

You're joking, sir!"

The outburst was unusual but not unexpected and George Cowley looked over the top of his glasses at the man standing rigidly, almost at parade stance, in front of him.

"I don't think I caught that, Bodie. You have some problem with the assignment?"

The agent didn't speak; in fact, his lips were pressed tightly together and the controller of CI5 could imagine the pressure of the younger man's teeth grinding against each other.

But the face before him was blank, a practised façade displaying no emotion. Cowley's gaze softened a little as he looked at one of his best agents. He didn't relish giving out this kind of assignment; in fact, it left a rather sour taste in his mouth. But the objective was important and he was in no doubt that for this particular job Bodie was the best man. Allowing his voice to display a little more warmth, he leant back in his chair and took off his glasses.

"Och laddie, I know it's not pleasant and if there were any other way...but this is important. We need to know what Stephenson knows and find out if he's up to anything. If he's what he appears to be—a successful, financially independent businessman—then there's no problem. But if our sources are correct then he's involved with some very nasty business indeed—most likely drugs and arms shipments to Uganda. We have to know what he's up to, Bodie; that's why you have to get close to him."

At this, the cool expression of the dark-haired agent broke into a sarcastic grimace. "And just how close would that be, sir?" he said with a hard edge to his voice.

"Aye, well that's something that you'll have to see about now isn't it," Cowley replied gently. He was not without sympathy for the position that he was putting his agent in, but he also hadn't exaggerated—this was important. Shipments of arms had been finding their way into rebel hands for months and the country of origin had been identified as the United Kingdom. It was CI5's responsibility to find out exactly who the source was and to put a stop to the movement of weapons.

"Look lad," he continued. "Our intelligence says that Richard Stephenson is a wealthy man—just the wrong side of fifty but who's proud of his appearance, works out at the gym and takes care of himself. And...he has a liking for younger men—to be precise, dark-haired young men of a fairly muscular build. Our sources also suggest that he's not into power games, certainly no violence in the bedroom, but that he likes to use his money and his charm to get what he wants. In a bygone age it might have been said that he likes to woo his conquests. The man is certainly no gorilla. So who knows, maybe you can find

NINE TENTHS
BY CASSIDY COLLINS

out the information before it has to go too far.”

“And if I can’t, sir?” came the clipped response.

Cowley put his glasses back on and sat up rigidly in his chair, his face losing all trace of compassion. “Then you have your orders, 3.7,” was his curt reply.

With that the controller of CI5 picked up a file and began to read, effectively dismissing the unhappy agent from his office.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Ray Doyle was furious. He stalked through the corridors of CI5 like a thundercloud. Most of the established operatives read the signs only too well and were careful to keep out of 4.5’s way. They had no idea what had riled him but were keen to avoid becoming the focus of his anger.

Best leave it to Bodie to calm Doyle down, was the general consensus, Bodie would know how to handle him.

Of course there was a hapless newcomer or two who managed to stumble into the path of Doyle’s rage; their education was swift and very sharp indeed—no one messed with 4.5 when he was in a temper.

Finally the angry ex-bobby came to a stop outside his destination. With the briefest of knocks he opened the door and, ignoring Betty’s startled interjection, stormed directly into Cowley’s office.

George Cowley sighed and looked up from the papers that he was studying. Laying the folder down, he met the heated stare of the curly-haired man full on. “Something I can do for you, 4.5?” he said in carefully measured tones.

“Too right there is,” came the sharp response. “Where’s Bodie?”

The question held a steely edge yet barely concealed the man’s very real concern for his absent partner.

“Bodie has been given an individual assignment.”

“So I’d heard” The sarcasm bled through.

“ So what’s going on? Why’ve you split the team? What’s so secret that it’s not on the duty roster and no one seems to know where he is, eh? That *I* don’t know where he is?”

Remaining calm, Cowley replied, “The nature of the assignment is confidential 4.5 and it is also of a somewhat delicate nature.”

Doyle’s face registered surprise and also a hint of suspicion.

“Delicate sir? And *Bodie*?” A flicker that might have been an aborted smile passed fleetingly over Doyle’s troubled countenance. William Andrew Philip Bodie was a man of many skills but being a master of tact and diplomacy was not one of them. “Look, tell me what’s going on—he’s my partner and I ought to be there to back him up. So what is it that even *I* can’t be told?”

“All right, lad, calm down,” Cowley said softly. “We’ve had some intell about who might be supplying the rebels in Uganda.”

This caused the younger man’s eyebrows to rise. He knew that this was top priority and that the department had been working for months to try to find out exactly where in the UK the arms were being dispatched.

“A possible source has been named but we need to verify it. Bodie is the perfect candidate for the job. He has, shall we say, past experience that makes him uniquely qualified.”

For a moment Doyle seemed mollified but then continued with his questioning. “Past experience? Something to do with his time in the SAS? What is it that means he’s the only one for the job *and* that he has to go solo? He needs back up...he needs *me*, sir!”

Cowley refrained from commenting on Doyle’s blatant possessiveness of his partner as there was worse to follow. Weighing his options carefully he finally spoke in a quiet yet firm tone. “The man we suspect of the arms dealing is a known homosexual. The only way that we can get anyone close enough without suspicion is through a, shall we say...romantic link.” The older man had the grace to appear

a little uncomfortable as he employed the euphemism for sending one of his top agents out as a whore.

“What?!” Doyle was astounded. Bodie, the perfect man for the job? This was ridiculous. He felt like laughing, but instead he simply broke into a wide grin. “Oh come off it, sir. There’s been some wires crossed here...Bodie with a bloke...you’ve got to be kiddin’ me! This is a wind up.”

“Four-five,” Cowley barked, his patience finally eroded. “I, unlike some others that I could name, do not have time for infantile practical jokes. There are things about your partner that you obviously don’t know. All that I can say is that Bodie has had some experiences in the past that I believe will allow him to satisfactorily carry out this assignment.” Seeing that Doyle was about to object, the Scot raised an authoritative hand. “This discussion is over, 4.5. You are not to interfere and you are not to compromise Bodie’s cover by making contact with him, do you understand? He is already *in situ* and all we can do now is just wait and hope for a positive outcome.”

∞ **CI5** ∞

Doyle wasn’t sure how he drove home; he couldn’t remember stopping at traffic lights, giving way at junctions or even indicating. He had no idea what speeds he’d been travelling at; one minute he was at work and the next off-duty and back in his flat. He felt numb and totally stunned.

Bodie—bent?

No way! His mind couldn’t even begin to comprehend *this* little gem that the Cow had sprung on him.

Bi? Bodie was AC-DC? Well that was the way it seemed right now and of the two this idea seemed somehow to be the least threatening. Doyle rubbed at his temples where the throb of a headache was just beginning.

But surely he’d have known! How could

Bodie not have told him—they were the best of mates, after all. The best friends, the best partners, the best team that CI5 had. They shared everything—that’s why they worked so well together. Sometimes it seemed that they were almost telepathic—well, maybe not that but *empathic* yes. They could often read each other’s feelings and even anticipate what the other would sometimes do or say. In fact it was a long-standing joke on the squad. The other operatives seemed to think of 3.7 and 4.5 as some kind of double act and ‘good for a laugh’. Bodie was always happy to play along with any scheme that Doyle came up with.

So how could he not have told him about this? Doyle considered Bodie to be his closest friend in the world...didn’t his partner feel the same? The thought that Bodie hadn’t trusted him enough to share this information was wounding and it just kept running round and around in Doyle’s mind. Infinitely worse though were the pictures that his imagination were conjuring up to accompany those thoughts. Pictures of Bodie naked in some man’s bed, in some man’s arms. Bodie on his hands and knees while some man was behind him ready to stick his big, fat prick into....

No! Doyle wrenched his mind away from the thought as his stomach lurched sickeningly. He didn’t believe it—he *couldn’t* believe it.

Oh god...Bodie was bent and he was probably off somewhere right now...*with another man*.

He groaned out loud as lights flashed behind his eyelids and his head began to pound.

Doyle paced the floor and threw himself impatiently onto the low sofa. He couldn’t get comfortable and moved from one side to the other trying to relax, finding it impossible as his head felt like it was ready to split wide open. Frustrated, he thumped at one of the bright blue cushions.

Bodie! Bodie with a man... Never, he wouldn’t believe it...no way, it couldn’t be

true. After all—what had these other blokes got that he hadn't?

That final thought cut through the fog of his tormented deliberations like a bright shaft of sunlight.

What had they got that he hadn't? *He?* Is that what this was all about—that he wanted Bodie for *himself*?

Suddenly his body was immobile; the impatient and irritable movements of a second before were stilled. He sat frozen against the corner of the sofa where his body had come to rest at the moment of his strange epiphany.

Is that what this was all about? He wanted Bodie...for himself?

Sitting quietly, he tried to breathe deeply in an effort to find a calm centre and focus his mind. He really couldn't take all this in. First there had been the revelation from Cowley about Bodie's 'past experience'. No details of course, but just enough to get Doyle's mind whirring with possibilities. Now this—another shock—this time the blow self-administered. And what a bloody beauty it was too...he was surprised the impact hadn't been measured on the fuckin' Richter scale!

So he fancied his best mate...that wasn't so bad was it? Bodie was a very attractive bloke when he came to think about it. All dark, brooding good looks and pale, muscled skin...yes, very easy on the eye was his partner.

So?

Doyle had always prided himself on being an unbiased individual. Yes, he knew he had a quick temper and strong views on various issues but he had never thought himself homophobic. Over the years he'd had occasion to socialise with people from all different backgrounds—different races, cultures as well as sexual persuasions—and he liked to think that he'd been receptive and open to a range of ideas, though he'd never actually put homosexuality into practice; he'd always loved women with too much of a passion for that. It wasn't just looks that he went for, mind. Yes, the outside was important—he liked a

pretty face and a good body as much as the next man—but it was what was on the *inside* that was more important to him. Not that he always had much chance to learn about the real person behind the exterior, what with the job causing unsociable hours and broken dates. There weren't many women who could put up with that. He found that he didn't always have time to really get to know a girl before they got fed up and it was all over.

So what did he think about this new idea, this bolt out of the blue...that he wanted *Bodie*?

Well he was shocked. He even managed a wry grin at this thought. Shocked was definitely an understatement. Never in his wildest imaginings did he ever think that he could fall in love with his partner—and someone who was a man to boot!

Hang about, where'd that come from... *love*? When had love come into the equation? One minute he was thinking about wanting Bodie and the next about loving him.

He carried on breathing slowly; in through his nose and out through his mouth until he felt calmer again. Now he could try this new little surprise on for size...love.

Well, if there was one thing that Doyle recognised about himself it was that when he felt, he felt intensely and with great depth. He never seemed to experience shallow emotions, when he felt something it was always keenly and often times painfully. Like his emotions concerning Ann....

Doyle gave himself a mental shake. Now was not the time to bring up that particular ache again. Ann was over and done with, gone for good. In hindsight he knew that it would probably never have worked; Ann would never have accepted the things that he had to do for his job, would never have accepted him for what and who he really was. But Bodie... Bodie was a different matter all together...

Armed with the newfound knowledge that yes, he might just actually love Bodie, then maybe all this didn't seem so strange. Well, he

knew Bodie was his best mate and that in itself was a kind of love. So how hard was it to take the next step and realise that he was actually *in love* with him?

Doyle sighed deeply. What had started off as a perfectly ordinary day had rapidly deteriorated into something akin to a bizarre dream. He rose wearily with heavy, sluggish limbs and crossed the room to pour himself a stiff drink. He swallowed greedily and the scotch caught at the back of his throat, its mellow bitterness sending out waves of heat as it travelled to his numbed extremities.

It was obvious that he still had a lot to think about.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Bodie settled back more comfortably into the opulence of the plush corner booth. The classic line of his suit and the rich burgundy of his silk shirt allowed him to blend perfectly with the well-to-do clientele of the club.

So far, he thought, things had gone fairly smoothly. He'd managed to make contact with Stephenson quite easily through the gym that the businessman frequented. He'd then made sure that he'd sent out some quite obvious signals that had been quickly picked up by the older man.

Stephenson had seemed extremely pleased that the young and handsome newcomer found him interesting and had at once begun what Bodie had privately dubbed the 'Wooing of Philip Bodie'. The ritual was quite formal and they were now on what Stephenson primly liked to refer to as their third 'date'. So far Bodie was thankful that the dates had involved little more than fine wine, expensive food and a little dutiful kissing before Stephenson gallantly saw him to his door. Bodie had to smile at the almost old-world chivalry that Stephenson seemed to exude. The man was quite a pleasant companion in many ways and his appearance was not exactly repellent. He was in his early fifties with grey hair and he had a sparse

build that he religiously kept in trim by frequent visits to the gym. Smaller than Bodie in both height and physique, he was an interesting conversationalist with a dry sense of humour. It was ironic, Bodie thought, that at another time he could have actually become friends with the man. But just friends... nothing more. He had no interest in the man 'in that way', he thought as he grimaced at the irony of the whole situation.

Shifting a little on the red velvet seat, Bodie considered his assignment. With regards to actually finding out if Stephenson was involved in running guns and drugs, he had so far drawn a blank. His subtle questioning had only revealed that Stephenson was, as he seemed to be, a wealthy businessman with a penchant for young, handsome men whom he liked to wine and dine and slowly seduce. However the seduction process had clearly been moved up a gear tonight and Bodie, with a sinking heart, was fairly certain that this evening would not end with a chaste kiss on the doorstep but would involve him having to go to bed with the older man.

Bodie tried to swallow but his mouth was suddenly parched as he thought of that particular possibility. Cowley hadn't been wrong—CI5 vetting was very, very thorough after all—he did have some experience with men. But it seemed so long ago, like he'd been another person. It had begun when he was in the Merchant Navy. Well, he'd only been a kid really—running away from home and signing up when he was just fourteen—lying about his age so that he would be accepted. In hindsight it was obvious that he was going to be hit on by the older men and at least there'd been no real violence involved. They hadn't been animals, just frustrated sailors who were a long way from shore and all that had been expected of him was to be a willing hand or mouth, nothing more, thank God. So although not particularly enjoying the experience he didn't remember it with revulsion, just acceptance of a valuable life-lesson learned.

Then of course there'd been Africa and the mercs. By this time he'd been a grown man and more than capable of looking after himself. He'd made certain that the only activities he became involved with were ones of his own choosing. That had really just been some mutual wanking off to relieve the pressure. Yeah, some of the others had screwed around but he wasn't interested in that; all he'd needed was a release for the adrenaline rush after battle and an occasional change to break the monotony of his own right hand. So in fact his experience with men was fairly limited. He'd never been screwed, although he knew a little about the mechanics as he'd had a couple of birds that'd liked him to put it up the back way from time to time. That was all though—he'd never been penetrated and the thought of it made his stomach roll over alarmingly.

Christ...

Bodie could feel cold sweat trickling down his back as he tried to block out the disturbing thoughts that were crowding in on him. Is that what sleeping with Stephenson would entail?

The idea of having sex with the man later that night was nauseating. It definitely seemed to be on the cards, though, as Stephenson had increased the pace of his seduction. Earlier in the evening the older man had picked him up from his temporary cover flat in his chauffeured limo and, on their way to the exclusive gay restaurant and club, had made him a gift of an obviously expensive gold bracelet. Bodie couldn't help but be impressed by the older man's technique and by his gift. The gold of the bracelet was heavy and now lay warmly against the skin of his right wrist; the finely worked links gleaming brightly against the paleness. Was this some expensive trinket to buy his place in a rich man's bed? Could he go through with it?

Inwardly he laughed, but the joke was bitter...and it was definitely on him.

For God, Queen and Cowley, he thought. Yes, he knew he'd have to go through with it.

He should perhaps be thankful for small mercies—at least Stephenson wasn't a barbarian, someone who got off on pain and domination...or so it seemed anyway. But who knew what happened behind the closed doors of someone else's bedroom? With a mental shake Bodie raised his eyes and painted an expectant smile on his face as his companion returned and slid into the booth to sit closely at his side.

"Sorry I was so long, Philip. Did you miss me?" Richard Stephenson's voice was warm and rich with just a hint of humour. It was a deep voice and not one that could have been described as effeminate.

"Desperately, Richard," he laughed and the older man joined in with a deep chuckle as he slid his arm around Bodie's shoulders.

"So my dear, did you enjoy the meal?" Stephenson whispered as he leant more closely towards Bodie's ear, gusting moist breath across the delicate skin there.

Bodie shivered a little, though more from dread of the evening's finale than from the desire he feigned. "It was wonderful—as always." Bodie smiled. In fact that was no lie—the food had been perfect, just as it should be for that price, he thought grimly. But Stephenson was a rich man and could obviously afford the best in food and wine, and it seemed his taste in men was equally as expensive. At least I don't come cheaply, Bodie concluded ironically.

Typical really, he mused, it was just his fucking luck to be stuck in this parody of a bad Mata Hari when he had absolutely no interest in men, no matter what the Cow bloody thought. Well, save one man, of course and that was more like a secret fantasy... something that he kept locked away, only bringing it out on cold, lonely nights to warm his soul and his bed.

The fantasy was Ray Doyle and it was bloody ironic that he had to go and fall in love with a man who was most decidedly and determinedly heterosexual. Yep—just his

rotten, stinking luck; he'd only ever wanted one man and that man was totally unobtainable. So instead he was sitting here being winned and dined by another man in whom he had no interest, but with the possibility—no the *inevitability*—that he would have to sleep with him.

Sometimes life was just fuckin' hilarious.

Bodie barely contained a heartfelt sigh and then felt Stephenson's hand press more closely against his shoulder, reminding him of where he was. In a moment, a second hand was placed on his thigh, just a little too high for propriety. The rich damask tablecloth seemed designed to hide a multitude of sins and Stephenson's hand began to creep a little higher, gently rubbing spirals against the firm muscles of Bodie's leg. Swallowing his distaste at being touched so intimately, Bodie arranged his features in a mask that suggested desire and wanting for the man at his side. It was only on the inside that his heart broke a little more at the thought of sharing with Stephenson that which he had only ever wanted to share with Ray.

At that moment a shadow crossed the table and Bodie looked up, his questioning gaze turning quickly to one of shock, disbelief and finally horror. For standing before him, his face glowering with what appeared to be barely concealed fury was...Ray Doyle.

Bodie flinched and began to pull away from the embrace of his dining companion. He was stunned that Ray was here and mortified that his partner should see him in this kind of situation. His mind was spinning with questions but he tried to play it cool in the sure knowledge that Ray must have a bloody good reason for turning up like this in the middle of an op.

Locking blazing, green eyes on Bodie for just a moment Ray then directed his attention to the other man seated at the table.

"Take your hands off him."

His voice held a tempered steel core of menace that Bodie recognised as extreme anger

and that even Stephenson could hardly fail to notice.

The businessman simply gawked and stared at the intimidating figure standing across the table. Ray was dressed in black jeans, shirt and leather jacket, and his very presence seemed to scream danger.

"W-what?" came Stephenson's shocked response.

"I said 'take your hands off him'," Ray repeated very slowly, "...and I'm *not* goin' to say it again." The anger held in the low and even tone seemed to roll across the table in venomous waves, serving only to strengthen the aura of menace surrounding the imposing man.

Visibly gathering himself, Stephenson began to rally and reached again to circle Bodie's shoulders in a firmer embrace. "What are you talking about? Get out of here. Who do you think you are, coming and disturbing our meal like this?"

Ray smiled briefly but it was a flint-like parody lacking warmth. "Someone you really don't want to mess with," was his chilling response. Without glancing at his partner Ray continued with banked rage, "Bodie! Move, *now!*"

Bodie seemed to jump at the curt instruction and without thinking pulled himself from Stephenson's renewed embrace and rose from his seat as if unable to disobey his partner's will.

"Ray?" His query was almost tremulous.

"Philip. Who is this? What's going on?" Stephenson asked vexedly, looking at his young companion who was now moving towards the glowering figure on the other side of the table.

"Erm, Richard, I..." Bodie seemed unable to frame a response and looked questioningly at Ray. If Ray was the one breaking his cover then he must be the one with all the answers, he thought dully.

Ray reached out a hand and took Bodie's arm in a possessive grasp. "Never you mind

who I am, mate,” he addressed Stephenson in an icy tone. “But I’ll give you a bit of free advice. Next time you decide that someone takes your fancy, just make sure that he doesn’t belong to somebody else first, right?”

With that Ray turned smartly on his heel and left the restaurant, towing a bemused Bodie along in his still furious wake.

∞ **CI5** ∞

As the two men exited the building Bodie tried to question his partner. “Ray? What’s going on? What about the op?”

Turning to face the other agent Ray muttered, “It’s a bust—the Cow sent me to pull you out.”

“What? What about—” Bodie questioned, indicating the club with a nod of his head.

“Seems the intell was wrong—Stephenson is no more a gun runner than my granny. So I came to get you off the hook.” Ray’s face twisted with an emotion that could have been anger or just gut wrenching pain. “Course, by the looks of it you probably didn’t want to lose your meal ticket.” The last was spat out as though the words were coated in bile.

Bodie stood stock-still and looked at his partner with a stunned expression. Before he could even begin to formulate a reply he saw Ray’s keen eyes light upon his right wrist.

“What the fuck?” Ray shouted as his hand shot out and grabbed at the heavy gold chain blinking palely in the weak street light. “A present from the boyfriend, Bodie?” he sneered as he snatched at the bracelet, breaking the catch and flinging the object into the gutter.

Bodie had no idea what had inflamed his partner’s anger to this degree. Biting off the caustic comments that were struggling to erupt, Bodie fell back on long experience of dealing with an enraged Ray Doyle. He shuttered his expression and simply waited. There was obviously something eating at Ray and it looked to be deep down. Bodie knew that he wouldn’t find out what it was until his

partner was ready to tell him. More than anyone else, he knew the way that Ray’s mind worked and he realised that whatever this was, it was big. It was something that was aching down in Ray’s gut if the mixture of despair and anger on his face was anything to go by.

Without waiting for a reply Ray strode towards the nearby gold Capri and muttered in an irritated tone, “Well get a fuckin’ move on then, it’s freezin’ out here.”

Rubbing at his sore wrist where the wrenching gold links had scored his pale skin to an angry red, Bodie squared his shoulders and followed his partner. Whatever else happened tonight he was determined to get to the bottom of Ray’s problem.

∞ **CI5** ∞

They drove in silence. Gone was Ray’s normal grace and fluidity behind the wheel, now he was tense and gripped the steering wheel with an iron hand.

Bodie used the time to try to put a few things in order. He knew that Ray was angry, hell he didn’t need to be a Sherlock to see that. Ray was, in fact, fuming—as angry as Bodie had ever seen him. But...there was something else behind the harsh words and furious actions. What was it?

Fear?

Yes, Ray looked scared...in fact he looked bloody terrified. What the hell was happening to him? Ray was never rattled this much by anything.

Oh Jesus, he wasn’t ill was he? Oh Christ, Ray wasn’t dying? *No, please!* Bodie knew that if there was one thing that was sure to put him in his grave, it was losing his partner.

Steadying his suddenly erratic breathing, Bodie berated himself for the turn towards melodrama. No, Ray was as strong as a horse...he wasn’t ill. Plus the fear was somehow connected to Bodie. He’d seen it, seen it when those beautiful eyes had flashed with heat and passion at him in the club. But what else? There had been another emotion

hiding there, what was it...it'd looked like desire? Tinged with jealousy?

That was ridiculous! Just projecting a little, eh Bodie old son, he thought ironically. But he couldn't help himself...what if...?

Glancing surreptitiously at the hunched figure in the driving seat, Bodie finally closed his eyes and tried to replay the events of the evening. What had happened exactly?

Okay, Ray had broken in when Stephenson had got Bodie in a semi-clinch. How had Ray reacted? Bodie would have expected some smooth line designed to get his partner out from the obbo and then some scathing innuendo about being found in a compromising situation with a man. But that wasn't how Ray had reacted, not at all. What *had* he done? He'd played the jealous lover and played it well too. In fact too bloody well, Bodie thought with a start. Ray Doyle was not that good an actor. So he really was jealous...he'd looked at Bodie with hurt in his eyes and then treated him with all the possessiveness of an irate lover. Could that be it? Ray actually wanted him?

Bodie tried to assimilate the rush of new thoughts. What about the little scene with the bracelet? That hadn't been for Stephenson's benefit as they'd been alone on the pavement. So was he right...did Ray actually look on him with desire?

At once Bodie felt elated and yet empty. He knew Ray Doyle...he was a sensual creature; years of double dating had shown him that much. Was this just some kind of experiment? A passing fancy to try it with a bloke and then that was it? Bodie would become just another notch on the rather impressive Doyle bedpost?

Bodie's stomach turned over and he licked at dry lips. He couldn't stand that...not with Ray. He'd accepted long ago that he'd fallen in love with his partner. Not a smart move and one that was only going to bring him heartache in the long run. But he hadn't been able to stop himself...he'd fallen hard and

long; for this soldier it'd been the real thing. It was strange really that while he'd known it was a hopeless longing he'd been able to handle it and just be glad of what he did share with Ray. But this new situation—the possibility of Ray actually being interested in return—could threaten all that. Bodie knew that if Ray just wanted to try it on and have a one-night stand then he'd have to leave, he'd never be able to stay 'just mates' with his partner after that. A few stolen moments would open up everything that he had tried so hard to hide for all these years. He knew that he'd be left bare and bleeding if that was all that Ray could offer.

Better to have never tasted the forbidden fruit than live with its bittersweet memory forever.

What the hell was he going to do? He felt cold inside as an icy splinter wormed through his gut and chilled his bones. Would he have the strength to refuse Ray if he tried it on? How would Ray react to that? He was a vain man in many ways, though with ample reason in Bodie's opinion but he knew that Ray would be affronted and probably furious at any refusal. He would see it as a direct slur on his desirability.

So it seemed that he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. Accept a night of lust with Ray and let it break his heart wide open until the pain caused him to crack, or refuse any offer of casual sex and end up alienating his partner?

Oh what a fuckin' mess this was.

Bodie had been so busy with his thoughts that it was with a jolt that he realised the car had stopped moving and they were outside Ray's flat. So this was it...into the fray, Bodie old son, he thought dryly, and if you're really lucky you might just come out of it with your heart still beating.

Turning to look at his partner who was sitting like a rock behind the wheel, Bodie fixed a bland smile on his face and spoke at last.

“So we’re at your place then, sunshine. Looks like you want to share a nightcap. Come on then, might as well make a move as sit here all night in the cold.”

Ray refused to meet his eyes and merely exited the car, slamming and locking the door behind him.

With a weary sigh Bodie followed suit and trailed his partner through the security gate and into the ground floor garden studio.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Ray was obviously stretched as tight as a bow string and as they entered through the kitchen he shrugged off his jacket and snagged two tumblers. Once in the lounge area he grabbed a bottle from the shelf and poured two hefty measures of scotch before positioning himself by the window with his back to the room. He held his glass steadily in one hand but did not drink from it.

Bodie took the remaining glass of amber fluid and sat down carefully on the low, leather couch. Looking at the taut lines of muscle and sinew bunching under Ray’s shirt he decided that he had to say something. With his heart beating frantically in his chest he took a deep breath and asked in a quiet voice, “Ray, why are you angry at me?”

Immediately it was as if all the emotion leached from the gaunt figure by the window. Ray’s knees sagged and he only just managed to stumble into a chair before he fell.

Holding the glass in both hands, Ray sank back and rested his head on the high chair back, his eyes drifting shut. With a sigh that sounded both exhausted and resigned he answered.

“Oh Jesus, Bodie—I’m not angry at you...not really. I just don’t know what the hell’s going on anymore. I’m so bloody mixed up that I think my head’s goin’ to explode.”

Bodie was surprised; he hadn’t expected this. Anger, maybe, resentment perhaps or even a wicked come on, but not this...this confusion and helplessness. Bodie recognised

the feelings. Or at least he hoped he did. It was exactly the way that he had felt when he first realised that he was falling in love with his partner. A tiny flicker of hope began to smoulder deep in his heart. Could Ray be feeling what he felt? Could it be more than anger or lust?

There again, it could be something else entirely. The embryo flicker spluttered and grew dim.

What the hell was he going to do? Bodie had promised himself that he would never let Ray know how he felt. But what if...just *what if* Ray did feel it too?

He couldn’t help it; the flicker was back again, though weak and very unsure of itself.

“What is it, Ray? Can you try to explain it to me?”

Ray raised his eyes and looked quizzically at his partner. “Trust me, mate. You don’t want to know what I’m feeling right now. Just leave it alone, okay? I don’t even know why we’re bloody sitting here—I should’ve just taken you straight home in the first place.”

But Bodie couldn’t leave it, despite every piece of common sense that his brain was screaming at him, he suddenly realised that he had to know and know now. He just couldn’t go on like this anymore. Taking all his courage he asked again.

“Come on, mate. A problem shared and all that... You never know, I could help.” His voice rang with a cheeriness that he did not feel as the tiny voice in his brain told him to shut the fuck up before it was too late.

“What’s all this, Bodie,” Ray asked as his temper began to flare again. “Thinking of going after Kate Ross’ job are you? Trying your hand at bein’ a head shrinker, now?”

“It’s not like that, Ray.” Bodie was glad that his voice didn’t sound too needy. “I just want to help, find out what’s eating at you.”

That was obviously it for Ray—the final straw. His emotions seemed to boil over in a melting pot of anger, hurt, jealousy and passion.

“You want to know what’s wrong do you Bodie?” he shouted. “You want to know what’s making me like this? Well I’ll fuckin’ *tell* you, but don’t say I didn’t warn you—you’re not goin’ to bloody like it. Know why not? ’cos your partner’s gone soft on you...on you mate! Your mate’s a flamin’ queer! Want to know how I felt when I heard about this op? Sick, mate, bloody sick to m’ stomach. Not because the Cow let slip that you’d been with men...but because you weren’t with *me*! I don’t know how I kept myself from goin’ mad this last week—imagining Stephenson doin’ god-knows-what to you! And all the time...all the time I wanted it to be me. Can’t you see, you big, dumb crud? I bloody love you and need you and want to lock you up and keep you just for me, for bloody ever! *Now, is that what you fuckin’ wanted to hear?*”

As suddenly as the tirade had started, it stopped. Ray seemed to crumple in on himself and collapsed back into the chair, covering his face with his hands. The barest mumble came through his clenched fingers.

“Make it quick mate. Thump me and then get out. I’ll see the Cow in the morning and tell him to reassign me—you won’t ’ave to stand with your back to the wall, don’t worry.”

Bodie was in shock. He had just been given everything he’d ever dreamed of and was now staring at his partner, gobsmacked and with the biggest, sloppiest grin on his face. But of course Ray couldn’t see it. He was hanging his head and obviously waiting for Bodie to hit him. Hit him? Hit Ray? Bodie closed his mouth with a snap but couldn’t dislodge the smile that threatened to split his face. Ray loved him...he’d said it. He had, hadn’t he? That is what he’d said in amongst all the shouting? Bodie was suddenly unsure and his smile faltered. This was too important to screw up.

Moving to kneel in front of the cowed figure, Bodie spoke softly and with heartfelt concern.

“Ray? Sweetheart? You did just say that

you loved me, didn’t you?”

Ray’s head snapped up and his eyes looked warily at his partner, as if searching for some trick. What he saw in the uncertain face before him must have eased some of his anxiety.

“Yes, mate. Sorry—didn’t mean for it to happen. Didn’t even realise that I did until this op started. Then I thought that I could keep it under wraps...you know, that way you’d never find out and leave me. But I couldn’t, not when I saw you with him tonight. He was touching you, touching the way *I* want to touch you. I dunno what happened, I just saw red I s’pose. ’m sorry, mate.”

“Green,” Bodie whispered.

“Mm, what?”

“Green, sweetheart. You saw green... jealousy...the old green-eyed monster.”

“Yeah, s’pose I was,” Ray agreed, chastened. Then his head came up swiftly and he raised an eyebrow in query. “Sweetheart? Did you just call me *sweetheart?*”

Bodie shuffled a little uneasily, suddenly feeling exposed as he knelt before his partner’s chair. “Um, yeah I did. A couple of times. Don’t you like it?”

Ray’s face was a picture of confusion and then it softened. “I do, actually. Dunno why, should sound daft coming from you, but it doesn’t. Does this mean...?” His question was hesitant and displayed a multitude of insecurities.

“That I love you too?” his partner replied. “Yes it does. I’ve loved you for ages.”

With that Ray broke into a shy yet amazed smile and leant a little closer. “Bodie?”

“Yes?” Bodie ventured, feeling somehow excited and expectant yet nervous as well.

“Will you say it again? And kiss me?”

Bodie took in the panicked breathing of the other man and the telltale lines of strain about the jade eyes. Ray was terrified but he was a tough little sod and seemed prepared to follow this through. Reaching to run one finger down the soft skin of his cheek, Bodie moved

until his lips were the merest distance from his partner's.

"I love you, Ray," he whispered. "I love you, sweetheart." The final endearment was lost as Ray closed the aching distance between them and their lips met in the briefest of kisses.

Drawing in a sharp breath, both men dived to re-establish contact and Bodie tangled his hands in the silky curls framing Ray's face. He felt Ray move to better receive the pressure of his lips and then he was falling into a warm, sweet haven as Ray opened his mouth and sucked him in.

It seemed like an age later that the two men roused themselves and found that they were lying on the hearthrug with legs entangled, their lips swollen and bruised, panting for air.

"Bodie? Is this real, sunshine? Can we make this happen?" Ray's voice was uneven as his breathing began to return to normal.

Bodie rolled onto his side, resting his head on one crooked arm so that he could look down into the wide-eyed gaze of his partner. "Yes it's real, Ray. Unexpected but real."

"Um, I've never actually done this with a man before," Ray admitted with downcast eyelids.

Bodie gently placed two fingers under his partner's chin and raised his head so that their eyes met. "Contrary to what you might have heard, I'm no expert myself." He continued with a nod at Ray's quizzical look. "I mucked about a bit in the Merchant—didn't have a lot of choice really. But it was nothing much—oh I learnt how to use my hands and mouth but that was it. It was so long ago though, and I didn't fancy any of 'em. It was just easier to go along with it than be hassled." Bodie paused and ran his fingers across Ray's uneven cheekbone and then buried his nose in soft curls. "You're the only man I ever wanted. I know it sounds like a load of old bull, but it's true. I've never even said stuff like this to birds, but I can't help it...I love you. That's all that I can say."

"Jesus, mate but I love you too. You're right—it sounds like a right load of old crock and I ought to feel bloody stupid sayin' it but I don't. I love you, Bodie."

The kiss was confident and strong. They might be hopelessly in love but they were both men; strong and hard, no shrinking violets. Their lips and tongues battled in desire until once again they broke apart panting.

"I may not have much idea what to do," Ray gasped, "but I think it's time we took this party upstairs and found out. What do you say, love?"

Bodie beamed at the endearment and pulled Ray in for a final hug before rising gracefully from the floor, pulling his partner up with him. Holding Ray close he had a final moment of doubt.

"This isn't just a game is it Ray? Just for one night? I couldn't stand that." His voice broke a little and he swallowed noisily as he buried his face in his partner's neck.

Ray pulled at Bodie until they were standing face to face. Speaking slowly and deliberately he smiled. "Oh Bodie, love. You can be a big prat sometimes, can't you? This is for keeps, okay?" He squeezed his partner's hands as he spoke and received a relieved smile in return.

Hand in hand the two men walked towards the stairs.

∞ **CI5** ∞

They were both naked on Ray's wide, brass bed, lying on their sides so that each could see the other.

Ray reached out a hesitant hand and traced a path across the smooth, solid planes of Bodie's chest, following the fine, dusky hairs that were just visible there. The younger man hissed as the light touch seemed to ignite a thousand nerve endings.

"Oh god but you're beautiful Bodie," Ray whispered and then looked up guiltily at his partner. "I don't mean that to sound daft but christ...you're just bloody gorgeous!"

Bodie broke out into a wide smile and his eyes shone like midnight sapphires in the lamplight. “You ought to take a look in the mirror sometime, sweetheart...incredible you are...bloody amazing. It’s not just your face either, there’s those dancer’s legs and that tight little bum plus...” His hands reached out and tangled in the light, auburn down that dusted Ray’s chest. “I’ve always wondered how this would feel,” he said in a hushed, almost awed tone. “I’d see a few curls peeking out from those shirts that you never button up and I’d have to put my hands in my pockets to stop me reaching out and touching!”

Ray raised his eyebrows in amazement. “Really? You like it?”

“Love it mate,” Bodie said thickly as he dipped his head and kissed Ray’s breastbone. His explorations did not stop there and soon he was placing light kisses in a torturous path across Ray’s chest before finally tonguing and sucking on one pert, brown nipple.

Ray cried out harshly as the teasing teeth bit into his sensitive flesh and Bodie pulled back.

“Ray? You okay?”

“O-okay?” came the shaky reply. “You’ve got me lighting up like a bloody Christmas tree!”

Bodie allowed himself a slightly smug smile. “Just you wait, sunshine,” he promised with a lascivious wink.

At Ray’s slight look of apprehension, he continued quickly. “Don’t worry, mate. Let’s keep this easy, eh? Just do what we feel like and if either of us doesn’t like something then we’ll say and stop. After all, it’s a bit like the blind leading the blind so we’re goin’ to have to fumble our way through this for a while.”

Ray grinned, “Sounds like fun actually—all that fumbling about. You’re right though, we’ve got plenty of time to try everything, haven’t we?”

Bodie rolled over onto his back and pulled Ray with him to lie on top. “Just the rest of our lives, angelfish—if I’ve got any say

in the matter, anyway,” he said levelly.

Looking down into his partner’s face, Ray nodded, all at once serious again. “Glad that you feel like that, sunshine. ’cos I don’t think this is some passing phase. I’ve thought I was in love before enough times to realise that this really is it. It’s finally happened to me and this is for good as far as I’m concerned.”

Pulling his lover’s face down until their lips were almost touching, Bodie smiled. “Suits me, sweetheart. ‘Forsaking all others’, Ray...that how it’s going to be?”

“That’s right.” The older man smiled as he moved forward and stole a deep, searching kiss, his hands stroking at the silken skin of his partner’s neck and shoulders. “No more seduction ops for us either, I’ll tell the Cow that to his face. Our Casanova days are over and he can bloody well like it!”

At the mention of the earlier assignment, Bodie stilled the gentle hands that were beginning to bring a fire to his flesh with teasing touches. “Don’t worry, we’ll tell him together and...Ray?” He was a little hesitant. “I just wanted you to know that nothing happened with Stephenson, all right?”

Green eyes shone with warmth and love. “Oh Bodie, let’s just forget all that now, eh? It’s okay—it’s over.” He reached for his partner’s right hand and bathed the abused wrist with tender kisses of apology. “You’re mine and I’m never letting you go—and just you bloody remember that the next time some bird that’s all legs and tits comes marching along!”

“No need, sweetheart.” Bodie’s smile was bright and genuine, suffused with all the love that he possessed. “I’ve got everything I want right here.”

The time for talking was over.

Ray wrapped a wiry thigh around Bodie’s waist and pulled them over on to their sides once more. In this position each man could touch and taste the beguiling body before him. Forgetting any initial hesitancy in the rush of desire that enveloped them, they began to

move against one another as if with practised ease.

Soon the stimulation of hands on chests and backs was not enough and Bodie pushed Ray down to lie back against the soft, cotton coverlet. Mapping a delicious route with hands, lips and tongue, he moved down Ray's chest until his head was resting at the juncture of one bony hip. Reaching out with a slightly shaking hand Bodie ran a single digit from the root to the tip of his lover's trembling cock. The effect was immediate; Ray's hips jerked and a low, breathy moan urged Bodie on.

Emboldened by the hoarse pleas from above, Bodie wrapped his fist around the hard shaft and pumped it strongly in an even rhythm. As Ray's cries increased he leant forward and licked at the exposed crown where the receding foreskin had revealed a reddened, glistening head. He used his tongue to probe delicately at the tiny slit and sucked on a pearly drop of fluid already leaking from it. Intoxicated by the taste, he opened his jaws wide and swallowed Ray whole, revelling in the earthy shout that the action elicited. Gagging slightly at first, he soon adjusted and began to suck and lick at the engorged organ. Ray's cries became more breathless and his hips surged upward more frantically as he fucked his partner's willing mouth.

Tracing a spiral pattern along the shaft, Bodie reached to palm the heavy balls that hung between Ray's powerful thighs. Beneath his caresses he felt the hairy skin pucker and tighten as his lover's climax approached. About to redouble his powerful suction, Bodie felt strong fingers digging into his hair, pulling his head away from his prize. He looked up in confusion.

"Ray? Am I doing something wrong?"

Ray blew out a long, ragged breath and smoothed the short, soft strands still clutched in his grasp. "Wrong? Any more bloody right mate and I'll be dead!"

"Then why?" Bodie questioned.

"S'alright, love. I just want us to come

together, okay?"

The whispered words ignited a fire that burned low in Bodie's belly and he grinned ferally, eyes shining darkly with need. "Oh definitely, sunshine," he agreed as he crawled up the slim frame, stopping to drop licks and kisses along the way.

As his head drew level with his partner's Bodie felt muscular arms pulling him down into a ferocious kiss. Surrendering to the blazing intensity of the man beneath him, he sucked on the devilish tongue that invaded him and drank from the moist, honeyed cavern of Ray's mouth.

Ray opened his legs and cradled Bodie's powerful body in the haven of his hips. Shouting mindlessly at the first touch of heated shaft on heated shaft, they surged together in a harshly primal, masculine dance. Sweat and pre-ejaculate eased the path of fevered skin as their hardened cocks duelled and rubbed in a frenzy. Two sets of hips pumped furiously, fighting to allow the maximum amount of contact between the throbbing flesh.

"Oh yes..."

"Jesus..."

Broken moans and panted oaths filled the air as they clung desperately to one another. Each man moved against the other's muscular form in a rhythm that served to spur their passion to even higher levels. Just as the pleasure seemed unbearable and the touch of hot flesh on sensitised skin became overwhelming, blinding orgasm shook through each man, their cocks spitting liquid fire that mingled and cooled on their shuddering chests.

It was several minutes before Bodie could get his breath back. Realising that he had collapsed with his full weight bearing down on his partner he lifted up and began to pull away.

A muscular arm shot out and captured his own in a steely grip.

Twinkling green eyes laughed up at him.

“Where’d you think you’re going, mate?” came the throaty chuckle.

Bodie released the lock on his elbows and lowered himself to cover the body below him again. “Sorry—just thought I might be a bit too much for you.”

The wicked chuckle returned and was accompanied by a firm, wet kiss. “Never mate. I’ll never get enough of you. Now shut up and

let’s get some kip. You’re goin’ to need all your strength for the morning, loverboy!”

Smiling as he snuggled his head against his lover’s shoulder, Bodie could only agree. “Sounds perfect to me, sweetheart...can’t wait.”

Within moments the two men were entwined together in sleep. ∞

