure or impure seduction: he couldn't help it, she didn't blame him, it was just his nature to try it on. That little, devastating smile which would crease his cheek, the droop of heavy lashes over those eyes—her mother would have called them *bedroom eyes*, and Kate Ross had long ago decided that nature had designed Ray Doyle as her surefire secret weapon in case the human race ever looked in danger of extinction. It really wasn't his fault he was always out there spreading his sperm around: it was Nature's. Nature had formed Ray Doyle deliberately to be irresistible. It was hard to put your finger on exactly what it was. But, for example: whatever he wore he looked good in it, whether smart, or scruffy as today, in well-washed navy sweatshirt and faded pale denims: he smelt delicious, looked enticing from whatever angle, even when he was tired, even when he was angry, even when he wasn't trying. She would bet money that no-one could resist him for long. She would bet money that no-one could be in the same room with him for long and not have sex cross their mind. Whatever it was, Doyle had it. In spades.

“Sorry,” he was saying. “What did you ask?”

She had forgotten, too. She looked down at her notes.

“What's changed, 4.5? What's good in your life at the moment? Tell me about it.”

“I wouldn't say anything's *good*, particularly. But I suppose I've come to terms with things, that's all.”

“What things?”

“Losing Ann. Losing Bodie...”

Now they were getting there. “Yes, you were engaged for a short while, weren't you?”

No attempt at commiseration, he noticed, and thank god for that. “Only to Ann,” he said caustically. “Me an' Bodie, somehow we never got round to it. Couldn't decide on the ring, you see.”

She took no notice at all of the sarcasm. “Do you see the two things in the same light?” When he didn't immediately reply she continued, quoting from her notes, “‘*Losing Ann. Losing Bodie*’.” Let's take Miss Holly for a start. What would you do, 4.5, if she came back tomorrow? Let's say, she'd had time to think—? Realised she'd made a mistake—?”

He opened his eyes wide at the unconscious cruelty of it. “I'd be over the moon,” he said slowly, deliberately. *You stupid cow.*

“No second thoughts, then, on your part? The engagement would be on again—” she held up a hand— “Don't say anything for a moment. Just think about it for a little while.”

Inwardly mutinous, Doyle shut his eyes, crossed his arms and sulked. But after a while of calm silence he grew bored of the inner view of his eyelids and summoned her up, after all.

There she was. Cool, pale, beautiful. Cool even in bed; it was half her fascination, engaging all of his most aggressively male instincts in the battle to one day break through that moonlight cool and bring forth all her inner warmth and passion—

And what a typical male fantasy that was. He could see it now: she would be a Susanna. How long would it be before they got back from the opera or some cultural book-binding event, and he would turn to her, in love, to be met with *'don't let's spoil our beautiful evening, Ray'*—

Well yes, she was essentially cold. And would not hesitate to be cruel: he knew that already.

Would he really want to spend a lifetime with her?

And the damning answer came: no.

Three years, perhaps, before he was looking elsewhere for the warmth and passion denied him at home: she would not look outside, not she, she'd be too taken up with their two pale cool children, George and Olivia, and her part-time career, and her evening classes in interior design. So then there would be an amicable divorce, conducted with the same impeccable civility and restraint threaded throughout her entire life: they would lose touch almost straight away, write one another off as one of those mistakes, she still up there on her higher plane of art and culture, himself slipped back again, down into the underworld of his life that was not hers, death, blood, sweat, lust, *life*.

He opened his eyes wide as it all flashed before him like a dream, and it could have been true. Feeling Kate Ross' curious gaze on him did nothing for his temper: he felt disloyal, to Ann perhaps, but most of all to his own eager idealistic self which had begged Ann to marry him as if his one chance of happiness depended on it.

“What do you want me to say?” he snapped, and she deflected him calmly.

“I don't *want* you to say anything. I just asked you to think about it.”

And then his temper broke as he slammed both hands down on the table in front of him. “All right. It would never have worked. So it's turned out for the best. Then why do I still feel so bloody lousy about it?”

Kate Ross regarded him unsmilingly. “Only you can answer that, 4.5.”

He was ready for that one. “Five bloody years of training, and you can't give me an answer?”

“—because it wouldn't help you if I did.”

“Try me.” His eyes were bright with challenge.

“The only conclusions worth anything at all are the ones you draw for yourself. Of all the people

I work with in here, I'd say you were the closest to understanding that, 4.5."

"Doesn't say much for the rest of 'em, then," he jeered.

"But you know I'm right."

He took a deep breath. "All right. Write off Ann. So now you're going to tell me—no. Now you're going to *help* me *discover* just how much better off I am without Bodie?"

"Well, that depends, doesn't it? At the beginning of this conversation you seemed to equate the two circumstances: *losing Ann. Losing Bodie*. But are they in fact the same?"

Her calm manner, unchanged throughout his own fluctuating moods, was doing its job, bringing him down rapidly from the peak. He put his head in his hands, rested his eyes against his fingers for a brief moment.

"I can't think any more. Tell me."

She took pity on him: "What I'm suggesting, what I want you to think about, is the reasons for you throwing yourself so wholeheartedly into a relationship you can see now would never have worked."

Why had he?

The answer came clear and cold: because he had been burned by Bodie, that was why. On the rebound. What a cliché. But like all the best clichés, it had the merit of authenticity.

"I took the next best thing, after Bodie, that came along. Just to prove—"

"It's a very easy trap to fall into," she soothed. "Quite typical. And some people, of course, never recover from that. It becomes a downward spiral, and it repeats itself over and over again, falling from one failed relationship to the next without any real thought as to whether it might work or not: as if it's enough to be seen to be succeeding, for however brief a time; and, are you listening to me 4.5? We don't want that for you. You can do better than that for yourself."

He sighed. All the weight of the world on his soul.

"So, as in many things, it's time to look backwards. To sort out what went wrong there, before you can move on to the future. So let's go back, 4.5. To Bodie." It was so rare for her to use their names that he looked up at her, his face blurred with chagrin. "After you and 3.7 put an end to your sexual relationship, there was a marked decline in your psychological profiles."

"Oh, that's a surprise," he said sarcastically. "Bet you needed to look that one up." His gaze canted upwards to the ranks of thickest tomes around the wall, detailing between them, no doubt, every smallest facet of human nature and its cause. Including the fact that a final, terminating row with your lover could send you into a temporary decline.

“Did you miss the physical side of your relationship?”

“Yeh,” he drawled, offensive. “Never been to bed with Bodie, have you? Ah, shame.” Bright, bold eyes sought out hers, attempted to engage her in provocation. But she simply looked at him calmly, dispassionately.

“But you made no effort to resume it.”

“No.”

“Why was that?”

His hands gripped tight, tighter, on the corner of the desk, a small gesture she did not miss, weighing his obvious tension in her mind against the benefits of continuing. But it was time, really. All this had gone on long enough.

He said at last: “In some ways, it seemed the best thing...”

“Yes?” Looking at her, he got no clues as to her thoughts. He went on: “It was goin’ the wrong way— we didn’t see eye to eye about a lot of things—And I didn’t realise—”

“You didn’t realise what?”

“Look, I didn’t realise Bodie saw it as anything more than an easy lay nights he was too lazy to go out and pull some bird.”

“Is that how you saw it?” she probed, gently.

He gave her a smile, flirtatious again, even. “Yeah, sometimes.”

“And at other times?”

“—other times—” he shrugged. “I dunno... I had this feeling, stupid really, we’d be all right together. Just the two of us, you know? No-one else. But Bodie never seemed to want any more than what we had. I mean, he fancied me. Oh yeh, he *wanted* me all right. But somehow I never guessed it was any more than that for him.”

She was careful not to let anything show, not by so much as a flicker of one eyebrow. “And was it more than that?”

He flicked a glance up at her. “Well, you should know. Can’t see why he’d lie about it. According to Bodie everyone knew, including you.” He didn’t say it in an aggrieved sort of way: Doyle knew the rules. But it would have been only human of him to hold it against her.

So. When the breakthrough had come, it had been that easy. Somehow, some time when she was

not looking at them, not checking them, had her attention on some other problem from the many Cowley threw her way, Bodie had made that leap in the dark. Told Doyle what had been obvious to Kate Ross for many months. And found, she hoped, some peace.

“4.5.” She recalled him from his thoughts. “We’ve made a lot of progress today: I think you’ll find it useful. Just one more thing—”

She was looking at him quite nicely for her, not sympathetic exactly, but warmer than usual. Doyle suddenly had the impression that she liked him rather more than he had ever realised. It was enough to make him grin at her, leaning back and stretching in his chair, raking a hand through his hair. “Haven’t I coughed up enough for you to get off on yet?”

“Just one more thing,” she repeated. She had never, by word or implication, come close to this before. But it was time. Get him past this, and then he could move on by himself.

“Why did you and 3.7 decide to split up?”

He only looked at her, no grin now. She continued: “You had—not a perfect relationship, but a workable one. More workable, as we’ve seen, than the one you had with the woman you asked to marry you. You had regular sex together and very often you preferred that, both of you, to sex with your girlfriends. What went wrong, 4.5?”

He took a deep breath, but did not reply straight away.

“Can you tell me about it?” she asked, definitely gentle now.

“It’s not easy...”

“Take your time.”

He was frowning now, staring down at his own hand resting on the desk in front of him, tapping his fingers restlessly. “Bodie—couldn’t handle it.”

“Mm?” she said to encourage him after a moment.

“Well, you know he couldn’t. You told me yourself he never could admit to you that he went to bed with me.” He stared up at her, those strange green eyes narrow, focused. “He had a kind of thing about queers—poofers, call ’em what you like. My guess is, he couldn’t stand to think of himself like that.”

“Are you saying, you were 3.7’s first male sexual partner—?”

A small, involuntary smile. “Oh no, very unlikely.” The smile went out. “But you see, Bodie—and people like him, I’ve met ’em before—they think it’s okay to—” Dr Ross smiled inwardly as she watched him scrolling down his vocabulary to find something suitable for her— “to grab a bit of sex with another bloke. Quick and easy, no strings, no words if you don’t want to bother

with 'em. I expect Bodie was used to that. Army days, and all that. But—”

“But it wasn’t like that?”

“Sometimes it was,” he said directly. “And sometimes—”

She let the frowning reverie he had fallen into carry on for some time before she prompted him— “*Sometimes?*”

He roused himself, looked her unflinchingly in the eye. “I think Bodie was getting in too deep. And he couldn’t take it. Ah, you know him. You know how he has to be alone. He has to be independent. Just that bit further out than everybody else. He was backing off, and I didn’t want to let him. And then—” He looked at the window briefly, brought his gaze back to Kate Ross silently waiting, a little defiant, a little angry now. “We did a few—farout things. It worried Bodie. Disturbed him. He liked it—but then he didn’t like it, if you know what I mean.”

“Bondage?” she asked, perfectly cool. “The sexual politics of power?”

He was looking quite disconcerted. “Not really.”

And she had it, just like that. “Or *gender*, perhaps?” Instantaneous. His eyes shot into narrowed slits, and she knew she had it. One nail, well and truly hit on the head.

The little silence that followed gave Kate Ross time for thought: *so, what was it then? I imagine—what do I imagine?* Raymond Doyle, tarted up a bit, would probably be irresistible to a man of 3.7’s inclinations, and plenty more besides: he had that way, rare enough, of transmuting anything he wore into yet another elusive hint at his own ambiguous sexuality. And that was a thought in itself: possibly, probably, there had been some experimentation with female clothing, not an unusual fetish even in the quote, unquote ‘*normal*’, and Doyle was not that. A line constantly drawn over and over in 4.5’s psychosexual profile was of some gender ambiguity. Not that it worried 4.5 at all.

But it worried the hell out of Bodie. Oh yes, that must have been how it was. Bodie had liked the hint of thrilling perversity, Doyle dressing up for him, pretending to be a woman for him, or however it had been: he had liked it too much. Hated himself for it. Cut himself off from Doyle and kept away. It wasn’t okay to love Doyle at all, and it certainly wasn’t okay to love Doyle as some pseudo-woman.

All these things drew themselves in Kate Ross’ diamond-sharp mind like lightning flashing across the sky; and did not show in her face by so much as a flicker of her eye. She laid down her pen and allowed him a little smile. There he was, watching her, a little crease of worry between his eyes.

“I think we’ll stop there.”

Every taut nerve in Doyle slumped with relief, but he pulled himself up again quickly. “Unless

there's anything else you want to tell me. Or ask me," she added.

The worry smoothed itself out, and the crease flashed instead to his cheek as a smile. "Plenty. But you wouldn't answer the questions I want to ask, would you?"

She ignored this and told him instead: "You're doing very well, 4.5. Really very well indeed."

"Yeah?" he said ironically. He was already on his feet, alert, fit, taut with energy. "Well, if you say so it must be true, mustn't it?"

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Bodie was, if not exactly hanging around, not far away. He fell into step beside his partner on the white-pebbled drive between the ranks of cherry trees, still leafy green, as Doyle acknowledged him with a lift of the eyebrow.

"Get on okay?"

Doyle shrugged. "I dunno. How d'you tell?"

"Did you pass? is what I mean."

"It's not a test, Bodie, like you *pass* or *fail*."

"Oh, I think it is, Doyle," Bodie said, dark, enigmatic. "Whether you know it or not."

"In that case, I passed. In fact, she was panting over me today. So much, I was lucky to escape with all my clothes. Fancy coming for a run? Down the Brompton?"

"Yeah, later."

"We could go for a drink afterwards."

Bodie did not immediately reply. "Well?" Doyle prompted.

"Look, don't push it, Doyle. We'll do the run— okay?"

Evidently Kate Ross had wound him up more than he'd realised, because that made him snap, just like that, taut and fragile as a web of glass.

"I just asked you to go for a fucking drink, not any fucking thing else."

"And I said no, okay?" Bodie said coolly. "Don't make a big deal out of it, Doyle." And he lengthened his strides to pace on and away from Doyle, leaving him further behind with every step.

So that was how things were. Doyle lingered behind, a lump of stone inside him, a chill around him in the pretty springtime air.

Kate Ross had misled him. There was no way back.

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It was very late when Bodie rang the bell of Doyle's Tottenham Court Road apartment, certainly too late for any usual social call in any ordinary life, but then no such things applied to them. Doyle was barely awake, sliteyed, wearing a rumpled shirt and worn blue jeans, bare feet. He smelt of sweat and sleep and fading aftershave. Bodie followed him into the narrow hallway, turning to set the locks with automatic instinct, one which Doyle seemed to lack; he was forever forgetting to do it. He went through to the living room, pausing on the way outside Doyle's bathroom, where Doyle was standing flatfooted at the toilet, the torrential downpour evidence of more than a pint or two consumed earlier in the evening.

When Doyle came into the living room he threw himself into a chair and spread the fingers of his right hand over his eyes. Not in a dramatic sort of way; a tired, had-enough sort of gesture.

"You been drinking?" Bodie asked.

"Not really. Fell asleep. Come to call me on duty?" He didn't remove the hand from his eyes and his voice was blurry.

"Don't think you're fit for it, are you?" Bodie asked ironically. He slid himself to the back of his seat and picked up a magazine from Doyle's coffee table. He opened it at random. *Autocar*.

Doyle took the hand away. Ice in his eyes flaring across the room. "You really suggestin' I'm unfit for duty? That's a serious allegation, you know. Wanna take it any further?" Definitely contentious. Looking for a fight.

"All right, all right," Bodie returned mildly. "So I just broke into your beauty sleep, point taken."

Doyle glared. "Yeh. And if you've not come round here solicitin' my ninja skills, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me get back to it." Fully awake now, he looked over at his partner who had made himself very much at home, feet up on a footstool, deep inside the pages of *Autocar*.

"Just exactly what are you doing here?" he asked, and all the warning signs were on.

Bodie did not answer the question directly. "Had my session with the delightful Doctor Ross."

"Oh yeah. And you *passed*, of course." Steeped in irony.

Bodie laid the *Autocar* down, looked across at Doyle, all hard flippancy himself. “What did you expect? One of these days she’ll give up trying to find anything wrong with me.”

“Must be nice to be perfect. Only, of course, you don’t tell her everything, do you? Very selective with the truth, I’ve heard.”

Around the mouth Bodie was suddenly white. “That’s professional indiscretion, Doyle. You wanna be careful if you don’t want to lay her open to a nice malpractice charge.”

Doyle tilted his head, and the slow contempt of the look he gave Bodie froze him into silence. Doyle was very soft as he said, “Oh, you needn’t worry. She doesn’t mention you much these days. Hardly at all. After all, you don’t exactly figure large in my life any more.”

Bodie said nothing.

“Enjoyed the run, though,” Doyle added as if in afterthought, into the ugly silence.

Nobody said anything more for a while. Doyle, very tired, very depressed, tipped his head back on the settee. In the absence of the taunt of his gaze, Bodie’s eye ran quickly over him, taking in the hollows of his throat above the opened shirt, the faded jeans soft with wear, the bare feet. Doyle’s eyes opened then and trapped Bodie’s watching him. Bodie looked away.

“Ah, don’t worry, Bodie, I’m not about to make a pass at you.” Doyle said, cynical with contempt. “I’ve got the message, okay? From you and everyone else.”

Watching the sudden distance in his eyes Bodie said with a real anger, “Well, poor old Ray. I shouldn’t worry about it, though. Might do you good to give it a rest for a while.” Lately Doyle had been burning his way, at great speed, through an excessive number of women even for Doyle.

“Well, while we’re on the subject,” Doyle said, smiling still, eyes struck in steel, “there’s something I want from you, been bugging me a lot lately.”

“I don’t owe you anything, Doyle.” Bodie was on his feet now, angry.

Doyle was up there with him in one bound. “Oh no? Well, perhaps you don’t, Bodie, I’m not going to argue with you. But—” he took a deep breath, lowered his eyes beneath his leashes, “—you *love* me, don’t you. So you say. So you’ll do it anyway.”

Bodie turned away from him abruptly, hands stuffing into his pockets. “You’re sick, Doyle.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. No more than anyone else. No more than you, anyway. *Love*.” Doyle spat out the innocent word. “Did I dream it? Did you say you loved me, for chrissake?” And when no answer came, “Did you, Bodie? *Did you say that?*”

Bodie turned to look him in the eye and his voice was low as he said:

“You know I did.”

He had pushed Bodie for that. Had needed to. Needed to back Bodie into a corner and make him get it out into the open. But now he had, he found that after all it did not help: just opened up a new area to joust in. Doyle laughed bitterly. “And he says *I’m* sick. Loved me, did you? Oh yeah. I remember. Loved me so much you told one of your bloody birds that queers should be horsewhipped for filthy practices.” Bodie had swung around, away from him: Doyle took one step nearer the broad hunched back. “Loved me so bloody much you denied for three years to Kate Ross that we’d ever gone to bed together. *Three fucking years*. Was it so horrible, Bodie? Eh? Was it? So disgusting you had to lie about it all the time?”

He shook his head into the resounding silence. “Loved me. Jesus.”

Bodie’s head was bowed: then he lifted it, chin up, to stare at the ceiling. He drew in a huge, shuddering breath before he said, “Ray, leave it. Please.”

“You loved me enough to fuck me. Oh yeah, I remember that. And it was so good for you, it meant such a lot to you, that afterwards you kicked me in the teeth and dumped me. Isn’t that right, Bodie?”

Bodie was very quiet, the timbre of his voice unrecognisable as he said, “You’re remembering it wrong. It didn’t happen like that.”

Doyle sniffed. Rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. Wandered around a bit. He gestured with his hand. “Well, all right. Let’s have your side of it. Amaze me, why not?”

Bodie looked at him very briefly, then turned away again. But not before the sadness, the bleakness of his expression hit Doyle like a stone in the face. “I came round to try and sort it out. Remember that? You were so angry. I didn’t really know why. I thought it was because I—”

Doyle could not speak, did not try, still recovering from the look on Bodie’s face. Bodie looked at him without seeing anything, and added quietly: “It doesn’t matter now, anyway.”

Bodie paced around restlessly, a hard, fit man, Paras-trained into a fighting, killing machine, body encased in black leather, heart encased in stone. Yet Doyle knew what he had seen in Bodie’s eyes. And what he had heard in Bodie’s voice. What could words do, beside things such as these?

He buried his face in his hands. “I’m sorry.”

Bodie stopped, looked at him, steady now. A wry smile tugged at his lips and was gone. “Sorry for what? It’s not your fault you didn’t feel the way I did. I never expected you to.”

Doyle swallowed. He felt sick. Bleeding with pain, both Bodie’s and his own. Bodie was looking at him now with worry narrowing his eyes, trying to work out what was going on in his

head. “I was angry—” Doyle said, and stopped, and tried again. “I thought you hated me.”

“Just because I never poured my heart out to Kate Ross?” Bodie sounded amazed.

“You were always going on about queers. I thought you were ashamed of me.” No, that wasn’t it. “Ashamed of us. But especially me. I was the one with all the wild ideas.”

“I got used to it,” Bodie said, hard and fast.

Doyle wanted, needed, to touch Bodie. To get close to him, step in and rest his weary head against the solid warmth of Bodie’s shoulder. And all that would follow: he yearned for it with every beat of his heart.

Instead he turned away. Said without looking back:

“What now?”

And Bodie answered him, “I don’t know.”

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“Well?” Cowley enquired irascibly, but Kate Ross shook her head.

“There’s no easy resolution to this, you know. I can’t believe you were expecting them to walk off into the sunset and start doing the shopping together.” She sounded tart.

Cowley made a face of distaste, his bright eyes sharp as knives in the sun.

“Indeed not.”

They were sitting together in his office. Despite appearances his mood must be generally favourable; he had gone so far as to offer her a nip of whisky, which she had accepted, and poured himself a meticulously identical amount.

She took a sip before saying, “Their professional partnership seems to be on a very stable course, however. Which should please you. The immediate crisis is over for them. Which way their personal relationship goes from here, well—” she indicated with a gesture of her hand that it hung precariously, tilting this way and that.

“Have you ever discovered the reasons behind all this?”

She shook her head, then changed it to a nod. “Something sexual, obviously. Many dark hints about Bodie getting in too deep, and not being able to handle it—”

“—I don’t want to hear any more,” Cowley said with even more marked distaste, some

anatomically correct vision obviously forming horribly in his mind. Ross shot him a faintly scornful look and continued,

“—some incompatibility of gender attitude. I didn’t want to press 4.5 too hard for details; he was getting fragile at that point.”

“And who can blame him?” Cowley said acidly. “It can’t be easy for them, having some woman doctor poking her nose constantly into the minutiae of their bedroom habits.”

Dr Ross was nettled by this. “I wouldn’t have to probe their bedroom habits, as you call it, one whit so intensively if it wasn’t such a preoccupation of *theirs*,” she said, tarter than a spring gooseberry by now. “3.7 and 4.5 both have extremely high sexual profiles: Doyle in particular, and Bodie’s not far behind him. They both have what you might call dramatic personalities, they frequently see themselves five seconds away from an early death. Combinations don’t come much more explosive than that. But it doesn’t take all of your operatives the same way. With some of your people—more stable, well-balanced individuals—it’s hardly ever necessary to discuss their sex lives at all.”

That would annoy him. He was allowed to have a kick at the 3.7/4.5 team: no-one else was.

“Which of my people might that be?” Cowley demanded, prickling.

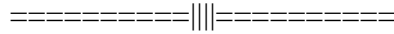
She was ready for him. “Anson. Murphy. Jax. Lucas. All individuals with a perfectly uncomplicated sexual attitude. Sex occupies exactly the right place in their lives, neither too much nor too little. I mention *your sex life?* to Murphy and he spends two minutes describing his latest girl, trips to the cinema, and how important it is to him to satisfy her in bed. Mention it to Ray Doyle and I know I’m in for half an hour of increasingly bizarre revelations about his thought-provoking sexual preferences.” She paused, to give her next phrase dramatic emphasis: “But even that’s preferable to Bodie: mention sex to Bodie, and that’s it, after a bit of macho posturing he’s gone, and it’s deep silences and heavy sighs for the rest of the session.” She took another gulp of whisky. “I don’t believe there’s another pairing in the A-squad capable of anything like the tangle your favourite

team have got themselves into.”

“Och, I don’t have favourites.”

She ignored this as pure tokenism. Everyone knew about Cowley and his Bisto Kids. “Well, at the moment they’re back on women again. Though what hope there is for them in that direction I really wouldn’t like to say—” She drained her empty glass, set it down, shaking her head. “—Two men who can take two pretty girls away for the weekend and then spend every moment they can in bed with each *other*: well.” She stood up, smoothing down her skirt.

“Is that what they get up to?” Cowley shook his head, more in awe than disapproval. “Well, thank you, Dr Ross. It all makes me glad, aye, very glad, that I’m not young again.”



A moment ago, there had been Bodie, easily and cosily making a cup of tea.

Now here they were, fighting for their lives with little on their side except what they could do for themselves..

Shattering glass. Shouts. Bullets whining around. All dropping to the floor. The girl on one side, Bodie and Doyle crawling to fit up their guns, grimfaced, conferring at a rapid pace:

“Tactical withdrawal?”

“Tactical or strategic.”

“Have you *got* a strategy?”

Doyle grimaced over his gun, slotting in clips. “Might delay ’em a bit.”

Bodie, very on edge, snapping, “Can’t delay ’em without reinforcements!”

He didn’t need to say it. Obviously they were hopelessly outnumbered, from the sounds outside there could be ten, fifteen well-armed men. And what the bloody hell for? One poor whitefaced girl, crying in the corner, not because she was not brave; bravery was meaningless in a context such as this. Doyle crouched in a corner, turning it over and over in his mind, a sort of pattern almost there, almost—

“They want her dead. They want all of them dead, and quick. Maybe that’s the question: *why the big hurry?*”

Bodie did not care, did not even want to think about it. “If I’m going to die for a meaningless cause I want to go with a clear head—” Grim, brutal, he bashed in the window with the heel of his gun and began to let loose a fast steady stream of fire. The response was immediate, and terrifying: volleys of answering fire, echoing and ricocheting around.

“Save it,” Doyle told him, an ugly look on his face.

And Bodie exploded at him, “Look, we can’t get out of here, why drag it out?”

Adrenalin protected him from disabling dread, but he knew Bodie was right: their number was up. Well, plenty had gone before them. They were as brave as any whose names adorned the roll of honour. Didn’t take any special talent to die. He and Bodie would be okay. And, at least, together.

“We’ve ’ad it,” he said prosaically, sorting out ammo clips, pressing them in with fingers as fast and precise as ever. He hardly heard the girl’s reply, protesting, “No you haven’t,” but he replied

to her automatically, harshly, “Keep still.”

“They only want me—”

“Keep down.”

Like a film he was watching something not happening to him: she rose, a pale despairing figure, she walked like Lady Macbeth past the window—

The response was immediate. And in a blaze of spontaneous, excited gunfire, she died.

“*DIANA...!*” His voice swooped and howled all around them, and the only thing he recognised in the chaos was Bodie’s arm, solid and tight around him, restraining him—

“You rotten—” Bodie’s grip was around his neck, keeping his firing arm down. He grabbed at Bodie’s arm, and hurled it viciously away from him. Fucking *bastards*.

Bodie said grimly, ironically, “Leave ’em, they’re withdrawing.” And as Doyle’s heart pounded and his arms shook with delayed shock his fingers were actually trembling: couldn’t get in much of a shot now if he tried.

“Look, they’re just acting under orders. They’ve probably got just as much idea of why she had to be killed as we ’ave.” Oh, typical Bodie, that: every sympathy for creatures who were paid to kill. Creatures like themselves.

And at the moment he felt sick with himself, sick with it all, because he was no better than they were, and Diana Molner lay dead and finished on the floor. Bodie was looking down at her too, without really seeing her, saying softly, “But at least she knew what she was fighting for. They were against her, and that’s all she had to know...”

Doyle slumped on trembling legs beside the girl’s body as Bodie went again to look out of the window, systematically checking. Her face was very peaceful, very lovely. He reached out with a thumb to remove the droplet of blood at the corner of her mouth. Bodie came back, knelt beside him, looked at him then down at the body.

“She’s beautiful,” Doyle said, barely audible. “Isn’t she?”

“Yeah, well, beauty’s no magical shield. Though it seems to be working pretty well in your case,” Bodie said shortly. “If those guys had been called off thirty seconds later, you and I’d be lying there too. End of the line, Sundance.”

Bodie’s voice was low, dispassionate, whereas Doyle knew himself to be dangerously emotional, the adrenalin backlash emptying his head of blood, leaving him dizzy. His body was still on alert, pulse racing and uneven: he looked at the pale, beautiful skin of the dead girl, blood draining away from it inwards already, his pity and grief at such an intensity that that his body was at feverpoint, running all his emotions at a pitch he recognised, with shock, as sexual desire.

Yet he had felt nothing so extreme for her while she was alive: a little liking, a little concern maybe, pale things compared to this sudden essential need—a wish, perhaps, to breathe his own vibrant life back into her crumpled pose of death, but whichever charitable way you tried to look at it, you could not escape the truth of it, that he was turned on like nothing else, as fierce a feeling as he had ever had.

Okay, so he knew what it was. Battlefield Syndrome, they called it. Soldiers got erections as their mates around them thrashed in blood and died. But to want what he was wanting—

This bloody job was getting to him. Turning him weird.

He remembered like a whipcrack in his mind a far-off conversation about necrophilia. With a sudden, convulsive movement he buried his palms into his eyes as he crouched on the floor, thighs cramping with fatigue.

“Jesus, Bodie. ”

He felt Bodie look his way. “What?”

“It’s a good job you’re here. Otherwise I’d be tempted to give her a poke, now that’s fucking sick, isn’t it?”

“It’s shock, Ray, that’s all it is.” Bodie’s voice was unemotional, but his attention had been thoroughly caught for all that; he was watching his partner closely.

“Mortuary attendants do it all the time, you know. Always on the lookout for a goodlooking stiff. And that’s all we are at the moment, innit—? Mortuary attendants? We were fucking useless at protecting her. Couldn’t save her. All we’ve got to hand back is a body. Don’t you think she’d like one last fuck before they burn her up?”

“Stop it, Ray. You’re getting hysterical.”

“Well, you know me. Any excuse.”

“Let’s get out of here, go call Cowley. ”

Not paying him any attention Doyle picked up the girl’s hand and turned it over in his own, noting the well-shaped nails, unpolished. Although it felt cool already her body would retain its internal heat for some time. His guts churned sickly with horror, desire, despair.

“Get up.” Bodie, suddenly intense, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Get up, Ray.”

He shrugged off the hand angrily. “Leave me alone.”

But before he could stop it, Bodie had plucked him up to his feet and was manhandling him, struggling and swearing and fighting all the way into the next section of the carriage, out of sight

of the poor, brave, pathetic body.

He wrenched his arm out of Bodie's grip. "What the hell are you doing?"

Bodie's teeth showed in a smile of no humour. "Unhealthy, Ray. Don't let it get a hold on you." And he stood there, blocking Doyle's view and his way past.

Amazed and angered by Bodie's arrogant behaviour to him, Doyle tossed up for one moment whether to fight or give way. After a moment he too smiled, relaxed all his resistance deliberately so that Bodie's tight hold on his arm dug into soft skin, looked up into Bodie's hard blue eyes.

"Okay. It's up to you then, innit?"

Bodie's eyes darkened as he surveyed Doyle, noted the malicious intent of his partner's expression, the flinty green of his eyes as he gazed up into Bodie's face, and his grip shifted on Doyle's upper arms but did not cease.

"Serious, are you?"

"Just watch me."

And as Bodie, trouble in his eyes, did not move, "Come on Bodie, time was we'd have been at it five minutes ago. Lost count of the times we did that. Best therapy of all, coming off, didn't we always used to live by that?" He moved himself closer still, imposing his body on Bodie's personal space, hustling him, eyes shining, lips parting, and the tables were turned now, Bodie the one deciding if to fight or if to run.

"Lie down," he urged, softly. "Come on, Bodie, that's all I'm asking you. Look, I'll make it easy for you. You don't have to touch me. Just be with me while I do it." And at that very moment he was unzipping his jeans. "C'mon, don't be shy," he said, viewing Bodie's averted gaze with some black amusement, "Nothing you 'aven't seen before, is it?"

Unspeaking, Bodie lay down with him on the dirty carriage floor. Doyle kicked over, astride him. Jeans undone just far enough, he straddled Bodie's belly, taking his own weight on his thighs, and cradled the familiar warm length of his cock in his hands, pulling himself slowly in the familiar hand over hand motion, head down and watching himself so that for a moment his attention was entirely absorbed by himself. And then although his hands did not cease his head snapped up, caught Bodie staring up at the ceiling, blankeyed, distant. "*Watch* me." And Bodie, obedient, brought his eyes to dwell on the flushed cockhead appearing in and out of Doyle's grip. Doyle crouched up a little, aiming it like a weapon for Bodie's face. "See, it took me a long time, Bodie," he whispered, losing his breath a little now, "but I worked it out now. What Kate Ross meant."

"What did she mean?" Bodie asked distantly; he propped one elbow behind his head the better to watch the blurring movements of Doyle's swift hands.

“You did this with that bloody water pistol. Remember?” And his look turned inward, now, onto some inner glory, chin tipped back, his face taut with rapture as he hit flashpoint. His hands stilled, fell forgotten away from himself as the white blizzard hurled itself away from his body to scatter like damp scuds of snow on Bodie’s chest, and then he collapsed on top of Bodie, face hidden in Bodie’s shoulder.

Bodie lay there, feeling Doyle’s weight press the wetness through Bodie’s shirt to his goosechilled skin. It had been a long time since he was so close to Doyle like this, close to the warm scent of his hair, of his skin, of his sex. And he felt, too, the tremors which racked Doyle from head to toe.

“It’s all right, Ray. It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, you won’t tell Kate Ross, anyway,” came Doyle’s voice, more robust than he had feared. Doyle pushed himself up then, looked down into Bodie’s face for maybe ten seconds, then rolled away and onto his back with a sigh.

“Christ, Bodie—what can I say? *‘Sorry?’* That was sick.”

“Nah,” Bodie demurred. “Hell of a day. Something’s got to give somewhere along the line.”

Fighting for their lives out on their own, abandoned by Cowley to the wolves who had closed in, and killed.

The girl who lay dead in the other carriage, broken glass and bulletfire and blood spattered all around her.

Doyle’s eyes opened. “Okay. But it was still sick.” It came to him, not for the first or only time, that without Bodie he could not last in this job. There were times when Bodie alone was his lifeline. It was a crucial thought.

Bodie perched up on one elbow. “Sick, I don’t mind.” His hands went to the zip of his cords; with a little flutter of excitement Doyle watched him pull it down. “But you couldn’t even get it right, could you Doyle?” And Doyle watched, eyes slitted in pleasure, as Bodie unbuttoned his shirt and pushed his clothing out of the way and knelt up over Doyle’s sprawled body, his erection so close to Doyle’s face he had to squint to keep it in focus.

“Didn’t even come close, did you?” Bodie whispered raggedly, eyes hazing as his own expert fingers roughly pulled on himself in haste, and at the end, the very last moment, he pressed his cock downwards, aimed it with his fingertips so that come flew out softly, hitting Doyle’s eye, his cheek, his throat.

Then he dropped his forehead, knelt on all fours over Doyle, panting rapidly, recovering his breath and his wits.

“That’s style, Bodie,” Doyle said from a long way away. He touched Bodie’s hair, a brief caress, and then it lingered. No more words were necessary.

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They cleaned up at the sink, looking out at the empty tracks, the abandoned carriages.

“Cowley’ll be wondering where the hell we’ve got to.”

“Let him fucking wonder,” Doyle said viciously. “Cared so much he landed a fucking Susie on us, didn’t he?”

Bodie was pondering on that abrupt withdrawal. “Yeh, but I just wonder if he wasn’t the cavalry after all.”

Doyle eyed him with ill temper. “For that, *you* can tell him the good news.”

They left the body behind, no backwards look.

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Doyle’s eyes snapped wide open when the door did. All he could see was the tiny black eye of a gun, aimed at him.

“Ah, put it away,” he said, waving it off.

And there was Bodie coming round the door, shoving his gun underneath his jacket. “Thought it must be you.”

“Been looking in that crystal ball again?”

“No-one else uses that scent.” Bodie crossed the room and came to sit down near him, looking across. Too soon to judge his mood. “What do you want, Doyle?”

Doyle crossed his ankles in front of him, stretched his arms high up and yawned. “Thought it was time I paid a midnight call on you, instead of the other way round.”

“It’s late, Doyle.”

“I know what time it is.” There was a silence. “The other day. When Williams had that gun on me.”

Bodie didn’t say anything.

“Did it cross your mind, just for a minute, to see what happened? See if he ’ad the guts to shoot?”

Bodie was shaking his head. “Come on.”

“Just for a second?”

Bodie moved convulsively. “Of course it bloody well didn’t. I was just getting the timing right.”

“Seemed like a long wait.”

“Well, it would, wouldn’t it? Anyway, what you grumbling about? Here you still are.”

Doyle grinned, then. “Yeah. But I still think you were getting off on making me wait.” He got up, crossed the room, making straight for his partner. Bodie’s halfshut eyes tracked his approach.

Doyle knelt in one quick movement beside Bodie’s chair, leaning his arm on the rest, looking up into Bodie’s face. “Just reminded me, the other day.”

“What did? Seeing Williams wetting himself at the thought of killing you?”

“After the Molner girl died.” His eyes moved over Bodie, flinging everything of warmth and of passion he could summon into the look he brought to bear on him. “You’re always there for me, aren’t you, Bodie?”

“Yeah?” Bodie said, voice somehow hollow, and Doyle nodded, eyes never leaving him.

“I need you in my life, Bodie. I can’t do it without you.”

Bodie did not reply. Tense. Reined in. Waiting.

Sink or swim, Bodie.

He said what he knew Bodie was waiting for, spoke the words aloud: “I want us to be together.”

Bodie’s breath came out in a rush as if he had been holding it; he moved his head, and the words came out almost hoarse: “I dunno, Doyle.”

“Truth is...without you, I’m finished in this job.”

He laid his cheek on Bodie’s knee. Just rested it there, feeling the thud and pulse of blood from his heart. “Did you never know what I wanted, Bodie?” he whispered, so softly they could pretend he had never said it if they had to: “Did you really think I was just in it for the kicks?”

Bodie said nothing.

“Let me stay, Bodie. I’ll do better for you this time.”

He had counted on Bodie’s not being able to deny him anything when it came to it: but he realised now, at this moment, in the doubting, brooding silence, that it was a closer-run thing than he had ever dreamed.

But Bodie let him stay.

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“Look a’ this,” Doyle said with his mouth full of chips. He pointed out to Bodie a huge pair of newspaper tits nestling around the mound of junk food they were sharing, wrapped in The Sun.

“Mm.” Nostrils flaring, Bodie admired them. “Tear it out, eh?”

“Nah, too greasy. Just feast your eyes, old son, and then say farewell.” Doyle wiped his hand down the front of his shirt and shoved the rest of the chips Bodie’s way. “You finish ’em.” He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

Stuffing, Bodie mumbled, “What you going to do, then?”

“Wait for you,” Doyle said cryptically. The bedroom had every comfort, a bathroom off, a TV perched on a shelf so they could watch it from the bed, which was kingsize and white. Bodie had struck lucky with his flat this time.

There was a scrumpling noise beside him as Bodie jettisoned, probably reluctantly, the rest of their supper. Doyle could hear his own stomach making gurgling sounds as it had a go at digesting the huge mound of carbohydrate he’d just shovelled down to it. Well, he needed it. Ten mile run, perfect end to a perfect day: Cowley had them in training for something big. Best not to think about it.

Live for today.

The bed bounced about a bit. He felt Bodie’s lips touch his, and twisted his face away with a grimace. “Don’t like the taste of fish?” Bodie’s voice said into his ear.

“Not these days,” Doyle said; and made a start, as Bodie undressed him, constructing an elegant and rude little fantasy in his head. “Bodie.” Off came his shirt; he obligingly half sat up to assist his partner. “Remember that massage parlour we raided the other day?”

Bodie snickered. “Did you see Anson’s face? When the bloke begged him to hold off just five more seconds?”

“And Anson said, sarcastic, like a joke, ‘shall I go out and come in again?’”

“And Cowley said—!” Incoherent with laughter they finished it together, “—*I think that’s his line, don’t you?*”

Snorting, Bodie said, “And you always say the old man’s got no sense of humour.”

Doyle said, “Think he ever uses a massage parlour?”

Bodie grimaced. “I’d rather not know—!”

“You ever been to one?”

“As a *customer?*”

Doyle laid one hand, light, on Bodie’s where it was set to dip into the hollow between his belly and the waistband of his jeans. “Wonder what it’s like?”

“Tired old tarts thump your shoulderblades for ten seconds then they ask you if you require anything further,” Bodie’s voice swooped low. “Sir.”

“And then?”

Bodie’s breath touched his ear. “Then they get the gloves on and jack you off.”

Doyle shivered, thrilled, tense, as Bodie touched him, found him hard and wanting. “Got any rubber gloves anywhere?” Bodie murmured to him, exciting him beyond belief; he had hardly hoped—

“First Aid Kit.” He opened his eyes when he heard Bodie coming back into the room, pulling on a thin white pair of safety gloves. His heart gave a jolt and his cock leapt at the sight; Bodie, hands encased in rubber, his forearms bare above to the sleeves of his white T-shirt. It reminded Doyle of the way Bodie looked sometimes when they had a victim in the cells, and Cowley would threaten Sparks and his box of tricks, and Bodie would pull on the gloves slowly, and wait. Tough, silent, beautiful. Menace incarnate.

His cock wept silently, pulsing with urgent little expectations of its own. Something cool and sticky flooded over it, seeping down over his balls and into the crack of his arse. Probably the lotion he used himself sometimes for masturbating, especially when they watched each other. Now Bodie’s hands gave his desperate cock what it wanted, pulling on him, sweet and strong and slick, sensations so utterly delicious he wanted it to last. Forever, if possible. And when he felt himself dangerously close his hand shot out and gripped Bodie’s wrist to stop him.

“Hang on a bit.” When he got his breath back enough he eyed Bodie, decided yes, Bodie could take it, said: “Do they offer anything—kinky?”

“Look, sweetheart, they’d paint you blue and stick a chicken up your arse if you’ve got the cash up front,” Bodie said, with the beginnings of a grin.

Doyle waved at his jeans on the floor. "Wallet's in there. Take what you want."

"Okay. Consider it done. Chicken is it, then? Or what?"

"Very wasteful with that stuff, weren't you? Went everywhere, it did." Bodie's eyes flicked over him. "Even inside," Doyle said to him, soft. "Want to see?" And he rolled onto his stomach, presenting himself, exposing himself utterly.

Bodie's hand landed there a moment later. Parted his buttocks quickly, not particularly gentle, like a doctor examining him in a perfunctory way. Then stroking him. The glovetipped finger felt unnaturally smooth and silky against him. Bodie always knew exactly what he wanted; after a while playing with him one of the fingers tickled round the rim and probed the opening.

Brilliant sensation. It flashed through him, melting his insides completely; so good he was almost shitting himself with the pure excitement and tension and bliss of it. He moaned, and thrust his hips upwards. "All the way in."

Something cool, more lotion, fell on his back and buttocks and anus; and the finger pressed it inside him. "Okay?" Bodie whispered to him, and the glove slipped slowly in and out.

Doyle pressed back involuntarily. Asking for what he really wanted seemed indelicate. He surprised himself sometimes; he heard himself say:

"Wider, okay?" and Bodie slipped another finger past the knot of muscle, all the way inside, and scissored his anus gently open and shut. Impossibly, instantaneously, Doyle felt himself beginning to come; he fought it for a little while but it wouldn't stay away; he half-turned to one side in a desperate haste, grabbed Bodie's free hand and pressed it to his cock. And with Bodie's rubberclad hand squeezing him in front, the fingers opening him behind as orgasm swept through him, harder, intenser, sweeter than ever before, and also a sensation deliciously shameful and at the same time the most liberating he had ever had, he erupted back and front, everywhere, and he didn't care at all.

Bodie got a towel afterwards and soap and cleaned him up.

"God, that was incredible," Doyle sighed.

"No need to call me that," Bodie quipped modestly; and while Doyle cracked up he stared at him curiously. "Can't imagine what you got out of that, Doyle."

"I told you, it feels good. Don't know what you're missing, do you?" Bodie's head came up at that, his eyes, Doyle would swear to it, the exact blue of a night sky pricked out with stars. "And you don't have to, mate," he avowed. "Each to his own." Someone, some earthy grizzled marine ten years older than Bodie had probably tried to get up a younger Bodie's prim little arse, even succeeded, perhaps, succeeded certainly at humiliating and hurting him, thereby landing Bodie forever with an anal hangup which Doyle was grateful not to share.

But then again, he could be wrong, because Bodie immediately picked him up on it: “Look, I didn’t say I wasn’t curious.”

Doyle stretched, an immense satisfaction stealing through body and soul, and grinned at him. “Are you telling me you’re going to let me do that to you?”

“If anyone could make it worth my while, you could.”

“Not tonight, though—okay?”

Bodie flicked a derisive glance over the slumped sprawl of his exhausted cock. “Not up to it, Raymond?”

“Got other plans,” Doyle told him succinctly. Enough rest: time to get moving. With a growl of appreciation he rolled over to kiss Bodie, thrusting his tongue arrogantly into Bodie’s mouth, down his throat as far as he could get; licked his nipples into peaks, gasped his cock and jerked it in the way Bodie liked, paused to admire it—

“Ever measure this? You could make a fortune in porn movies, sunshine.”

“Yeah, probably, but I’d lose my day job.” Bodie had his eyes shut.

“Nah, we’d find a way round it. They wouldn’t need your face, after all.”

“Get on with it Doyle, will you?”

Doyle grinned, very white teeth, one chipped in front. “Getting impatient?”

“Oh no,” Bodie told him impassively. “But just pretend I’ve got a Luger on the back of your neck for the hell of it, will you?”

“Nice idea,” Doyle said, straightfaced. “But, just for tonight—I want something from you, mate. Special treat, you might call it.”

He knew that Bodie understood him at once. But he knew nonetheless that this was deep water: something they had not really touched on before. Except once. And Bodie, remembering that once, might be shadowed by the past. And indeed, Bodie said slowly, “I dunno, Doyle.”

He brought all his will to bear on Bodie, would not let Bodie’s eyes escape the demands of his own. “You want to. C’mon, Bodie, I *know* you fancy this.”

Bodie’s lip curled, an unwilling smile coaxed out of him. “Know me too well, then.”

“I can feel your eyes up my arse every time I climb a flight of stairs.” Doyle leaned back, all supple willingness, and smiled a very special smile.

Bodie was leaning over him, stroking him in an absorbed kind of way, kissing him every so often, small, soft kisses beside his mouth. His eyes when he raised his head to reply were dark with trouble and desire. “Sure you fancy it? It hurt you last time, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it hurts I suppose,” Doyle met his eyes. “Not the same sort of pain as being hit in the face with a lead duster, mind you. It’s—special—” He kissed Bodie again, long, lingering, savouring every taste he could discover in Bodie’s mouth. Then he settled back on the pillow, and held out his arms for Bodie to come into them. “C’mere a minute, Bodie, just lie down with me for a bit. Listen. I’ll tell you what I want.”

“Let’s hear it then,” Bodie said when he had settled his head on Doyle’s chest, and Doyle’s fingers wandered in his hair, playing with it.

“Okay.” He took a deep breath, shut his eyes, summoned it up. When he spoke his voice was low, soft, hypnotic. “You get here, to my flat. You don’t know me all that well, we’re just mates, that’s all. You can’t see me at first, can’t hear anything, lights out, and so on. Then you find me. On the floor, asleep. Face down, no clothes. You come over. Look at me. And then you—”

“Then I what?” Bodie’s voice speaking right into his ear was intimately deep and sensual.

Doyle smiled without opening his eyes. “—You know you shouldn’t. But you want to. So you open me up back there, and you have a really good look. Maybe you even—touch. You know?”

“Can’t help but think you’d wake up at that point,” Bodie said critically. “Most people wouldn’t sleep through it.”

“Not asleep then,” Doyle rectified. “How about— unconscious?” The idea made him shiver. “Oh yeah.

That’s even better. Yeh. I’ve passed out cold. You *know* I’m not going to wake up.”

“Okay, passed out cold. Wouldn’t I be going through the First Aid routine by now?”

Doyle rolled his eyes. “Look, Bodie, this is a sexual fantasy. We’re not talking responsible citizen here. We’re talking man who’s always wanted to get a secret thrill looking up his mate’s arsehole.”

“Okay,” Bodie murmured, amused. “I get it. No resuscitation procedures. Go on.”

“Where did I get to?” He knew perfectly well.

“I was about to go where no man has gone before, I think.”

“—ey, don’t jump the gun. You don’t want to stop, because you know you’ll never get the chance again. You know I’d kick you in the teeth, make you eat my gun or something, if ever you tried

to get your hand up my arse—”

“Like a sleeping tiger—” Bodie was getting into it now.

Doyle had his hand on Bodie’s cock, just a friendly touch. It was hardening beautifully, waking up and stretching itself and doing little pressups, getting ready for action. “—So then you think, god, he’s not going to wake up *whatever* I do—”

“And I—?”

“—you do whatever takes your fancy.” Doyle opened his eyes, twisted around to look into Bodie’s face. “Hit me about a bit. Stick something else inside me. Whatever. You decide.” He stopped, to breathe, to snatch and savour a kiss. “—then— Whatever you do next, it’s got to lead to the point of you making up your mind to go the whole way. There I am, dead to the world. You’ve had a look, and a feel. But it’s not enough.”

“I start thinking ‘rape’, do I?”

Doyle kissed him again. “You’ve got it. Let’s get up for a bit, have a drink or two.”

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Mahler 6 on the tapedeck. Moody, tragic, demanding. Perhaps not ideal. But he loved the passion of it. And once into it he could not switch it off before it came to the end, those three masterly hammerblows of fate. Wearing only his jeans, undone, he read the newspaper and sipped at a Scotch and let the music swell his mood.

Bodie, fully dressed, watched TV and drank slowly from his glass. His fine, well-muscled forearms, downed with dark hair, rested on his thighs. He was a very attractive man. Doyle felt conscious, all the time, with every heartbeat, of the brooding, powerful presence, the life and vigour of the man, reined in, ready to surge and overpower him. He was so deeply, intensely absorbed in their own little private world that when the doorbell rang, he jumped.

“Better answer it,” Bodie said. They were on a case which required off-duty hours; but it turned out to be Murphy and Stuart, out for a free drink.

“It’ll ’ave to be a quick one,” Doyle said, consulting his watch as he held the door. “Bodie and I got reports to do.” He was careful not to stand too close to Murphy as he passed; wearing only the jeans and nothing beneath he was conscious of his own body odour, not unpleasant, sweat and sex none the less. When Bodie joined him in the kitchen he handed Bodie a fresh bottle of Johnny Walker. “Look, they’re your mates. Get rid of ’em soon, eh?”

“I’ll do my best, Lord.”

Bodie was looking particularly beautiful tonight. Irresistible. Doyle put the bottle down, took

him by the hips and leaned in for a kiss. Wearing no underwear his cock pressed itself to Bodie's through soft denim. Bodie kissed him back, hands tangling in Doyle's hair to tilt his head so that Bodie's tongue could enter his mouth, the gentleness and the ardour of it taking Doyle by storm. He murmured some endearment, close to Bodie's cheek. Hearing a noise behind him he drew his mouth away, lingering, unhurried, and turned to see Murphy there. Doyle picked up the bottle off the side and extended it towards him.

"This what you came for?"

"Thanks."

"Help yourself."

As Murphy disappeared rather rapidly into the lounge, Bodie met Doyle's gaze, half amused. "Cool, Doyle. Very cool."

"Maybe now they'll get the message and go."

"I want to kiss you again," Bodie said, standing in close, breathing in the warm, lustful smell of him.

Doyle leaned back against the breakfast bar. "Go on then. It's not a sin." He moved his body languidly against Bodie as Bodie kissed the side of his mouth, whispering to him,

"Oh, it is, Doyle. Believe me."

Damned, then. But somehow he could not care: he would take his thrills here and now. There was no heaven, save what you could find on earth.

Murphy and Stuart did not seem to want to hang around for long. Doyle shut the door behind them, bolted it securely, and turned, his hands already going to his jeans. "Were you thinking about this all the time they were here?" he said, head bent as he pushed them down and kicked them off.

"All the time," Bodie said, and his eyes were ablaze, no tenderness there now, only passion, and a hard, decisive energy: "All the time."

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Doyle lay face down on the carpet in the hall, head turned to one side, cat-like senses alert—waiting—

When he heard the soft sounds of Bodie's approach his heart kicked off the blocks for a fast sprint; he bit his lip in the most exquisite anticipation, conscious of the pounding in his chest, the rough feel of the mat against his cheek, most of all his naked bottom thrillingly exposed to the

air.

Footsteps halted behind him.

The longest, sweetest silence he had ever known.

And just when he could not bear it any longer, something even sweeter: a touch on his skin. A palm, rubbing. And himself being split slowly, the cool air rushing in to bathe his heated inner skin. Now his heart seemed to have stopped entirely. He could see it all so clearly in his head, the man crouched behind him, wanting to see, needing to, eyes feasting hungrily on the forbidden.

And then the moment came when seeing was no longer enough.

Something, a fingertip, tickled around the edge of his anus, sending little rills of pleasure and excitement zinging through his nerve endings. When the tip slipped inside him he couldn't help but press back against it.

A stinging slap on his rump sent sweet little aftershocks of pain along his skin. "Not allowed, Doyle," Bodie's low voice said to him. "You're dead, remember?"

Perhaps the first word which had come into Bodie's head: or, perhaps, hints at a very dark fantasy indeed? Interesting. Bodie's two hands pulled his cheeks wide apart then, no more teasing, he was as wide and open as Bodie could stretch him. He could feel the burn of Bodie's gaze against him and it struck a line of iron right down through his cock.

Anticipation. Fingers pinching his cheeks hard, still holding him wide open, Doyle was expecting the invasion of something cold and hard, he was tensed up for it: but instead something beautiful, soft and wet. Bodie's tongue. At the same time his insides went, just like that, a gutsweetness stealing all through him and melting him throughout. It felt—so *bloody wonderful*—he couldn't keep from letting out a little whimper of pleasure, but Bodie didn't pick up on it this time, just settled there between his thighs and gave him the unholy kiss of all.

Oh christ... so good, so sweet.

Bodie's weight left him and Doyle shot his head up, lifting himself up on his palms like a man doing pressups. "Where the hell are you goin'?" His voice sounded hoarse, unused.

A tube of lubricant in Bodie's fingers appeared in front of his nose. "Ah, get rid of it," Doyle said roughly. "We don't need it, okay?"

"Yeah we do."

Strung out to the last degree, Doyle snatched it and hurled it across the room. "Look, I'm just in the mood to do it without, okay?" He wanted to feel Bodie's cock inside him with nothing between them. And he wanted Bodie to have to fight a little bit to get it in there. His eyelids slammed shut again when the weight of Bodie's hand slapped down on his cheeks for the second

time, and Bodie wasn't being gentle. If he could only see himself he suspected there would be a red, sore mark raised by the blow.

"Shut up and keep quiet," Bodie's violent whisper came.

Brilliant.

He lay still and quiet as the dead and felt at last the head of Bodie's cock nudge between his buttocks, rub up and down the crack a bit, long and hard, slipping sweetly in Bodie's spit. That felt nothing but good, just the most beautiful, simple pleasure. If Bodie kept it up long enough, up and down and round and round like that, massaging his sensitive opening the way he was doing, he was going to come fast and that was that, already his cock was weeping its joy onto the rug below.

But then there was suddenly a change in the mood; he knew what was coming and screwed up his face, fingers clenching on the rough wool of the mat. And he winced as Bodie leaned in on him, cock straining for entry, no-one could help it, it felt impossibly large, hard, as if it would split him in two. Bodie stopped then, wound an arm beneath his chest and waited, giving him time he didn't want; so he shoved himself upwards, hard and Bodie took the hint. One quick violent poke from Bodie's cock and pain ripped through him; he kept still and bit his own forearm to distract himself, deadly afraid that Bodie would stop if he cried out. He heard Bodie draw in his breath: yeah, *bet that felt good for you, sunshine.*

"Come on, do it," he hissed aloud. "Hard as you like."

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The shock of entry was over. He was widening, stretching all the time to accommodate Bodie inside him, it was getting easier with every stroke. Doyle picked up the rhythm of Bodie's thrusts and withdrawals and moved with him, but urging on the pace until Bodie was going at it fast, his hard quick breathing falling on Doyle's neck, one arm still beneath him, pulling him back against his belly; he could feel their bodies pressed so close together, Bodie going so deep inside him he kept touching the very heart of him, the pain a different note now, sweetening the pleasure. The tenderness and the violence of his own feelings astonished him, and he opened his eyes wide as orgasm ripped through the very centre of him, racing like starfire down tiny intricate passages to shoot out of him, and every thundering, trembling pulse of it squeezed Bodie tight, tighter, until the answering throbs of it hit him deep inside, soft, sweet, *oh yeah...*

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Bodie was stroking his hair, rubbing his wet forehead in a gentle sort of way, just waiting for him to come around. Doyle locked eyes with him and nothing was spoken aloud. It had been rough, violent, nasty even. And yet that made the *afterwards* more tender, more close. For a while there was nothing secret between them, they understood everything.

Special. Magic.



While he was showering and washing his sweaty hair, Bodie popped his head around the door. “You staying the night?”

“Might as well. Half asleep—” yawn— “already.”

He yawned again as he came through the bedroom door, vigorously towelling his hair. “Don’t just drop it on the floor,” Bodie said critically, watching from the bed.

“Would I,” said Doyle, hanging it exactly and precisely over the back of a chair, fussing over it this way and that, until Bodie laughed at him, told him point taken, and get the hell into bed.

Bodie had obviously made the bed again with fresh crisp sheets and army corners. It felt wonderful. Doyle slid his weary stinging body in with a sensation of the purest bliss, and shuffled close to the warmth of Bodie. Felt Bodie’s arms go round him. Turned his face up so that Bodie could kiss him, which he did, for a very long time, in a way unmistakably loving. Then he reached over and switched off the light.

“You always used to go home,” Bodie’s voice was quiet in the darkness.

“You always used to want me to.”

“No. I wanted you to stay.”

Doyle smiled in the darkness, Bodie’s possessive arm across his belly. “Yeah, well, you must have wished on the right star this time. Now shut up. I’m tired.”

But sleep didn’t come to him straight away.

“Bodie? You awake?”

“Mmm?”

“Got any thoughts about us moving in together?”

By some change in the quality of silence he knew that Bodie had opened his eyes. “How?” Bodie asked eventually.

“We could take up an option on a double flat next time one comes up. I was looking at the board today, there’s one going in Kensington.”

“Very handy for the palace, m'lud.”

“Or—” he reached down for Bodie’s hand and squeezed it tightly— “We could get a mortgage. Get on the property ladder.”

“No-one’s going to be queuing up to give us a mortgage, Doyle,” Bodie said tightly, ironically. “Did you see the new insurance proposals the other day? Cowley ’ad ’em on his desk, I had a quick look. Want to know the average survival term for a CI5 agent?”

“No.”

“2.7 years.”

“So they repossess early,” Doyle shrugged. “Our money’s as good as anyone else’s, while it lasts. Dunno about you, but it’s coming in faster than I can spend it these days.”

“We’ll think about it,” was all Bodie said; but as Doyle turned over and curled on his side preparatory to sleep Bodie’s arm wound under his and over his chest to bring him in close and sleep came easily, bringing no nightmares, only dreams of the strangest kind.

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3.7 was looking very handsome today, dark hair shining, shoes polished, dark suit and tie, which brought out the best of his looks, never inconsiderable. He was no friendlier, however: Bodie more than most resented this, had done from the very start, and made no secret of it. Hard work. Dodged every which way, by turns flippant, ironic, or uncommunicative; made her fight for every damned little thing.

In the end, though, she would get there. “—all your scores are well up, as usual—” “You’re surprised?” Bodie gave her an immodest grin. “I keep telling you I’m perfect. I was born that way. Big, brave and—beautiful—”

The funny thing being that of course he did not truly believe that. Had never really believed that. Was only just beginning now to trust the stroke of good fortune that had given him what he wanted.

“You’re still working solo?”

“Yeah, shouldn’t be for too much longer though. Doyle’s gone for the final checkup today, the full works. If they pass him he can be A-lined again starting tomorrow.” Bodie had a clipped, efficient way with him today. She had the feeling he wasn’t giving her his attention at all. Scanning for body language, her quick eye found him a little on edge, fidgety, his gaze constantly flicking to the window, but whatever the cause of his anxiety it wasn’t the simple fact of his being here for this interview; he was hardly listening to her, had no interest either in what she had to say nor in his own answers.

Which was, believe it or not, good news. Clearly he had nothing to hide from her today!

“How long is it since 4.5 was shot?”

“Eight weeks tomorrow,” Bodie answered her, and his eyes were fine, direct, clear.

They had survived.

“And you answered the emergency call, didn’t you? It was you who found him there. Have you found that hard to deal with?”

“No, absolute breeze,” he returned ironically.

“It hasn’t caused you nightmares, anything like that?”

He shook his head: no nightmares. Well, she could take a guess at why not: why should there be nightmares, when he could open his eyes any time he wanted, see the face next to his on the pillow, watch his chest rise and fall with life, feel the breathing soft on his own skin—

“I see from the *change of circumstance* forms that you’ve moved in with him.”

“Yeh.” No reaction.

Come on, Bodie. Give it to me. I need to hear it, just once.

“Why?” she asked bluntly.

“Just seemed easier that way. They let him out of hospital early on the understanding he had someone around to keep an eye on him. He’s got no family, so—” Bodie shrugged.

Ah, what a saint you are. No family, so you got the job of looking after him. Not that you wanted to, of course. Not that you’d have fought anyone to the death who tried to get between you and Ray Doyle. Oh no.

There was a little rattling sound on the window pane. It got all Bodie’s attention at once; he was prickling like a cat, stretched to the limits in the effort to see out.

One more try. Just one.

“You’re in his company almost all the time now, aren’t you, now that you—live together? How are you getting on? After all, it can be difficult living with anybody, even a close friend. Has it changed the way you feel about him at all?”

“Oh,” Bodie said, attention all outside now on the vision he could just about glimpse in the drive, “about Ray? Love him to death. I want to marry him and have his babies, okay?”

He spoke it with the lightest of ironies, just a catchphrase, after all, doing the rounds. He meant by it absolutely nothing.

And yet—

Her heart pounded; she felt a little lightheaded. Slowly the taut silence was penetrating his attention; he turned his dark head to look at her, eyes narrowed in a black gleam as he tracked down the moment of change, ran his own voice again in his head—

She held her ground, despite an intuition that this must be exactly how this proven killer looked at the coup de grace. And today was her day. She won. At last, at long last, she watched his eyes unfreeze: the tiniest, most reluctant of smiles began to change the sculpted line of his lips and she asked him, smiling herself,

“Can I have that in writing?”

He inclined his head towards her, cool, defiant. “Yeah.” It was out. The sky was still there, and the sun set in it. And Ray Doyle was out there waiting for him, on a day when summer began.

“Have any damn thing you want. In triplicate. Can I go now?”

And that was it.

Another file closed.

He even reached out, boldly, and shook her hand. Then the door slammed on him and she could hear his footsteps for a little while, down the staircase and away. She had the maddest urge to leap on her chair, to fling open the window, to take up precious piles of paper and hurl them into the air.

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Instead she stood by the window watching: and there he was outside, Ray Doyle, looking good, trudging about in the drive, kicking around a bit on the white pebbles, hands in his pockets, waiting for his partner between the pink glory of the flowering cherry trees.

And Bodie, now, suddenly bursting out of the door beneath—

The door to her own office opened— “Dr Ross— thought you might like to know, 4.5 has been passed for duty, starting tomorrow—”

“Quick,” she said. “Quick. Come and look at this,” and so it was that George Cowley was there with her to witness it, Ray Doyle whipping around at the hurried approach, face alight, fist leaving his side and punching up high and hard into the air in a gesture of triumph and joy and

sheer physical release: And Bodie was there by now seizing Doyle and lifting him high into the air, laughing up at him as Doyle laughed down, in the most uninhibited exhibition of pure, boundless exhilaration she had ever seen.

Spoken or unspoken, it hissed through the air—

“YESSS...”

They were together. Whole. Alive.

The swallows were still flying in the sky. And the summer: about to begin.

—July 1995