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BLAME IT ON RAY—OH!

Many's the time he had been seated here behind his desk, some disreputable, derelict lump of humanity hauled in to sit opposite him. It was always the same, or a variation of the same: he would ask questions, they would refuse to answer, he would become implacable, slide back into the old gallus aggression that had kept him unscarred on the streets of pre-war Glasgow. Then his prey would quiver, and relent, spilling their secrets as readily as they spilled the stench of fear into his office.

But this one... Oh, this one was different. There was no fear in this one, only defiance, and a banner of pride, head held high, as if that pride weren't tattered and stained by the life this man led.

"So," Mr. George Cowley, head of CI5, said conversationally, "you've not the slightest intention of telling me what I need to know?"

The man opposite him grinned, wicked amusement glinting brightly. "Icould tell you a lot of things you need to know." The eyelids lowered, until a sultry gaze tingled along Cowley's nerves. "Not that you'd want to hear them—not in here at any rate. Don't walls have ears in Big Brother's spy shops?"

"So you think we're spies, do you? Well—"

"Aren't you?" An impatient gesture, beautiful hands capturing Cowley's attention. "What else'd you call yourselves? Crawling around under people's beds, listening to them having sex—in my books, that makes you either bloody spies or Mary Whitehouse." Then he smiled, slowly, with all the knowledge and experience of the rent-boy he was, alluring and dangerous and wildly exciting. And knowing, all too-knowing, the smile the preening confidence of a man sure of his attractiveness and surer yet that he was wanted.

Cowley suffered the fear that should belong to his recalcitrant informer. Doubts crowded him for the first time in years. Had he really-no, that was stupid: he'd done nothing in front of this young man to betray himself, nothing that could make this Doyle character even suspect him. It was street-bravado on the young man's part, that and nothing more. "I've no time for your stuff and nonsense, laddie," he said, making sure his voice was perfectly steady and utterly stern and betrayed none of the effectiveness of those seductive green eyes staring at him. "But perhaps the fault's mineperhaps I haven't explained the situation to you well enough," he went on, sounding not in the least apologetic, making his very reasonableness seem a threat. "What you know could save the lives of scores of people. Flaherty was a regular...customer of yours, and according to our sources, his terrorist pals are worried what he let slip."

Doyle's face was impassive, only the eyes betraying his anger and his vitality. So much life, so much vitality: enough life, perhaps, to take some ofthe years off Cowley's shoulders, enough vitality, perhaps, to bring his body back to the passion of youth. Cowley pulled himself up short, calling himself for every tumshie-heided ijit under the sun. He was supposed to be interrogating the man, not indulging in fanciful daydreams. He took his glasses off, rubbed the bridge of his nose,

examined a file—anything, in fact, to give him a second to pour cold water on airy-fairy notions he had long thought safely interred under years and years of work. Tension erupted as anger: "Your head's full of clouds if you think you should keep your secrets to yourself."

"But they're not my secrets, are they, Mr. Cowley?" Doyle asked, uncrossing his legs so that the light cast intriguing shadows on the cusp of his moleskin trousers. "And since they're not my secrets, maybe you should ask one of your spies to weasel the truth out of the man the secrets belong to."

Cowley knew he should look up then, stare the arrogant git down, but his mind was overflowing with the beauty of the tightly-clad thighs, fabric clinging so snugly, and the sweet swelling of groin... Get yer mind out of the gutter and back on the job! he shouted at himself. You can go to the Club later if you need to, but you've got a job of work to do, and start thinking what this yin's so desperate to hide that he's flirting with you.

And then he remembered the man's profession, and amended that to: that he's trying to seduce you with the merchandise. The mental cold shower was useless, for having thought of 'the merchandise', he couldn't help but wonder how much the man charged, and for what. And whether or not the checks would turn Doyle up to be a security risk or the soul of discretion. Disaster, or everything Cowley had hoped for, until age and common sense had cured him of dalliances with men as luscious and alluring as this one.

"Thought you were supposed to be questioning me?" Doyle, casual, completely confident, his sexual attraction both weapon and shield. "If all you're going to do is sit there staring at a closed folder, then I'm off home." He rose to his feet, that simple motion turned into a work of erotic art, thigh muscles flexing, one hand coming to rub absently at his chest, the other resting, open, on his hip, the fingers pointing inwards and down...

...down, Cowley noted, swallowing quickly, to where the man's prick was clearly delineated, a thick curve, a sheen on the fabric to show that he habitually dressed left. And habitually walked through life partially aroused, as in love with his body as everyone else was. Mouth suddenly dry, Cowley needed a drink, the crack in his tough image be damned. This Ray Doyle character didn't seem to be at all impressed with his image anyway,

if that knowing little smile was anything to go by.

"Get back in your seat," Cowley snapped, getting to his own feet as Doyle sat down, the two of them moving as if choreographed. Then Cowley was crossing the room to where he kept his drink, two glasses clinking as he brought everything back to his desk—and to his silent humiliation. He had, he admitted, appalled, tried to hide his limp, tried to walk straight and tall and proud, as he had when he'd been young and his hair had still been red and not faded out to this middle-aged sandiness. He took a good swig of whisky that was better savoured sipped slowly, but it was the kick he was after, not the taste. He almost choked on it as well, as Doyle took his first mouthful of malt, and managed to make it all look like a hedonist's delight. The worst part of it was, Cowley would have bet good money that it wasn't even for display, the tangible pleasure nothing more than Doyle's natural sensuality.

He knew he should be asking questions, browbeating the younger man, harassing him into confession, but he didn't dare speak quite yet, for fear that his voice would betray him. Pathetic, he chivvied himself, truly pathetic, to have his head turned by a pretty face and a beautiful body. Ah, but, that rebellious voice in his mind answered, it's not a pretty face, is it? Cowley glanced up, now that he had the excuse of trying to categorise the face. No, not pretty, he thought as he made a note in a margin that needed no annotation. Interesting, intriguing, with those green eyes-put him in mind of a boy he'd known at school, a teuchter brought down to Glasgow by his father's need for work. Aye, and that hair, all rich chestnut and curls, thick enough to lose his fingers in. Even the broken cheekbone attracted him, with its tacit statement that here was a man tough enough and hard enough to fight for something.

Probably his payment, Cowley's sensible cynicism reminded him. With a sigh, he took a proper sip of his whisky, and forced himself back to his job. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour, he paraphrased in his mind. "Flaherty," he said, ready to begin again.

Doyle shook his head, and even the light was conspiring against Cowley, the late afternoon sun dancing through the curls like kisses. "Nothing to say about Flaherty. He was a friend of a friend that I helped out once or twice, and that's it."

"A friend of a friend? You mean, he was in-

troduced to you by one of your other...clients?"

"That's none of your business, Mr. Cowley."

"But it is yours. Are you denying that you sell your sexual favours?" Ah, that was better. Always best to sound disgusted and morally superior in situations such as these. It tended to keep the lust out of one's voice.

"I don't sell anything," Doyle snapped.

Cowley, absurdly he told himself, was disappointed that Doyle was going to pretend to be something he wasn't.

"I let people borrow bits of me that they want and I don't mind sharing."

"And in return," as sour-faced as a Minister from the Free Kirk confronted with a Sunday mother in make-up and trousers, "they let you 'borrow' large sums of money."

"No, they give me presents."

Pity, that, Cowley thought, disappointed in spite of himself. He had thought Doyle had pride and courage, an honesty that was refreshing and exciting.

Doyle chuckled then, the filthy laugh going straight to Cowley's groin. "Course, the presents are usually in cash or jewellery that I can then sell for cash, but I have been known to smile prettily when they give me a car or something."

He should, he told himself, be seriously dismayed that this man had no shame over being a prostitute and was obviously destined for a life of abasement. But he was too busy being charmed by the self-deprecating humour, the attitude that owned to neither sin nor shame. And that, perhaps, was the most attractive thing of all about Ray Doyle. What would it be like, Cowley wondered, to be without sin? To see no harm in a wee bitty pleasure or a nice present? But there was a job to do, had to get on with it. "And while you're earning these presents of yours, do any matters of importance get dropped in front of you?"

Another one of those irreverent, appealing grins. "Only knickers," Doyle said. "And yeh, yeh, I know what you're trying to get at, but my answer's still the same. Anything I hear doesn't get passed on to anyone else. Not even someone like you."

"Not even to save lives?" A flicker then, in those bedroom eyes.

Doyle looked away, out the window, obviously thinking hard. A man of principles, albeit very select and sporadically applied. "All right, I'll tell you this much—although why I'm trusting you

even this far is beyond me. Mike—Flaherty—did say a few things here and there, but nothing that even hinted at something you'd need to know. No mention of bombs or guns or any of that." Doyle shrugged then, and as Cowley's mind listened to what was being said, his body responded to the way the T-shirt rubbed against the taut nipples. "I mean, I don't go round gossiping, but I'm not going to keep my mouth shut if I hear anything about blowing people up. Anyway, as far as I knew, Mike was just a businessman, over here for a while working out some distribution problem and getting away from the attitudes back home." Doyle looked at Cowley then, and something in that honest gaze made Cowley's heart leap with unease. "Something to do with the Eire government not being too keen on the likes of us.'

It was the first time in years anyone had seen through his façade. Or the first time in years that anyone had dared mention it, here, in his own office. the sanctum sanctorum of his heterosexual rôle. He did what any closeted government official did under these circumstances did: he attacked. "There's not many who are keen on your sort, Doyle. Walking the streets the way you do, or molesting children—"

An explosion of movement, and Doyle was half-way over the desk, hands braced on the blotter, face a mere inch or two from Cowley's. "Now hang on just a minute," he snarled, voice kept low to prevent others from hearing and coming to the rescue. "If you want to pretend you're not what you are, then that's your problem. But don't you sitthere and say things you fucking know aren't true. If you don't have the balls to be honest, then at least don't make it worse for the rest of us. All right?"

"And you'll sit yourself back down before I use this on you, won't you, laddie?" Without even thinking about it, at the first hint of attack, his hand had grabbed the gun taped under his desk. Now, he brought it out slowly, making sure the light glinted threateningly on it, as it did in the films, usually the only place the average person had ever seen a gun. The old ploy had lost none of its effectiveness: Doyle sat, slowly and carefully. But not, Cowley noted, with any craven cowering. Fear, aye, but who wouldn't be afraid of a gun pointed at them? He put the weapon away, into the drawer this time.

"That was a bit much, don't you think?" Doyle asked him, and there was, amazingly, an edge of contempt in the voice.

Cowley locked the drawer, to prove that he didn't need the gun to protect himself, and because, quite frankly, he agreed with Doyle. It wasn't often he over-reacted like that. Not often at all. But then, it wasn't often he felt this threatened. He took a moment to look at Doyle, to assess him, to see what he could do to pull this interview back from the complete disaster he was turning it into. He needed, he knew, to get a grip on himself, get himself back under control. He'd been tempted before, he'd hungered after some handsome man in circumstances not unlike this, but he'd never been this stupid.

Of course, he'd never been this close to yielding to temptation either, had he? That, he confessed, was the problem. It wasn't Doyle's anger that was the threat, it was his own weakness for Doyle's considerable charms. "Betty," he said into his intercom, "d'you have those reports for me yet?"

"Just finishing them, sir," she said, "I'll be in in just a moment."

Cowley sat back, waiting for Betty, watching Doyle and deciding how best to handle this.

"Sir," Betty said as soon as she came in, "everything's here, apart from the situation regarding the conference and the duty roster. As soon as I have them, I'll type them up for you."

"Thank you," he said, not looking at her, devouring instead the papers in front of him. The first report was a disappointment, but not unexpected: the SAS were very polite, but they weren't willing to second Sgt. Bodie to a civilian organisation, and what's more, they were pleased enough with him that they were hoping he was going to sign on for another tour. Aye, well, Cowley had a few tricks up his sleeve to make sure *that* didn't happen. Next, a memo from the Minister, approving his leave, but due to that damned conference, the Minister was insisting that Cowley move his holidays up to the 6th—which was barely a fortnight away. Disgusted, Cowley slapped that paper down on the desk, and picked up the next. Ah, now this was much more what he wanted to hear. Murphy's report on Doyle: not on the streets, then, but an intimate friend of several important and very rich men who, apparently, were willing to put up with Doyle's refusal to be kept by any one of them in order that they could at least have him on Doyle's terms, which seemed to be fiscally wise and as moral as a rent-boy could

manage. Sandy eyebrows raised at some of the men Murphy had seen Doyle meeting-the man had better contacts in Whitehall than Cowley had! The security aspects were unnerving, to say the least. Frowning, Cowley went down the list, the names ranging from those high in Government to powerful in industry, and even one very influential TUC leader. Still, according to Murphy, Doyle was almost better known for his discretion than his bedroom skills.

Temptation knocked a little more loudly, and Cowley wet lips gone suddenly dry. Doyle, again according to Murphy, had no set prices, merely accepting the generosity of his 'sponsors', which meant that Cowley himself could afford Doyle, if he wanted to. If he wanted to! He was having a devil of a time not having Doyle right here and now in his own office with his own staff perilously close. Back to the job, he told himself, trying to be stern enough to make the command stick, get back to the job.

And for the first time in as long as he could remember, he didn't give a damn about the job. He shifted uneasily, unused to the need to adjust himself in his trousers: he usually had his libido so thoroughly repressed that he could concentrate elsewhere and any recalcitrant interest faded in due course. All that was fading in here today was his own determination to do the job he was paid for. He was far, far more interested in Doyle doing the job Doyle was paid for.

"If you've forgotten about me," Doyle said abruptly, "d'you mind if I leave? What with waiting for you to see me and then sitting here while you catch up on your paperwork, I've been here over two hours already, and it is past dinner-time, in case you hadn't noticed."

Cowley permitted himself the dangerous luxury of looking at Doyle, and admitted then that he was going to avail himself of Doyle's services. Not here and now, but later, discreetly, when Murphy was back on the Philips case and Doyle had been added to the 'secure' list alongside a certain Club and one or two very discreet friends. "I'll be with you in just a moment," Cowley said, going back to the paperwork, an unexpectedly sweet feeling of anticipation unfurling in his belly. "I suggest you use this time to go over everything Flaherty said to you that might be a slip-up we could use to prevent any more of these letter bombs going out."

Too busy looking at the report, Cowley didn't see the man himself start at the mention of letter bombs. Under Murphy's report lay the garish holiday brochures. One or two places were definitely out of the question now-there were some places a man did not want to go at the tail end of the nastiest European winter in many a long year. But Brazil, now, that had possibilities. Excellent weather, lush countryside, practically nude beaches, and yes—a glance at his desk calendar confirmed it-the trip would coincide with Carnival in Rio, that wonderfully hedonistic celebration which attracted humanity of all sorts to the city. Oh the pleasures to be had in Rio during Carnival and with Doyle at his side! It would be everything a man of his nature in a job of this kind so rarely had available to him.

He looked at the pictures that had first attracted him to Brazil, the tanned and lithe young men cavorting, nearly naked, on the beach. Doyle would look wonderful in those skimpy swimming trunks. Doyle, wet from the blue sea, sun shining on him, warm and salty, growing brown in the sunshine, coming willingly to bed, smiling that seductive smile for him, the beautiful mouth descending upon him, Doyle as erect as he himself would be...

Cowley almost blushed, half with embarrassment, and half with fury at himself. What was he playing at, indulging himself in fantasies when he was still behind his desk and supposed to be working? Flustered, he fiddled with the papers while he tried to get a grip on himself. Never, absolutely never in his entire life had he been this quick to lust, nor had he ever been this... He couldn't think of a word to describe his reactions to Doyle. For that matter, he wasn't even sure he was thinking at all, too wrapped up in every tiny move the restless Doyle was making, too engrossed in these foolish fantasies of himself and Doyle together in the luxury of a five star hotel.

But was it really so foolish? Doyle accepted presents, after all, and perhaps a first class trip to Rio de Janeiro was a gift he'd quite like. Especially if Cowley were to add a cheque to the plane tickets...

"You said this was about letter bombs," Doyle broke in, voice very decisive.

Cowley went back to work, only about half his mind on the undeniable need he had to stare at Doyle, to drink in every detail and linger over the most appealing bits. "Aye," he said, and had he

but known it, he would have been proud that there would have been precious few able to see beyond his hewn-granite expression. "There've been a rash of them, and all we have to go on is this one hint that Flaherty might be involved."

"Look," Doyle said, and even as serious as he was, there was no denying the man's sexual lure, "I don't talk about anything my friends say, not usually. But if it's about those bombs I've been reading about... Wasn't there someone killed?"

"That's right. A secretary, mother of three, and none of the children over nine."

If Doyle had been willing to reveal one or two things before, he was ready now to give every detail he could think of, just in case it might be useful. "I was still there one day when the phone rang. Mike went into the living room, and I could hear him talking about sending the orders out and making sure the merchandise was delivered on time."

"Can you remember anything else?" His body forgotten for the moment, Cowley focussed on the information he had needed to hear.

"Well," Doyle said thoughtfully, "there were one or two other things that might help..."

Half an hour later, Cowley sat back in his chair, well-contented. Doyle had delivered his information with pellucid attention to detail, and with a fine grasp of minor facts that would mean nothing under normal circumstances but could, and in this case would, be the difference between stopping Flaherty and the rest of his break-away group and some other poor soul opening a very nasty surprise package.

Another half-hour, and agents were dispatched to begin the slog of watching and waiting and gathering enough proof to put an end to the nasty business. Nothing to do with this now but wait patiently until the time was ripe and then go in for the prize. Cowley caught sight of the brochure half-hidden under a pile of notes and Murphy's report. "A good hour's work," Cowley said, sitting back and watching Doyle's animated face: the man had been intrigued by all the hustle and bustle, not a question asked, but the intelligent eyes had missed nothing.

Right now, the intelligence shifted into annoyance, albeit tempered with amusement. "A good hour's work? I've been here for days!"

"I know the feeling myself," Cowley replied, and the warmth in his voice gave clue to the other man. "In fact, there's nothing I can do here until several other reports come in, and there's none of them liable to come in before morning." He paused, fingering the brochure, thinking about possible risks and definite benefits, weighing costs both fiscal and other against this unheard-of sweep of purest desire. "As you've been so helpful, I think the least the Department can do is see that you have your dinner. Would you care to dine with me, at my Club?"

That made Doyle narrow his eyes suspiciously and glance, meaningfully, at the locked drawer where the gun festered. "Is it you I'll be having dinner with, or your department?"

A hesitation, while all doubts were shoved aside by the need to taste that insouciant mouth and to touch that sweet, sweet swell of groin. "I'm a generous man, but not so generous I'll pay for an entire Department."

There, that was clear enough, in the somewhat foggy language that formed negotiations for services rendered.

"Generous? Generous enough to make me forget that you pulled a gun on me?" Doyle rose to his feet then, not waiting for an answer, and Cowley found himself suddenly, breathlessly, eye to eye with the tight crotch of Doyle's well-filled denims. "I'll tell you something, shall I? Even if you weren't, you've got me interested. I like men with power, but you're the first man I've ever met who's made me back down, even if you did have to use a gun to do it. Fair enough, I'll have dinner with you."

Cowley too rose to his feet, exchanging the view of the delectable groin for the view of the fascinating face. "And the rest of the night?"

Doyle grinned again, the smile that made Cowley's heart beat that little bit faster. "Oh, I'll have you for the rest of the night as well, if that's what you fancy."

Eyebrows raised at that. Attractive Doyle might be, but Cowley wasn't going to lie there and take it from some young pup he barely knew. "You'll do as I tell you, laddie," he said, and was rewarded by a flash of interest in eyes that he could quite easily become addicted to staring at.

"Oh, I will, will I?" Doyle answered, following Cowley over towards the door. "Might at that. You're a handsome old bugger, aren't you?"

And Cowley, absurdly pleased by the compliment, paid for or not, grinned like the Cheshire Cat and felt quite as giddy. He was, he admitted

finally, besotted. Completely, totally, utterly besotted, taken in by a prickly package of beauty and intelligence and the serenest honesty he'd ever encountered. Hand on the handle, Doyle stopped him by the simple expedient of groping him.

"Oh, yeh," he heard whispered in a lush voice, "definitely a handsome old bugger. I think I'm going to enjoy this one."

Swollen with pride and lust combined, Cowley opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. Agents passed him and he nodded, properly imperial, and was pleased that not one of the welltrained men even noticed that their boss was anything but his usual self.

But Cowley knew the truth, was acutely aware of it as he sat in his car, Doyle sprawled comfortably beside him in the passenger seat, his gaze steady on Cowley's hands steering them through the crush of cars on city street. Cowley knew that he was in deep water and was drowning in the heady excitement of desiring this man. Cowley knew himself to be possessed by this handsome face and even more handsome body.

Cowley knew it, and was too far gone to care. He wasn't going to suddenly start passing on secrets, nor neglecting his job. But he had that holiday coming up, and all those days and nights in Rio would be heaven indeed with Ray Doyle at his side.

"Have you ever been to Rio de Janeiro?" he asked as they sat at a traffic light, too impatient to wait until after dinner to broach the subject.

Doyle shifted slightly, just enough to better display what was on offer. "You inviting me?"

"Would I be asking if I weren't? Of course, I'd make sure you had plenty of spending money if you came with me..." Silly, of course, to be nervous over whether or not his offer was accepted. Doyle wasn't stupid, nor was he greedy, according to Murphy's report. Nor, if those glances and comments and sultry sighs were anything to go by, was Cowley himself exactly repulsive to this man who had confessed a taste for older men of power.

"So when are we going to Rio, then, George?"

And George Cowley, bewilderingly infatuated with a man who was blessedly not a security risk, was still grinning when they arrived at the Club four hours, one detour home and two orgasms later.

And that, he blamed on Ray-oh!

For hJc and Cat—be careful what you wish for!