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HEARTBEAT

thumping hugely in his ears, painful in his chest as he took thestairs 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

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an infant schoolchild in brandnew 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 is 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.

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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—!"

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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.

—Sebastian June, 1996

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