

just to look at him, engrossed in the daily grind of writing up a report. *God. Me and Bodie. Not just a quick leg over with him. Not just another fella to screw for a night and then never see again. He'd never let me get away with that. An' I'm not sure that I'd want to give him up once I'd had him. Which is one of the reasons why I've been avoiding this in the first place.*

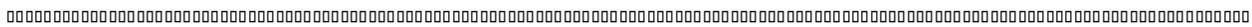
Feeling eyes upon him, Bodie looked up, giving Doyle a smile wicked in its knowledge. That was all, just a glance before he bent his head back to his work. *Christ! Look at me! Gettin' hard just from him looking at me like that. Want him. Wanted him for years, but never could pay the price. Commitment. To Bodie. Shit, I'll be lucky if he sticks with me for a year. Be luckier still if I don't get scared and run out on him beforehand.* Then he thought about the scene on the boat, with Marty the gunrunner, acting as if Bodie was his, acting as if they were already lovers. *And that's quite a turn up for the books, isn't it? Ready to fight dirty for him, to keep Marty's filthy paws off him. Jealous as hell, just 'cos I knew he'd had Bodie when I hadn't.*

He went back to his report, dry language and even drier figures assessing the 1-80 rifle. A movement to his left, then a hand, soft-skinned, a faint hint of after-shave clinging to it, brushing the hair at his nape, shivering sensation down his spine. Then gone, Bodie with it, coming back with a mug of tar-like tea. He found himself staring at the hand, not the man, for he knew Bodie's face in all its expressiveness. That hand. Would touch him, tonight, bare skin on bare skin. That hand would pump his dick for him, cradle his balls, finger him. Tonight. Later. With Bodie. He raised his eyes, and Bodie was there waiting for him, eyes the colour of summer sky, so dark and intense a blue that it made you hot even before you left the shade. And he was about to leave the shade and plunge headlong into a fully-fledged relationship with his partner. *Mad dogs and Englishmen*, he thought ruefully, thinking about the enormous changes he was about to make in his life. *Mad dogs and bloody Englishmen...*

Reading over the sheaf of papers, another thought popped into his mind. "You'll save me," he'd said to Bodie. "You'll save me." *Never trusted anyone like this before, Bodie, not ever. Not enough to trust them with not just me life, but living as well. Everyday, you and me, and you'll get to know me better than you probably want to. Better than I want anyone to know me. Scares me, that does. And you knew that, didn't you? Waited for me, keeping on at me, all the touches and the friendship and the affection. Knew you'd reel me in eventually, didn't you, you suave bugger.* Face flushing, he thought about that. Buggery. He loved fucking, loved feeling himself swallowed by satin flesh, loved the feeling of having a man up him. *Thank God Bodie's been around a bit, don't need to worry about taking it slow and easy. Nice and hard, that's how it'll be between us, no worries about having to lie about what we want, just in case it'll scare off a promising fella. This is for keeps, isn't it, mate? And it some ways, it doesn't even seem like a beginning, we've already been together so long as it is. Just a an extension. Just the next logical step...* 'Logical' didn't even begin to describe how he was feeling, an odd combination of the security of long-term lovers with the breathless nervousness of fumbling teenagers on their first holiday away from Mum and Dad, with all the girls in the world laid out in front of them. His jeans were getting tighter, pressing on him, adding to what thinking about Bodie had started. Kathy Mason and her deceptions were long forgotten; Cowley's temper and disapproval assigned to the scrap heap, along with all the arguments against getting so closely involved with your partner. Too late to rationalise that now—they'd been and gone and done it, and all that remained now was to dot the i's and cross the t's. Tonight. Him and Bodie. In bed. Him, in Bodie.

Report finished, he stuffed it into a manila folder, dumping it into the 'out' tray, ready for one of the office staffers to hand over to Cowley in the morning. And for him, all he had to do now was sit and stare at Bodie to his

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heart’s content, giving in to the newly permissible luxury of staring at a man with whom he had quietly, surreptitiously fallen in love. Bodie was leaning his head on his right hand, the left resting on the blotter, curved and relaxed, fingers bent.

“No one likes a bent copper,” he’d said.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Bodie had answered him. And that, that was the precise moment it had changed, when Bodie had taken it from flirtation to outright emotion. Wouldn’t have seemed like much coming from anyone else to anyone else, but between the two of them, with all the water that had flowed under their particular bridge, it spoke volumes. Not ‘fancies’, but ‘liked’. Always known, but it made it different somehow, made it real, to actually hear it said. Bodie, liking a bent copper. Bodie, liking him. Safe words, to go with the enticingly dangerous emotion that shone from his eyes sometimes. And Doyle wanted it, wanted all of it, and had done so for so long. But it had taken those flip words to gel it in him enough for him not to refuse, had taken the combination of jealousy on both their parts—”Tea? Fine with me,” and then Bodie coming along to play gooseberry—had taken their usual daily grist of danger and dissatisfaction, had taken screwing a bird for the slaking of sex and nothing more. And perhaps, it had simply taken time, to get him ready for the commitment of it all. Bodie was mouthing the words as he read them, obviously mindful of the rollicking he’d got from Cowley over the slapdash state of his last report, and the sight was one Doyle found endearing. There was enough of unfettered, unpolished youth in Bodie still to make life endlessly interesting, enough to bring out the wildness in himself. That would work well for them together, especially in bed. He’d heard enough complaints from Bodie about women who wanted everything slow and tender, whilst all the time a man’s balls were tying themselves in knots. So they’d not do that, not until the mood seized them, not until they had banked down some of the embers of rutting sexuality that had been smouldering between

them since the day Cowley had made them partners. Last words now, then the pen picked up, name scrawled with a flourish, all three initials employed to their fullest, and then it was done. They could go home now. Together. For the night. And for however long it lasted.

“Ready, mate?”

He grinned back, leaning back in his chair, stretching luxuriously, knowing that the movement made his pale lemon shirt gape to show chest hair, hair that every man—and most of the women—he’d ‘known’ had loved to touch. “Been ready for ages, you.”

A question in the eyes, seriousness under the banter. “Have you been?”

“Yeh. Been ready since at least this afternoon, you know.”

Sweet, predatory smile then, a hint of hunger licking at his lips. “Been ready a sight longer than you then, sunshine.”

“Well, we shall just have to let you go first then, shan’t we?” A promise.

“Sounds fair enough to me.” Acceptance.

It took his breath away, that willingness, that image of himself plunging into Bodie’s body.

“Well don’t just sit there gawping like a gutted fish, get a move on. C’mon, Ray, I’m *starving*. We’ll pick up chips on the way home, all right?”

“Yeh, but there’s a question I’ve been dying to ask.”

“Oh yeh?”

“Yeh.” He couldn’t help it, he knew he was grinning like a loon. “Your place or mine?”

A quick swipe at curls and then Bodie was racing past him to the stairs. “Yours, of course. Got a bigger bed, haven’t you, you randy old toad.”

In the car, sitting so closely together, throbbingly aware of his hand on the head of the distressingly phallic gear stick, cold-sweat aware that Bodie was keeping his hands firmly to himself, the smell of cod and chips and vinegar keeping the dank smell of the unexpected



eyes. *Will you chain me?*

“Never want to tie you down, you know that, mate, don’t you? Free to come and go as you please, free as a bird. Never going to hurt you neither, that’s why I waited until you were ready to come to me. Wanted this for a long time, but I’m patient and you were worth the wait. At least,” and Doyle felt Bodie’s smile fill his hands to overflowing, “that arse of yours is.”

Doyle breathed out, letting his body propel him forward until Bodie’s eyes closed, blue-marbled alabaster eyelids wrapping the wonderful warmth within. Lips brushed, a fraction shy, little enough that they could put a stop to it now, just enough to hint at what they would be giving up. There was no hesitation, both mouths opening, maws to devour the other, to bring him inside, to join them. Bodie’s hands were suddenly, shockingly, delightfully, under his shirt, fabric shoved and pulled until bare skin tingled in the air and hair was ruffled back and forth, back and forth across tiny bumps of nipples, sensation gliding through him as Bodie’s tongue slid into his mouth. He heard himself groan and mocked his own adolescent enthusiasm, but didn’t even attempt to restrain himself, striving, instead, to let all his self-imposed strappings go, to allow himself to be washed away by this loving, to give himself over to another person in a way he had never dared to before. He didn’t need to think, didn’t want to think, wanted only to know what Bodie’s body felt like under his, to discover if that milk skin was truly as soft as it looked. To discover what it was like to make love, not merely have sex, with no holds barred, with nothing of any consequence save how it all felt. He wriggled, all the better to touch Bodie, all the better for Bodie to be able to reach him, fondle him, touch him deep inside where he kept his most precious of secrets: himself. Bodie’s hands were in his trousers now, and a small part of his brain suggested going to bed, but that would mean trying to get up that bloody staircase and that would mean letting go of Bodie. And he couldn’t. If his life depended on it, he couldn’t stop now, lest his

fear stop him next time, lest the next time they were both able to think enough to put passion aside. He pulled his mouth free, using it to taste the sweat-moist satin of Bodie’s chest, lips pulling at nipples, teeth nipping at skin. For every caress of his tongue, there was a reflexive shiver along Bodie’s muscles; for every nibble of his white teeth, there was a gasp of pleasure to echo his own. Lower, he went, sucking and biting, leaving redness blossoming on the white, leaving pleasure rippling through ribbed muscles. The zip rasped open under Bodie’s anxious hands and Doyle’s wet mouth was there, waiting, for turgid flesh to be revealed, food for his hunger. Before the fabric was even fully out of his way, he had descended, plunging his tongue hotly into the dark shadow that graced Bodie’s groin, limber tongue finding pulsing hardness, sharp teeth grazing with delectable lightness.

“No...” Bodie gasped, every single atom of his body denying his word. It was written all over him that he was not protesting the pleasure, but rather the losing of control, of allowing himself to be washed away by the intensity this was bringing to him. Doyle smiled, the stretch of his lips taut around the crown of Bodie’s penis, his tongue pressing hard, insistent, demanding on the domed pleasure.

“No...no...no more, oh, please, don’t stop, oh no...” And with every rebuttal, Bodie’s hips surged upward, muscles straining, veins tracing a delicate Danube amidst his white skin. With practised ease, Doyle swallowed him, devouring him, bringing him within, deep, deeper, until his face was teased by the springy cushion of jet black hair. Bodie’s hands were rubbing over every inch of Doyle that he could reach, hands both frantic and hard, generous and demanding, and all of it built on a solid foundation of need. They were driven, the pair of them, whipped on by all those months of anticipation, all those months of denial. Doyle’s hands were clutching at Bodie’s buttocks, Bodie’s hands were pulling clothing out of the way, setting them free so that he could lose himself in a sea of warm skin, soft hair dancing under his finger-



broad back, careless of the fact that he was pressing just at the sensitive points over the kidneys, he groaned as he leant forward, biting his lower lip as the pleasure hit him, Bodie clenching his arse muscles for him, making it so wonderfully, incredibly tight, Bodie matching him groan for groan, hips bucking wildly every time Doyle thrust into him, making it hotter, better, deeper.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect, this being part of Bodie, this having of the larger body with its marble-statue musculature, with those endearing murmurings whispering, broken with passion from Bodie, muffled by his face being buried in the cushions. Doyle braced himself, hands on the small of Bodie’s back, still not caring where his hands were, knowing only that his hands were on warm skin and his cock was inside supple flesh. He moved, felt Bodie jerk under him, moved again, felt Bodie recoil only to snap backwards again, impaling himself with a cry, writhing under Doyle as Doyle’s hardness filled and stretched him. And all the while, the clenching muscles of Bodie’s arse pumped him, keeping tight as a virgin, adding to the pleasure, making them both cry out with the overload of sensation. Doyle couldn’t wait any more, couldn’t make the pleasure last any longer, no matter how much his body strived for it. He rammed home, once, again, and then again and again until he dissolved in the liquid ecstasy of orgasm. Sated, limp, he took a second to rest on the breadth of Bodie’s back, blinking in shock as he was thrust off, tossed backwards to land naked, on the plush of the carpet, limp cock flopping against his upper thigh.

“You bastard!” came at him, a bolt from the blue, fury pouring down on him, bitter vitriol burning into him. “You absolute bloody bastard! You didn’t have to do that, you know. You didn’t have to fuckin’ do that to me!”

And he lay there, stunned, staring up at Bodie, the tall man as white as a sheet, muscles trembling, fists clenched. *My Christ, he wants to hurt me!*

“What’d you go an’ do that for, eh, Ray?”

What’d you go and spoil it all for? Didn’t have to be like that. I’d’ve let you, later, when I was ready. Didn’t have to hurt me, Ray.”

“What kind of sick joke is this? What the hell are you going on about?”

“What’d you mean, what the hell am I going on about? You didn’t have to hurt me, Doyle, that’s all there is to it.”

“How could I’ve hurt you, eh? You tell me that. You’ve been round the merry-go-round more times than I’ve had hot dinners, so I don’t see what all the fuss is about. I wasn’t that rough, no rougher than other blokes’ve been with me, so what’s all the fuss about?”

“I didn’t want you to fuck me, that’s what.”

“Then why didn’t you say so? You’ve got a tongue in your head, haven’t you? If you didn’t want us to fuck, then why didn’t you say so?”

“I bloodywell did say so, you little prick. You just wouldn’t listen.”

Doyle got to his feet, wiping a speck of blood from where he had bit his lip when he landed on the floor. “Oh, yeh? Well look at you, Goliath. You honestly trying to tell me I forced you into something you didn’t want to do? Me an’ who’s army, eh?”

“Couldn’t stop you without doing you serious damage, could I? You were past all reason, you couldn’t even hear me, I don’t think. Couldn’t have stopped you without using lethal force, Doyle, not with those bloody hands of yours on my kidneys, I couldn’t.”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me that I raped you? Oh, get off it, Bodie. You were screaming ‘no’ at me all the while you were shoving your cock down my throat, weren’t you? How was I supposed to know when you meant ‘no/no’ and not ‘yes/no’, you tell me that.”

“Oh, did it look like I was enjoying myself, trying to heave you off like that?”

“Heave me off? I’ve seen more enthusiasm from a bird. Don’t come the outraged virgin with me, mate. I’m not the first that’s had you.”

He was stunned by the bitterness that came over Bodie's face, horrified by it, terrified by it. He ran away inside himself, using anger as a shield to protect himself from the ugliness of truth.

"No, you're not, are you? Just never expected it from you, that's all. Never had you pegged as the type of bloke who gets his jollies from hurting other fellas, Doyle. Never would've thought it of you."

"Hurt you? How the hell could a shrimp like me hurt you, eh? Come on, Bodie, don't just stand there, answer me. How could I hurt someone the size of you?"

Gathering his scattered clothes together, Bodie turned his back then, too engrossed in his own pain to notice the fractured intake of Doyle's pain. There was blood, there, on Bodie's thighs, mingling with the cum, and bruises, where sharp hipbones had thudded into tender buttock. A cacophony of colour, and all of it his fault. His fault. Or so Bodie would have it, anyway. "So how come you didn't stop me, then, if you didn't want it as much as you say you didn't want it?"

"Oh, you want your pound of flesh, do you, on top of everything else? Want to know all the sordid little details, is that it? Get off on that as well, just like you do on hurting people, is that your sick idea of fun, Doyle?"

Doyle got to his feet, watching with a worried glint in his green eyes as Bodie got dressed, a frown furrowing his brow as he saw how his partner's hands were trembling. Hurt? Fury? Stifling the urge to rip Doyle limb from limb? "Look," he said, trying to be conciliatory, genuinely uncomprehending of what was eating Bodie, "I fucked you when you say you didn't want me to, but I don't see how I could have forced you. It wouldn't have taken much for you to get me off you, so what's..."

"Wouldn't take much, eh?" Bodie's eyes were blazing at him, fury and pain churning together into a whirlpool of agony. "Wouldn't take much? Tell me, Ray, *sunshine*, have you ever been raped? No? Didn't think so. Know

what it feels like? Feels like you've sat on a hot poker, and one wrong move an' it's going to rip you open, split you like a marrow. The way you were ramming it into me, d'you think I *could* move much? And have you rip me inside? No thanks, *mate*. I'll pass on that, if you don't mind. And oh, yeh," he said, bitterness sheeting brittle layer upon brittle layer, "why didn't I throw you off straight away. How about I didn't think you could be about to do what it looked like you were about to do? How about I didn't think that you, my *mate*, my pal, could ever be as low as those bastards in Angola. Or on the merchant ship I jumped when I was 14. Shakin' you up, am I? An' as for the first few seconds after that, before you shoved your cock up me, well, this'll give you your jollies, Doyle. I froze. Yeh, big tough man Bodie froze because I felt like I was a kid again and back on that bloody ship with that fuckin' first mate. Is that what you wanted to hear? Is it, Doyle?"

"Christ, Bodie, I didn't know. I thought you wanted it. Come on, you can't blame me for not getting what you were after. First you said no but you meant yes, and then I'm supposed to know when no means no and all your rolling and moaning means the opposite of what it meant five minutes before. Look, if it'll make you feel better, I'm sorry I went too far for you."

"That's it? You fuckin' well hurt me, and all you can do is offer me a pathetic little 'sorry' as if you stood on my toe? That's all you have to say for yourself. God, but you're a selfish bastard, Doyle. Don't know what I ever saw in you. Must've been feeling masochistic, cos that's all I've ever got from you, grief and more bloody grief."

"Look, mate, I've already apologised, what else am I supposed to say?"

"You're not supposed to *say* anything. I want you to *feel* something for someone other than the great god Raymond bloody Doyle."

"Well, if that's how you feel about it, if my apology's not good enough, I'll take it back then."

"Good. And I hope you bloody choke on

it.” He turned away from Doyle then, literally as well as figuratively, ignoring the other man, dressing in silence, bitterly hoping the stiffness of his body was making Doyle feel like the heel he was.

It wasn’t until Bodie was tying the laces of his shoes that the repercussions of this began to dawn on Doyle. This wasn’t just another one of their arguments, this could be the end of it all. He reined in both his temper and his fear, and his tongue stumbled around his mouth, searching for the right words.

“Look, Bodie, okay, so I did something you didn’t want, an’ I’ve said I’m sorry. Honest, I am. Never want to hurt you, mate. Not you. Best mate I’ve got, best mate I’ve ever had.” Skittish, eyes very wary, Bodie nonetheless sat still all the while Doyle was speaking, all the while as Doyle crept closer to him, all the while until the back of Doyle’s hand was lying on his cheek and he could feel the faint, delicate bristle of hair there. He stared, silent, demanding that Doyle pay his reparations, insisting that Doyle see, that Doyle understand. That Doyle love him, and not just use him.

“I mean it,” Doyle said into that unwelcoming silence, “I’d never do a thing like that again, not now that I know that all that squirming and moaning was supposed to stop me. Never want to hurt you, Bodie,” he whispered, drawing closer, using his best weapon—his sinuous sensuality with its promises of love. The right words to soften the callousness, the right expressions to give them a new beginning. And then, with one thoughtless phrase, with one ill-considered choice of words, his tongue stumbled and fell, bringing everything crashing down with it. “But you know what it’s like, Bodie, sometimes when you’re with a bird, an’ she’s got you so hard you don’t know if you’re on your head or your heels, an’ then she starts moaning and wriggling, and you just keep on going. You know how...”

He reeled back under the blow, jawline white from the impact of Bodie’s fist, blood flooding back to turn white to red to blue.

Tempestuous fury burned in Bodie’s eyes, love mixed with hatred, bitter agony as all the hopes he had nurtured so tenderly for four long years lay tattered at his feet, in the form of a man who could rape without even having the balls to give it name. Shredded, by a man who could never love him, who could only ever love him to the best of his ability, as Bodie had always known. It was cruel indeed to learn just how paltry that ability was.

“Hopeless, that’s what you are. You’re pathetic, Doyle, if you screw people like that, and then say you just got all caught up in it. ‘She’s got you so hard’, you said. Good excuse that, then you can make it all her fault, just like I bet it’s all everyone else’s fault that you can’t keep a relationship going more than a fortnight. An’ was tonight all my fault, too? Well, was it? Did I make you do what you did? Oh, but of course, how could I forget?” His voice lashed out, drawing blood, words rubbing salt in the welling wounds they both bore, “I could’ve stopped you, couldn’t I, any time I wanted to, right? Oh, yeh, dead bloody right. With a cock up me arse, after what I learned on board ship and in the bloody Congo, you expect me to try to fight someone off like that? It’s ugly, and it’s disgusting, and it’s got nothing to do with pleasure, what you did to me, but it’s not a fate worse than death. You’re not worth it, *mate*, saving a relationship with you isn’t worth risking peritonitis, *sunshine*. Bastard you definitely are, but not even *you* matter enough to be a fate worse than death.”

Stricken, stunned, Doyle lay sprawled on the floor, mouth open, mind empty, as all the barbed-wire words ricocheted around his mind, the sharp edges cutting him, flailing him as they ripped through him. Bodie was almost at the door before he regathered his breath and himself and chased after his—*ex?*—partner. “Bodie!”

The banked-down hatred that hissed from Bodie was chilling to see, more freezing still to be its target. “Don’t say a word, Doyle, don’t you dare say another fucking word to me. I don’t want to hear anything you have to say.



Bar one. Bar what Doyle himself had done in his selfishness and fear. Trembling, barely daring to touch, one hand reached out to brush the unlined brow, to feel, for himself, that the flesh was still warm, that the machines didn't lie. A breath of relief flooded him, and he collapsed to sit on the edge of the bed, perched beside Bodie, careful not to disarray the tubes and IV's, careful not to add any more pain to the long list of sins he had blackening his name. He stroked the hair away from Bodie's forehead, then smoothed it back, fingertips butterflying over arched brows, gossamer touch on long lashes.

"Very touching," Cowley said, accent evidence to his anger. "Pity you didn't treat him so well before."

Doyle whirled round, almost losing his precarious perch, gathering himself and his wits with shaking hands. "Sir?" he said, not really saying anything at all.

"You mean, how do I know? Who else, Doyle, would he let hurt him like this? There's not another soul in his life he cares enough about to let himself be raped," the word was twisted with disgust, all of it aimed contemptuously at Doyle's head, "without at least trying to kill the bastard first. And there's no sign of a struggle on him, no blows from defending himself in a fight, no broken knuckles. And the bruises on his knees are too high up to be caused by getting someone in the goolies. All the marks on him, Doyle, every single one of them, were caused by being restrained. By you, unless I'm very much mistaken. And I doubt that."

Bluster, taking the place of honesty, hiding him away from confessing to this most brimstone of judges. "All right, so he was raped, and someone held him down, but what makes you say it was me? You can't just say it's because I'm the only one he'd let do it. What if he was jumped by a few blokes, eh? You're not going to try and tell me you don't know the kind of pubs he used to hang around, are you? Sir?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly aware of Master Bodie's...predilections. Just as I'm aware of yours, Doyle. But you've got a point, all the

same. I can't claim instinct as proof. But look at it this way. You come in here, riddled with guilt, so wrapped up in it that you didn't even see me here, with a dirty great bruise on your jaw. And Bodie went home from HQ in *your* car, to have supper at *your* flat. A relationship that's been simmering away for years, comes to the boil and you want something he can't give yet, so you do it anyway. The way you always do, eh, Doyle? And then 72 hours later, give or take, and Bodie pulls his 'phone off the hook so that someone comes to investigate and what do I find, but a man burning up with fever, belly distended, going out of his mind, saying over and over and over again that 'you didn't have to hurt me, Ray'. Tell me, laddie, what else could it be, but you raping your partner as if he were nothing more than a bit of skirt picked up at the dancing? You tell me. Go on. Give me another reason for why one of my best agents is lying in a hospital bed, being pumped full of antibiotics and God knows what else, if it wasn't that you raped him?"

Silence. There was nothing Doyle could say to that, nothing that wouldn't condemn him even more.

"Well? Nothing to say for yourself? What kind of man are you, Doyle, that you could do a repulsive thing like this?"

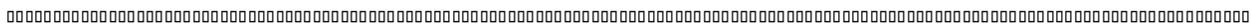
That stung, hearing his own question bedecked in contempt and loathing, coming at him from Cowley. "The kind of man you made me. Sir."

"Oh, no, you don't, laddie. You'll not be papping the responsibility for this on *my* shoulders, nor on anyone else's. You've made your bed, and God help me, I'm going to see that you lie in it! Now get out of here. You've seen all I want you to see and done more than any man has the right to do."

"You can't make me leave him, Cowley."

"That'll be *Mister* Cowley to you, Doyle. And not only *can* I make you leave, but I bloodywell *will*. This is a CI5 hospital room, with access restricted to CI5 personnel. I suggest you leave it immediately, Mr. Doyle, before I

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have you arrested for trespass in a restricted area.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, *Mister Cowley sir?*”

“Oh, how thoughtless of me to forget. Of course, anyone brainless enough to rape a fellow agent—and his best friend—would be too thick to understand plain English. You are dismissed, Doyle. Fired. Sacked. Out. And you can hand in your gun and your identification to McCabe as you leave. That’s all I have to say to you, so you’d best get out before I start in on a lot of things I shouldn’t say to you. Home truths are never welcome, Mr. Doyle, especially not when they’re as ugly as yours.”

“Wait a minute, you can’t fire me just like that. Bodie hasn’t pressed charges, hasn’t even told you I did anything at all. You can’t give me the sack just on your own suspicions.”

“Is that so? I can’t fire, can I not? You should know better by now, Doyle. Read the small print. I can fire you for no reason other than I’ve taken a notion to do so. Now get out, or so help me, I’ll have McCabe come in here and you’ll be taken back to HQ under guard.”

“You’re serious, you’re bloody serious. You’re going to throw me out because of something in my personal life.” Cornered, he sneered, his war already lost, determined to win this battle to ease his tattered pride. “All right, all right, you win. I’ll hand everything over to McCabe. But tell me one thing, *Mister Cowley*. What’s Bodie to you that you’re reacting like this? Eh? Fancy him yourself, do you? Is that what this is all about, the old man’s jealous cos someone younger got what he wanted all for himself?”

“Get your foul mouth out of here, Doyle and don’t ever let me see your face again! As far as I’m concerned and as far as CI5 is concerned, you are terminated. And that means, in case you’ve forgotten, that your car goes back to CI5, your flat goes back to CI5, your furniture goes back to CI5. And because you were fired, you’ll be getting nothing more than a week’s severance pay in lieu of notice. And you can make sure to pick that up when I’ll not be at the office. Now

get out, before I teach you a lesson or two. Go on. *OUT!* Away with you, and don’t ever let me see you again. You’re finished, Doyle, d’ye hear me? Finished.”

Finished. Finit. Caput. Dead.

At the doorway, holstered gun in hand, ID wallet ready, he stopped, all the anger pushed aside for the moment. “One thing, sir,” he said, without so much as a jot of sarcastic emphasis. “He will be all right, won’t he?”

“No thanks to you. And don’t you think it’s a wee bit late for all this tender concern? Friday night is when he could have done with *that*.”

Then Cowley turned away from him, exactly as Bodie had. Exactly as he had himself, when holding his inner truths up to the glare of light. He watched for a moment, watched the aging man staring down at the younger man, wanted to apologise for words said in haste. But that was the price of such words, that they be said in haste and repented at leisure. There was no lust in Cowley for Bodie, none that Doyle had ever seen anyway. And if there were? *Well, Bodie would be a damn sight better off with Cowley than he would with me, wouldn’t he? Not that it would be hard...*

He took a breath, meaning to say something, something to ameliorate the hurt, something to lance out some of the poison boiling up between them all, but even the sound of him still drawing breath was enough to make Cowley stiffen. The rejection stung like a salt-lashed whip and anger rose, as it always did, to hold the pain at bay. The child in him wanted to scream and yell and stamp his feet, to shout “See if I care!”, but the man in him stifled that oft-cried shield of childhood, for he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to carry it off without his voice breaking, as it had that day he’d had to choose between doing his job and protecting Bodie. *Funny, innit?* he thought to himself with an edge of bitter irony to cut all the deeper, burying himself in his guilt and rage so that he could hide away from truths too painful to change. *Never been any choice before, always just been ‘do whatever you need*

to do and hang the consequences'. Looks like this time, the consequences are going to hang me. He couldn't resist it, simply had to turn around and look once more on what was now his past. The thought lodged in his throat, burning like bile—not tears, no, not tears. He'd not cry for himself, that would run too much risk of revelation. All his tears would be for Bodie, and this was not a time when they were needed. After Friday night, the world should be jumping for joy and clicking its heels that he was leaving Bodie's life. Leaving. Cast out, more like, with Cowley as the hand of bloody God. Get thee hence, vile creature. Can just hear the old bastard saying it as well.

At the bedside, Cowley was growing visibly tenser, knuckles whitening, red flags of anger burnishing his cheeks. A movement, just a hint of motion, but enough to give fair notice. *Get out, or I'll have you arrested.* Doyle lingered for another second, just for the blink of an eye, harvesting his last glimpse of Bodie. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. And all he had was bitter emptiness and a horror of looking himself in the eye.

McCabe stoically didn't see him, as he just as obviously hadn't heard a word of the shouting match that had spewed from the room to echo down the corridor. His silence was condemnation enough for Doyle; that same silence was protection enough for Bodie. Bodie would have Cowley and CI5 and home, leaving Doyle with nothing but himself. There was a certain cruel justice in the world after all.

Bright sunlight, glinting off a young nurse's blonde hair, dazzling on the snow of her starched white apron dizzied him as he left the hospital. It seemed so bizarre a contrast to his own, portentous Gothic mood. For a few minutes, he stood on the broad, shallow-stepped sweep of Victorian stairs, obliviously hindering both nurse and patient alike, his mind curiously calm, the eye of a storm. *S'pose I'd best get back to the flat then, get packed up and moved. Need to find a place. Means I'll have to get to the bank, soon's they open. Then move all*

me stuff before I turn the car back in. God, it's been years since I last had to look for a flat, christ knows what they're going for these days. Shouldn't've gone to France last Bank Holiday, need the money now. Mind you, I could always stay with Mum or our Syl if it comes down to it. Oh, yeh, c'n just see it now. Big tough CI5 agent running home to his mummy. Give them all a laugh, that would...

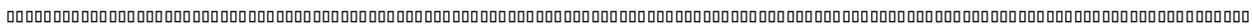
An ambulanceman, old dear on his arm, climbing the stairs inch by inch as if Everest had moved to London for the summer, glowered at Doyle, muttering under his breath about what the world was coming to these days. Almost abreast of Doyle, the old woman faltered, clutching at the St. John's man, pulling him off balance, knocking his cap askew. Doyle didn't even notice, too much concerned with his own needs to pay attention to the minor difficulties of others. The pair finally passed on to the swinging doors, low-voiced, ill-tempered mutterings still trailing along behind them. It took a student nurse barrelling into him from behind to wake him from his reverie to face the daylight nightmare.

There are surprisingly few jobs available to an ex-Met, ex-CI5 man, Doyle discovered. But then, on reflection, it was hardly surprising at all, really. Who in their right mind would employ a man that the great George Cowley had labelled as 'Unstable personality. Prejudicial discharge.'

"Ray! Ray, haven't you done with those weeds yet? God, I ask you, what did I ever do to deserve an idle git like you, eh? Where's our Dave when I need him, eh? I bet he'd have this little lot up and out by now, have that grass green as envy, he would."

"Get off it, Mum, I've only been out here a half-hour."

"Don't you speak to me like that, young man! While you're under my roof, you'll keep a civil tongue in your head, d'you hear me? Coming back to me, cap in hand, at your age. Where did I go wrong with you? How come you turned into such a lump, when..."



Doyle tuned her out completely, just as he had when younger. It was the only way he was able to keep his hands to himself. *Her and her bloody darling Dave. Anyone'd think he was the golden boy, when all he did was bugger off to the Army as soon as they'd take him. Never phones her, never writes, 'cept for some sappy card every Mothering Sunday. Comes home for Christmas with that big-titted wife of his and his squad of brats, wrecks the house, eats Mum out of house and home, but does he ever land it? Course not. He had the right father. He was clever enough to wait until after Mum got married before he was born, didn't he? And then he goes and follows in his Daddy's footsteps, another bloody bit of cannon fodder for the fucking Army. While dear, sweet old Mum gets to play the Widow Doyle for all it's worth, until her 'mistake' comes round to visit.*

"Are you listening to me? Well? Are you? I swear you were sent by God and all His Saints to try me. Purgatory, that's what you are. Payment for me sins, that's you. Oh, I'm coming over all faint, I need a lie down. See what you do to me? I'll have to take to my bed again, all because of you. If only my lovely Alex hadn't passed on so young, he'd be here to comfort me. Don't just stand there being useless, go and make me a cup of tea. I'll be in my bed, so you can fetch it upstairs for me. And don't forget the biscuits this time, my lad."

He stayed where he was, kneeling heavily into the spring of the grass, listening to her weary steps tread dramatically along the path back to the front door. A satirically amused smile greeted the old, familiar pattern: his mother seemed to think that the minute she was in the house, she was out of earshot. There, the groan of the old hinges, and then the sprightly step of a lively 48 year old woman, well pleased with her morning's work.

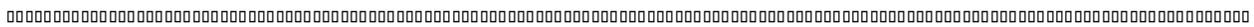
Widow bloody Doyle my arse, the uncharitable thought crossed his mind the second she crossed the threshold. *Not that I had ever better call her that to her face though. "Doyle?" she'd say, puttin' on that horrible fake-posh*

accent, "Doyle? How can I be the widow Doyle when Doyle's my maiden name? It's Mrs. McAllister to the likes of you..."

McAllister. Now there was a name he had come to hate. There was a name that he was fiercely glad not to carry. He'd rather have everyone know he was illegitimate, or come up with the old lies about his mother's 'tragic first marriage to her Irish sweetheart' than carry that old bastard's name. That was a man he never even wanted to think about again. He sat back on his haunches, trowel resting idly on his denim-clad thigh, watching a sparrow flittering along the top of the terrace. The long row of houses marched on, unyielding, eyes shuttered and blind.

And this was where he was living?

So what if he'd long since run out of money? He could have fought them down at the DHSS, argued with them about his stamps, made them contact the appropriate Government offices. Not even Cowley was a mean enough bastard to lie about that. That's all it would have taken: get the idiots down at the dole office to verify that he *had* held an 'employment stamp exempt' job, or whatever the hell the civil servants called it. He could have used the dole money, people managed to live on it for years. But he'd not been able to face the reams of paperwork, of having to go in to CI5 himself, not even now, not even with all these months between him and Bodie. Or perhaps that was the problem. He'd always been one for dramatic depressions, long hours spent in analysing and examining and going around in gloomy circles. And there had been no Bodie there to jolly him out of it this time, had there? He picked at a weed, finding a worm, watching intently as the worm crawled over him in search of some nice cool dirt. He'd got too used to that, to having Bodie get him out of his moods, that maybe he'd almost forgotten how to shake them off himself. Perhaps that explained these past few months of just lying down and dying. Or maybe he just didn't like himself enough to do anything for himself.



treated, bouncing from his anger to his depression, unable to face himself, thus his id was quietly trying to destroy that man he despised.

He wasn't sure whether or not he was glad that it hadn't yet succeeded.

The coast of France was looming up ahead, home of wine, pâté and bread superb enough to spread even his narrow hips. Home of snooty Frogs and garlic-drenched frogs legs, sexy women and demonstrative men. A crowd in which to become a hermit. A place, perhaps, of forgiveness, even if he could never forget.

Unlike England. There would be no blessings for him there, neither forgiving nor forgetting, not from Bodie, not from Cowley and most certainly not for himself. So to France then, she of such wary alliance, she of such hostile friendship. To paint, perhaps, or to work doing whatever he could turn his hand to. To live, *en ville* or *au compagne*, time would answer that. It wasn't that Cowley didn't have the reach, rather that he wouldn't consider destroying Doyle's nascent chances worth so much of a stretch.

The air began to clear as he neared land, the lash of sound and the prick of light returning, forcing him out of his sweet melancholy. The smell of the shore defeated the smell of the sea, the draw of the land slowly eviscerating the pull of the water, until he was aching for the soil again, with its blank face of earth to wipe out the memories he had buried in the sea. A fresh start. A clean slate. Nothing and no one but himself and what he carried on his back: a few clothes and enough guilt and anger for a shroud.

But it was with head held high, sinuous grace turning heads, eyes clear that he set foot on foreign soil. *Christ, bloody Napoleon on Elba, that's who I am. Be showing me arm in the old jacket next. Now, let's see. Just gone 6 o'clock, grab a coffee somewhere, dust off my old French and get on the bike, down to St. Germain and let's see if Willie the Wanker can find an old mate a job.*

It was with strange voices ringing in his ears, unfamiliar aromas assaulting his nose and the different brightness of French sun dazzling

his eyes that he rode into the village on the outskirts of Paris. St. Germain-en-Laye, gothic church and massive city hall, open air flower market and a cemetery filled with souls. An odd peace began its slow seeping in through his pores, as steadily and serenely as the dust danced in the golden air. He could breathe here. He could forgive himself, here. He could find the answers to questions that he had never dared even ask, back home, in the grimness of daily survival.

Bike chrome reflecting the whitewash wall, he knocked on William Ferguson's door, ready to bury his demons and start all over again. The fear of it thrilled him...

EVEN ENGLAND CAN CHANGE, GIVEN ENOUGH TIME. And even a man can change, given enough time. Some men, anyway...

"You've not given me a single good reason why I should tell you where Bodie is these days."

Doyle stared at the man who had once been king of this particular castle and was shocked by the changes time had wrought. Oh, the fire was still there, but it was strained now, as if it were will and not heart that kept it fuelled and burning bright. Tiger hair was steel grey now, a colour as cold as the eyes that glared back at Doyle. "Look, I've told you, I'm not going to turn up on his doorstep like a bad penny, just want to drop him a line, let him know I'm back in England. What's the harm in that, sir?" He clamped his mouth shut, too late to dam the word he had had not the slightest idea was going to come out. Sir. It was so easy to call him that, so easy to slip back into the old posture, sitting on one of the chairs in front of the Old man's desk, arguing for a rise or a weekend off or to have his expense chits reinstated. *Don't be such a wally, he snapped at himself, that's long gone. Forget all that.* But it was painfully obvious that neither of them had forgotten 'all that' and that Cowley, at least, wanted none of it. To think that one night had soured over four years... Doyle was no fool: he had expected no forgiveness, but he *had*

forgotten just how hard Cowley could be. *Cut Bodie and the Cow bleeds*, he thought again, as he had so many times since ‘that night’, *and then the old bastard’ll come after you with his claymore.*

“So all you want to do is write to him, is that it? Then why can’t you address the letter to him here? It’s worked fine these past three years, I don’t see why you have this sudden need to change the system.”

There was no diplomatic way of phrasing what he had to say. “Because I don’t think you’ve given him a single one of those letters, that’s why.”

Cowley leaned back in his burnished chair, the burgundy leather creaking faintly. “All my fault, is that what you’re trying to tell me, that it’s because of me that Bodie never once wrote back to you? Well, you just listen to me, laddie,” he snapped, lunging forward, sharp as nails and twice as cutting, “I’ve made sure—personally made sure, mind—that Bodie’s had every one of your letters, every one of your postcards, your Christmas cards and your birthday cards and what have you. Every single damned one of them, Doyle, I’ve given him. With my own two hands, I’ve given him your reminders of what you did to him. And every time, I’ve had to watch what happened to him afterwards. Keep them from him? I’m not you, Doyle, I’d never stoop so low.”

The fury made him reel, as shocking as the truth that was lodging in his throat. He’d been so sure that it was Cowley stopping Bodie from getting his letters. So sure it had been Cowley stopping Bodie from hearing how much he had changed, the differences he’d made in himself. But it wasn’t. It was Bodie himself. Bodie who hadn’t wanted to forgive.

“Ach, laddie, don’t take on so. You can’t have expected anything else, after all.” He looked at Doyle again, the whiteness leeching the life from his face, the pupils dilated and wild. “You did, didn’t you? Never took you for a dreamer, Doyle. Here,” he said, fetching his bottle and a pair of glasses, the old limp return-

ing as arthritis came to roost, “get this down you.”

Face now carefully blank, Doyle took the proffered glass, cradling it for a moment, watching the light glint off the multifaceted crystal that held the warm brown of the whisky. He sipped it and couldn’t help but smile, despite it all. Still Glenfiddich, and with the heat of it slipping down his throat, the smell of it filling his nostrils, it was almost as if he had never left. Almost as if it would be Bodie breezing in through the office door behind him.

It was Bodie. He knew it, instantly and to the marrow; knew, too, the moment Bodie laid eyes on him. Turning to face him was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. So was speaking to him. But it was the seeing chill indifference where he had once seen love: that, oh, that was by far the hardest.

“Bodie,” he said, with a nod of greeting, holding himself firmly in check, restraining himself from jumping to his feet and grabbing the man he used to know. “How are you, mate?”

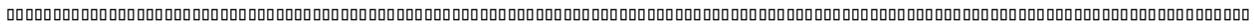
“Fine.” And that was it. One word, and then Doyle was dismissed, turned aside from, discounted. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Aye, about the Duncan situation, but it’ll keep.” A slight nod at Doyle, a silent reminder that they had a civilian in their midst.

“Then I’ll get back to work, then, sir.”

The cold in the room began to numb Doyle and his old anger began to warm him. “Oh, don’t let me keep you,” he said, in the old voice, resuscitating memories of many an old battle. “Wouldn’t want to stand in the way of Her Majesty’s loyal servants, would I? After all, I only came all the way from fucking France to see you, Bodie. The least you could do is speak to me.”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you. That’s really rich. After what you did, you think you can just waltz back in here and good old Bodie’ll lie down at your feet and lick your boots, is that it?” In the aftermath of his outburst, even Bodie looked surprised that there was so much anger still in him.



Doyle wasn't surprised at all. Underneath all his hopes, he had feared that this would happen, that his price would not yet have been paid. Three years, obviously, weren't enough. He smiled, slipping back into the ways they had once used to defuse arguments. "Not wearing any boots, am I?"

"Think it's funny, do you? Think it's good for a few jokes and then let's all forget about it and be good chums together? Lissen, mate, if you think I'm going to forget what you did to me, you need your head bloody examined. With a sledgehammer."

The whisky in the glass trembled with the slamming of the door, amber lights rippling and twisting. The reverberations of the finality of that slamming door eddied through Doyle, setting his teeth on edge, filling him with agony. He hadn't expected hearts and flowers, not really. But a part of him had hoped, a small, foolish kernel had sat there, a spot of gold amidst the dross, promising him that once Bodie saw him, once they were actually in the same room together again, once the first awkward moments had passed... They'd been closer than anyone else he had ever known, had loved each other, had needed each other. He couldn't quite believe that it was all gone, sunk without a trace in a vat of vitriol.

"Here."

His refilled glass was thrust back into his hands and he looked at it, wondering when Cowley had taken it from him and topped it up. He hadn't noticed, hadn't noticed anything, apart from how it felt to have Bodie physically walk out on him. He thought he had already been through all that, but being excluded, ignored, was nothing on having to sit there while Bodie actually walked out. Gone. Over before it had started, just like the last time. Before he could prove that he had changed. Before he could even get Bodie to look at him...

"Doyle! Look at me, man. That's better. Never thought I'd see this, Doyle, you lost to the world because you were regretting what you did to Bodie. Oh, I've seen you riddled with guilt

afore, seen you sick with it, but you've never regretted something. And there's a difference with you. Guilt is something you feel whether it's because you've raped your best friend or because some fellow you've never met blew up a bus in India. You enjoy guilt, it makes you feel alive and part of the human race. See, ma, I'm human, I feel for my fellow man. That was always your style, Doyle. But regret? No, you never regretted doing something enough to make it so that you could never do it again, did you? But you're truly sorry about that night, aren't you?"

"Sorry? You'll never know how bloody sorry I am."

"Sorry enough to just sit there like a great lump of lard, or sorry enough to go after him and make him listen to you? He'll still turn you down, mind, but you could at least make him hear what you have to say."

"No."

"What d'you mean, 'no'? Do you want him or not? For goodness sake, make up your mind!"

The glass sparkled as it splintered, cascading whisky down the chipped filing cabinet. "Of course I bloody want him! D'you think I'd come this far, sell everything up in France and face you, if I didn't want him? But I promised myself something, Cowley, and that was to let him make his own decisions. That's what went wrong that Friday night. Wasn't standard rape, I never forced him at the beginning. It's just that I decided for both of us what would be good. Never gave him a choice, never let him pick what he wanted, just knew what I wanted and went after it, without paying any attention to him, bar seeing what I wanted to see and not another thing more."

"So you'll let him walk out now, because it's what he wants?"

"Yeh." Disconsolate, fighting the urge to go out there and wrestle Bodie to the ground, force the stubborn bugger to listen to reason, he subsided into the chair, sprawling back, lacing his fingers through his hair. "Yeh, that's exactly

what I'm going to do. It's up to him, it's all up to what he wants."

"And you expect me to believe that? You expect me to believe that *you* are willing to be that altruistic with Bodie? You usually save your kindness for strangers, Doyle. It's easier that way."

"Yeh, it is easier that way and yeh, I'm a selfish bastard. But at least that's better than sitting there rubbing your hands in glee at someone else's suffering, isn't it, *Mister* Cowley? Sir."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"In all honesty, yeh, you're dead bloody right I think that's what you're doing, you old bastard."

"And you don't think it might be because I wanted to see if you really *were* willing to treat him properly?"

"Oh, so that's what this is all about? What's next? You going to ask me if my intentions are honourable?"

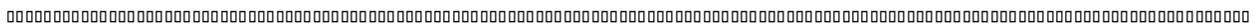
It was the old hearty laugh, and it shocked Doyle more than Bodie's anger had. "Honourable? I know the way your mind works, Doyle, I'd be surprised if there's an 'honourable' thought in your head. Where it comes to the things you'd like to do to our Bodie, that is. You know, you once accused me of fancying him, d'ye remember?"

"Owe you an apology for that. Didn't mean it."

"Aye, just that temper of yours running away with your mouth again. But it's not that I fancy Bodie, far from it. But I see a lot of myself in him, Doyle." He savoured his whisky silently, and Doyle left him to it. He may have been gone a few years, but he recognised the signs of the Old Man debating how much he should say. Quietly, they sat, Doyle focussing on what Cowley was doing, noticing the way the afternoon clouds allowed the occasional shaft of brightness through to glimmer on grey hair and pallid skin. *He doesn't look well*, he thought, watching the faint tremble of hands that had aged so much more than 3 years. Perhaps the

years had been hard on more than just himself. He thought about what it would have been like for Cowley, fighting to keep CI5 out of the hands of Tories who had forgotten they might one day lose an election, that the old glory had not returned, that they had a public to answer to. Thought about the scandal of former Prime Minister Wilson being forced out. Thought about the behind-the-scenes hostage deals and the new terrorism they always brought tagging along behind. And thought of Cowley, dealing with Bodie, with no Doyle there to help, to syphon off some of that violent energy. *Poor old sod. Probably missed me off and on, as well. Only to whack Bodie one, mind you...*

"I was a right toe-rag when I was younger," Cowley began, whisky held in both his hands, eyes downcast, head bent, the past leaning over his shoulder, watching with interest as it influenced the future. "I mean, a proper rascal, always in trouble. Nothing serious, no, I was too smart to get caught at anything like that. But I got myself into some hairy situations, I can tell you. Glasgow in the 20's and 30's was not the best place to grow up, not if you were after pretty manners and piano playing. My father was long dead, from TB when I was just a toddler and my mother came down with it herself. It didn't kill her, but she was away in hospital more than she was home. I was supposed to stay at my Granny's, but all I did was run wild. I was well on the way to becoming what we called 'gallus'. In other words, I'd be fit for nothing but the gallows. Oh, I knew what I was doing wasn't right, didn't feel right, wasn't anything I wanted to tell my mother about, but it made me feel *alive*. And it was going to be my ticket out. It was going to be my way up in the world. It would've been the death of me, if it hadn't been for one man who took the time to make a difference. He got me straightened out, got me into a good school, paid for the books and the uniforms, made sure I did my work. And all he asked for was my word on something. So I promised him that the next time I saw someone like myself, I'd step in."



“And that’s where Bodie comes in, right.”

“Aye. He was all set to go back to Africa, to a place just outside of Johannesburg. Training white supremists how to ‘defend’ themselves. Offered him a very good price too, I might add. But I’d given my word and I’d never run away from that promise. The first time I ever did that was 3 years ago. Shut your mouth, Doyle, or you’ll be setting up home for flies. Oh, aye, I saw it coming between you and Bodie. Not the details, mind, just the problems. And I never lifted a hand to help. I let my own anger get in the way. Let you run away.”

“Let me run away? You just about kicked me out of the country!”

“And what if I hadn’t? What if I’d let you stay, with Bodie torn apart and me angry enough to do murder? What then? Ach, well, the past is the past and I can’t undo it. But I *can* make amends. I can try to help you now the way I should have years ago.”

“So now you’re going to help me, eh? That’s rich,” he sneered, not noticing he was using the same words that had been levelled at him. “You threw me out, fired me, kept me from Bodie... Wouldn’t even tell me where he’d been moved to once he got out of hospital. Had to suck up the backside of one of the secretaries to get his bloody address! But it took me two months to get to him and you know our Bodie, don’t you? Two months without a word from me, and he’d have the biggest bloody vendetta since the Godfather, wouldn’t he? So you got to keep him and got rid of me. Put me through hell and now you expect me to put myself in your hands again? Pardon me if I don’t leap at the chance, but I’m not as flaming stupid as you want to think I am.”

“Sit down, Doyle! And stop making this harder than it already is. D’you think it’s easy for me to forgive you for what you did to Bodie? D’you think it’s easy for me to do what my conscience tells me instead of what I actually feel like doing? No, you listen to me, laddie. I’ll help you with Bodie, but only because I owed you help and never gave it and because you’ve

convinced me that you have changed your attitudes. But I’m warning you, I’ll not put up with any of your stuff and nonsense, d’ye hear me? One false step, and you’ll think what happened last time was Eden.”

“Who says I want your bloody help?”

“Me. And whether you want it or not, you’ll take it. Bodie needs you and that’s half of his trouble. He needs you and more fool him, he loves you. And he thought he’d found the right person for him. So what did you go and do? Take it all and shove it down his throat till he choked on it. He’s been the walking wounded these three years past and I’m tired of watching him suffer. I’m tired of giving him your letters and having to hold my tongue while he either goes off and mopes for a month or screws his way round half of London. It’s gone on long enough.” A moment’s breath, a second’s pause, then some of the ire left him, some of the past subsiding into the grave where it belonged. Here was one healing that had finally begun. “Aye. Too much suffering already, Doyle. For all of us.”

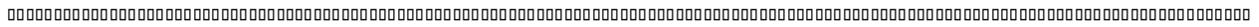
Doyle sat back down, head aswirl. *Three years and the old bastard can still make me dizzy. What the hell comes next?*

“Now,” Cowley went on, donning his glasses, picking up his appointments book, “I’ll be seeing a Mr. John Stirling on Wednesday. He’s got his finger in every pie there is. D’you need a job?”

“You really take the biscuit, don’t you? When I got here, you nearly ripped my head off. And now you’re offering to find me a job. Well, no thanks. I can manage by myself, thanks very much.” There was a flicker across Cowley’s face, a brief expression that Doyle recognised. If they were going to be able to finally lay that night to rest... “I mean it, sir,” he said, rewarded by the slightest of softenings of that craggy face. “And if I can’t find what I’m looking for, I’ll come back and ask you, if that’d be okay.”

“Aye, that’ll be fine. Leave a ’phone number with Ms. Armstrong. I’ll be in touch with you after I’ve spoken to Bodie.”

And it was just like old times, the same



tacit dismissal, the same automatic acquiescence. He was out of there before he realised it. And in the corridor, with Murphy pounding him on the back and making terrible ‘ooh la la’ noises at him, all muddled up with offers of a drink and questions about French women and lace knickers. Just like old times. Except Bodie wasn’t beside him. And Murphy would never be so friendly if McCabe hadn’t kept his mouth shut. Stepping out into the gathering gloom, a horde of agents surrounding him, any excuse for a party, he felt the depression descend again, pulling him down even as his lips curved upwards in a smile. No Bodie. And all this friendship based on a sleazy secret. Not the most auspicious return home for the conquering hero. But perhaps just perfect for a man who had spent three years getting to know himself. Forgiveness, obviously, would have to come later. If it could. Coming back to the tangled web was forcing his hopes farther and farther away.

chre slow. Tread. Tread. Tread. Pause. A shadow, there, off to the left of the clock drifting on the wall. Tread. A shape, black, or merely dark blue, Doyle couldn’t tell. The colour of a bruise, that’s all he recognised. Tread. The squeak of a floorboard, made weak by the damping of carpet and door. Tread. A face, just a pale blur amidst the bruise. A pause. Waiting, waiting, both of them, to see if the door would be opened. As still as the gallows, Doyle waited, viciously, desperately, stomping his need to take control into the ground where it could lie fallow until it had a place again to flourish between them. He became terribly aware of his own breathing and then, as if the past had never been, he could feel Bodie breathing, the way it had been, when they’d gone on an op. The way it had been, racing up fire escapes with a gun, somewhere, drawing its beady little eye in upon them. He could feel the other heartbeat again, as he had once taken for granted in other life or death situations. Except that this was the first time they were on opposite sides.

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The collar of his jacket had a mind of its own today, refusing to listen to him, refusing to subside under his tugging hand. Or perhaps it was simply that this was the form his nervousness chose to take, the form that emasculated him least. It wouldn’t do to faint the minute Bodie opened the door. If Bodie opened the door. The rippled glass distorted his view of the hall, giving him nothing to look at but the distortion of his own face and a Dali-esque hall clock floating in a twisted white wall. And the doorbell’s echoes finally dying in the distance.

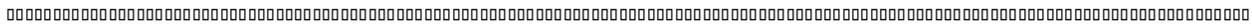
It might be all he’d get from today, so he drew upon that old familiar feeling of being half of a whole, of being one of the parts that was greater when it became sum of the whole.

So much for that, then. So much for Cowley’s ‘wee chat’ with Bodie, so much for Cowley’s suggestion that this was finally the time for him to come and see Bodie. So much for Bodie agreeing to see him after almost two months of obstinacy. So much for being stupid enough to get his bloody hopes up again. *Should’ve known better, should’ve soddin’ well known better. An’ he always claimed that I was the one who held grudges. Yeh, but who was it who went after Krivas like that, eh? Who was it who...* There were footsteps approaching, sepul-

And then a white blur rose from the bruise. Click. Door unsnibbed. Click. Lock undone. Click. Door, opening. Slowly. Bodie, face so pale, eyes so dark, midnight curving beneath his eyes.

“Lo, Bodie,” Doyle said, words a travesty of normalcy.

“Doyle.” Nothing else, for a moment, while he looked at Doyle, looked at the man who had once been his dream. Then there was a sliver of light in those blue eyes, a tiny star-twinkle of brightness, and the long path to healing was engaged. “Suppose you’d better come in then. You’re making the landing look untidy.” Doyle followed him in, his own steps in perfect unison with Bodie’s, the two steps merging into the one steady tread upon the Persian carpet. A long hallway, this one, with doors closed on either side, hiding all Bodie’s life from his view. He



couldn't drag his eyes away from Bodie, the corridor and the gloss of the doors and the glassy shine from the pictures not registering on any part of him save the last remnant of his CI5 training. He could hear every breath Bodie took, heard him swallow before he spoke again. "I'd've thought living in France would've taught you *something* about clothes."

"Wasn't clothes I learned about over there."

Silence greeted that, a vintage didn't-hear-a-word-of-that Bodie silence. It should have unnerved him, but he felt like grinning. Not only a homecoming of sorts, but so much better than what he had expected of today. After the massacre in Cowley's office, he had wrestled his foolish hopes back into their dungeon. He let the silence carry them into the living room and through the ritual of offering and accepting a drink. Then he sat down upon the pale cream couch he'd never seen before, looked around at the art he had never seen before, looked at the man opposite him, a man changed, perhaps, almost as much as Doyle himself. Perhaps.

"Cowley told me you'd be willing to hear me out. Was he right then?"

"When's Cowley ever wrong?"

"Any time he believed your bloody expenses, mate!" And that went down like the proverbial lead balloon. Okay, so Bodie wasn't about to allow levity to smooth this for them. "Some things I wanted to say to you, Bodie. Some of it's stuff I should've said that night, some of it's stuff I said in my letters. Some of it's stuff I never even knew."

The silence was deafening.

Doyle girded his loins and went on, implacable, needing to say this probably more than Bodie needed to hear it. "What I did to you...it was—and it wasn't—rape. Yeh, I forced you, but I didn't realise I was forcing you and it wasn't about power or violence and that's what rape's really all about. What I did to you, was all about me. All about how selfish a bastard I was. Still am, truth to tell. Probably always will be. But never the way I was then, Bodie. That

night, all I could think about was how I felt to finally get into bed with you. The only thing going through my mind was how my body felt. Never meant to hurt you, Bodie."

The silence *hurt*.

"Look, I can't undo what I did, but I do want to make it up to you. Want another chance, Bodie. Want to try again, see if I can get it right this time."

The silence was beginning to get right up his nose. It was an intrinsic part of his nature, this greeting hurt with anger, an aspect of himself grown out of childhood and never to be excised, no more than he could change his bones.

"Listen, Bodie, I never meant to fucking rape you, I just didn't realise that you'd stopped wanting what I wanted."

"And that's supposed to make it better? I'm supposed to be *glad* that my best mate couldn't give a shit about me, to the point where it didn't matter that it was me he was shoving his prick up? It's supposed to make it better that you couldn't have cared less who it was under you, as long as the body was still warm? Oh, yeh, Doyle, that *really* makes me want to fall to my knees and forgive you."

Doyle was beginning to miss that silence. "Bodie," he said, then stopped, hearing the snap in his own voice. "Bodie," he began again, curbing his temper as he had learned to, using his will as a rein and not a lash to hurt others, "I don't blame you for being livid, I'd be the same way. I'm just trying to explain how it was for me that night and..."

"Oh, how it was for you that night? Tell me, ducky, was it as good for you as it was for me? Is that what you're building up to you, you bastard?"

He was actively missing that stoney silence by now.

"Bodie..."

"Don't you fucking Bodie me. But it's a bit too late for that, isn't it, Doyle? You've already fucked me, haven't you? Already had your taste. Is that it? Fancy another spot of forced sodomy, do you? Is that why you've



bloody pair we are an' all, aren't we mate?"

"Don't care what you say, you're not giving me any of the blame for that night."

"But what about for keeping it going, for hurting us both this time round, what about that, Bodie? Now that's something you can't blame me for."

"Maybe not."

"Definitely not."

Silence again, both of them busy with the words that battered at the core of the gordian knot.

"Give me another chance, will you, sunshine?"

Bodie climbed to his feet, for all the world older than Cowley. "Dunno."

Doyle took his ace out from his sleeve, fingering it, wondering if this were the right moment to play it, or if this gamble would lose him the only trump card he had. Bodie's back was to him, his head bowed, fingers tangled tightly in the heavy curtain. Doyle saw that back stiffen, saw the neck muscles cord, saw the head begin to slowly rise. He felt the bile rise along with the knowledge that he'd lost. Time to play his last card.

"One other thing I'd wanted to tell you, something I told you in my letters. I love you, Bodie, love you enough to come crawling back to you like this. Even love you enough to make some changes in myself." He wanted to joke, wanted to make some facetious, sarky remark, to fall back on the good old British way of dealing with scenes: make them funny and then perhaps the bombs won't hurt. Or at least you won't be prat enough to cry.

"Join the real world, Doyle. You can't just kiss it better."

"D'you think I don't know that? Look, Bodie, I'm sorry, I wish I'd never done it, if I could go back and do it all again, I'd put by balls in a bloody vice before I'd hurt you like that again. Bodie, when all's said and done, what it comes down to is me wanting to prove to you that I really could be good with you. Show you that I love you."

"And do you? Do you honestly love me?"

Such a small voice, to come from Bodie.

"Yeh. Just that I used to have a helluva funny way of showing it. Like I've been saying, I'm really sorry, mate."

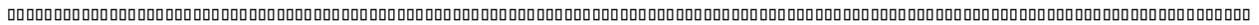
"Not half as sorry as me."

One large, pale hand came up to rub at Bodie's nape and Doyle watched it, feeling the old hunger hollow out the pit of his stomach. God, how he wanted to reach out and touch that soft skin himself or trace the curls as they slept against the smooth neck. But he dared not, knowing full well that it would destroy whatever vestigial chances that still clung stubbornly on.

"Give me another go?" he heard himself say, voice harsh with his desperate attempt not to sink into wallowing in his own misery. "Please?" and his voice finally cracked, breaking mid-word, the pain biting into Bodie.

"Oh, Christ, Ray, I don't know. Go away, will you and let me think. Can't think with you here. Go away, Ray. Just go away."

For a second, he couldn't actually move, but then the sight of that rigid back penetrated him, cold and chill and killing. His hand came up, but then returned to his side, skulking in the shadow cast by his jacket as if ashamed that it had even thought of touching Bodie now. He didn't want to speak, didn't want to hear how his voice would sound. So he nodded, unseen, to Bodie's back and then began to leave, the movements forcibly bringing back the memories of one particular morning a lifetime ago. His body knew the motion, every move burned into his synapses to entwine with his DNA. No choice, but to go. No choice, or he'd be no better than he had been that night. *Don't even think it*, he told himself. But of course, tell yourself that, and the thoughts spew into your mind faster than you can murder them. *Don't!* he screamed at his temptation, walking faster and faster until he was almost running. As his hand reached out for the snib, the picture came to his mind full-fledged, the picture of how much Bodie still loved him and how terribly, frighteningly easy it



would be to seduce him. The hunger was a cataract of need from Bodie, a hunger that was temptingly easy to exploit. But sex now would be worse than useless, would serve not to forge them together but to force them apart, bringing up 'that night' like Sunday vomit after Saturday's party. His hand closed upon the latch, twisted the brassy metal and pulled the door open. He took his first step away, his entire, obstinately optimistic body listening for Bodie, listening to hear Bodie say 'wait'. The word didn't come, nothing came to reel him in. He stepped through the gaping door, onto a landing pristine and scoured, devoid of all signs of life, the epitome of the polite English city dwelling. He started down the stairs, still listening, still hoping, but it was all dying, step by step, the fearfilled pain racing in on its heels. By the time he reached the outer door, he was running as if all the bats of hell were chasing him.

And he didn't even know that Bodie was still standing at that window, watching him.

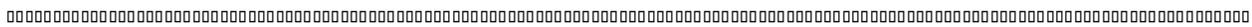
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The flat he had rented on his return to England was the sort usually described as 'modest'—that estate agents' euphemism for microscopic. But it was perfect for him, a man on his own who had sloughed off most of his material possessions. There was room enough here for him to fill some empty spaces with new books and old treasures as he bought them, but not so many spaces that he rattled hollowly around the place as his hopes shivered through his brain. No matter how he tried, he still felt the faint swellings of hope every time the 'phone rang; his belly still churned every time the door went, he still couldn't help but start at the sight of a tall, dark and handsome man in the street. Apart from the recalcitrance of his heart, he was resettling in England quite well, even if he were given to a distressing propensity for yelling in French if he were in a hurry and idiots were in his way. But all that was passing, as the old air and the old attitudes seeped back into his bones. He had even gone to his mother's house, to sit politely for an hour over tea while she com-

plained about him as if he weren't there and at the end of it, he had stood and departed, feeling as if he had never been there at all, as if the woman with whom he'd had tea was a wisp from a book by Genet. Walking home from his mother's home had been wonderful, his mind full of his city, his London, all the places he'd known first as a lad, then as a copper, and then with Bodie. Bittersweet, absolutely, but ripe and rich and heady, even if it was only the slithering lick of pain that told him he was alive and kicking.

And at the oddest moments, memories would come back to him, diamond bright and ruby warm: Bodie's skin, the big hands holding him, the brilliance of the smile glittering in blue eyes. There was a song on the radio, played everywhere, in the shops, on the radio of some yobbo walking past, blasting from a car screeching around a corner. "Lips like sugar, sugar kisses," the singer sang, pouring salt into his wounds or heat to his groin, the reaction as rational as the flip of a coin, emotion ruling this one aspect of his life. Sugar kisses. It took so little to feel Bodie's mouth open against his, the sweetness of it devastating this other side of the disaster. And then the guilt would rise up again, for no matter how often he thought he had forgiven himself, no matter how often he had expiated that particular sin, no matter how many times he had examined it rationally and worked himself through his self-revulsion, it would catch in the back of his throat, choking him. It was going to take Bodie for him to be able to finally bury it in himself where only the health of the regret would remain, changing him from that night. And in the meantime, there was a living to be made, choices to be made. The Beethoven record was still there, but he never listened to it, not now. Even much of Mozart had been lost to him, for the past it evoked, so it was just as Tchaikovsky began to fill his small flat that the doorbell rang, interrupting music that was of an age far less discordant.

By the time he'd got as far as the living room door, the bell had gone twice more. "All



right, all right, keep your shirt on, I'm coming, I'm coming." His door was a solid piece of wood, his peep-hole not yet installed, a blank face to present to the world. He hauled it open. "Bodie." That was all that would come from him, all the other words held inside. Let Bodie be the one to speak, give Bodie the chance to say whatever it was he had come here to say. *Keep your mouth shut, Doyle, don't cock it up now. Just keep your big trap shut...*

In benedictine silence, they went into the sitting room, Bodie not attempting to keep his curiosity to himself. His eyes examined everything, filing it all away, assessing, identifying, noticing every subtle nuance of taste that had altered with the passing of years and noticing too those things which were conspicuous by their absence. Knick-knacks, pictures on the walls, the clutter of books and papers. So little had imprinted itself upon this flat, even considering the short time Doyle had lived here. Looking at it through Bodie's eyes, following the line of thought with the same old ease, Doyle saw this house for what it shouted: temporary. Nothing here was fixed, nothing here was settled, nothing here yet belonged. Not even Doyle. Perhaps, *especially* not Doyle.

Doyle sat down, as he had at Bodie's, on the couch, waiting for Bodie to reiterate that last meeting they had suffered. Instead, Bodie lowered himself on the sofa beside Doyle, close enough for the musky draw of his after-shave to curl over to Doyle, just as Bodie's hair curled a fraction over his collar, barely touching, but addictive to those who desired him.

"Been thinking about what you had to say when you came over to the flat last week, Ray."

Ray? Doyle thought, a hope going through him that, for the first time, he didn't immediately suppress. *If he's calling me 'Ray' right off the bat and he's been thinking about what I said... Down, boy,* he thought to his cock that was rising in direct proportion to his hope, *pack it in until you're invited...* "Oh yeh?" he managed, laudably calm.

"Yeh. Must be getting senile in my old age, but some of what you said actually made a bit of sense. You were a lousy bastard to do that to me, but if I look at it from your point of view, it's not quite as bad. And," he paused, dragging in a deep breath, "even though I still think I should've beaten you to a pulp for it, even though there's no bloody excuse for it, it still leaves me with two choices, doesn't it? Either I never see you again, or I give you another chance. Which is what brings me here."

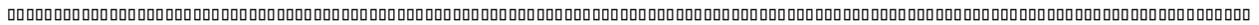
There was a tremble in Doyle's hand as it rested on his thigh. He was waiting, consumed, for Bodie's touch, for Bodie's forgiveness, for Bodie's answer.

Bodie wasn't looking at him, was staring at the carpet between his feet and the way it reflected in the polished black of his shoes. "I'll only warn you once, Doyle. You do anything like that to me again, if you so much as think about it, I'll fucking kill you. Quite, quite." he suddenly stared straight at Doyle, impaling him, butterfly on display, his words so terribly, terribly quiet, "slowly."

"Seems fair enough to me, Bodie. D'you want it in writing?"

A wry smile greeted that. "Yeh, actually, I would, but I'll never get it from you, will I, Ray? Not your style, that. No, the warning's enough, I think. Well, that's all I had to say." He got to his feet, Doyle eyeing him with complete shock.

"Where're you going, then?" he asked, going back to the way they always used to talk to each other, wiping the slate clean, even if there would always be a backup stored in each of their memories. "Got some food in, if you're hungry." He laughed, albeit it a little strained, a little cracked, mirror to his feelings. *Nice and slow, nice and slow, don't rush him, don't rush...* a small voice was repeating frantically in his mind, saying the words over and over, reining him in, stopping him from grabbing Bodie and hanging on for dear life. *Can't have it all at once. Can't just really wipe it all clean, it all takes time...* He laughed again, even less than before,



the barest hint of moisture brightening his eyes. “Can you believe I said that? Christ, when are you ever *not* hungry? D’you fancy a bite?” And he held his breath, waiting. Despite all his dreams, it wasn’t going to be easy. Nothing this important ever was.

And then Bodie was smiling at him, sitting back down, so close, so bloody close Doyle could feel the heat of his thigh burning into his own. “Haven’t had much appetite, actually. But I could I murder a cup of tea. Don’t suppose you’ve got any bickies, have you? Or d’you still have nothing but muesli and prunes in your cupboards?”

“S’funny,” he said, jumping to his feet, away from the temptation of that long, lean thigh, striving to match Bodie’s nonchalance, “after I got back here, I went on a right proper binge, ate everything I could get my hands on. You know, all the stuff I had when I was a kid. You just keep your bum parked there, tea and biscuits coming up.”

He hadn’t been in the kitchenette two minutes but Bodie was crowding in behind him, taking up all the space, all the air, making Doyle breathless with awareness.

“Ray...”

The words seemed to wither.

Doyle fought the urge to fill up the silence with meaningless chatter. There wasn’t a single thing he could think of to say, apart from to tell Bodie how much he wanted to fuck him. Or how much he’d missed him. And if he started on all of that, he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to stop.

“Missed you, Ray. Missed you as if I’d had my legs cut off.”

That did it. The mugs clattered down onto the draining board, a tiny chip of china flying off in a graceful arc while Doyle turned round and hauled Bodie into his arms, pulling him into a taut embrace, frantic to touch him, to hold him, to fill his senses with him. Words were spilling from him, words committed to letters never read, confessions made in the forgiving darkness of night now made into the darkness of

Bodie’s pullover. Mumbled, muffled, but understood all the less.

There were hands stroking his hair and they were trembling, as his entire body was. Bodie’s hands, Bodie’s body, Bodie’s heat plastered the length of him, making him hard, from lust and love commingled. God, how he wanted him, wanted to ravage him, but there was a stiffness in Bodie, and it wasn’t his cock. Wary then, and justifiably so. Time to prove the truths he had declared. *Give him time*, he repeated his mantra. *Give him time...* He eased himself out of Bodie’s arms, wondering when the hell it had gone from him holding Bodie to him being cradled by Bodie. Not that he was complaining, but he’d have to watch himself for that. His fingertips traced the shape of lips he ached to kiss, lips that did not part for him. He smiled, faintly, bravely, watching the darkness of distrust slowly clear from Bodie’s eyes. “S’all right, mate,” he said, softly, still allowing himself the luxury of touching plush of skin and the stubble of beard. “My intentions are strictly honourable. You let me know when you trust me enough to let me back into your bed, and I’ll race you to it. But I won’t push you, okay? Don’t forget, I’m an ex-copper. Know all about probation.” The smile was rigid now, held in place by force of will. Oh, he understood Bodie’s gut reaction, but it didn’t make it any less painful. He turned back to the sink, picking up the mugs again, not caring that turning like that put him in profile now to Bodie. He knew his erection would be tenting his French-cut trousers, but he didn’t mind, being far beyond anything so paltry as embarrassment. Let Bodie know how much he wanted him. Let Doyle prove that he could control himself, even when he wanted Bodie hard enough to hurt. Just let everything between them go back to normal, the way it used to be, that’s all he’d ask for right now. He’d ask for the rest later and cry for the moon when he was alone in his own bed tonight. But at least Bodie hadn’t pushed him away when his erection had dug into Bodie; that was something. Enough, for now. He started the rest of the healing between them,

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reweaving the old friendship. “How’s the Cow these days, eh? Still the same old bastard to work for? Still catching you fiddling your expenses is he, then?”

And the conversation stuttered up between them, and then it began to flow, the friendship parachuting open as if nothing had changed, as if Doyle had done nothing more untoward than move to France for 3 years. But it was so awkward, the parting at the end of the day, what they had come so close to becoming hovering over them like a pall. There were good-byes, with that peculiar moment the British have of ‘to hug or not to hug’, the feelings there, but the tradition of closeness not. And then there was what hugging meant to them, what it brought up again... So there were long looks and aborted movements of restless hands, shufflings of feet and finally, a shrug, a good-bye and then the door was shut and Bodie was gone, leaving Doyle alone to wait until he was forgiven. Alone, save for that last minute invitation to keep him warm.

“Come for a proper English pint with me tomorrow night, then?”

And god, yes, he’d come with him, any time Bodie asked. He was still hugging the possibilities to him as he went to bed, pyjamas tossed carelessly over the chair as he slipped between the chill sheets, hand immediately, starvingly, centring in on his cock, pumping, hard and sudden and implacable, the smell of Bodie, the sight of Bodie, the feel of Bodie bringing him to an abrupt, lonely orgasm, Bodie’s name groaned into a deaf pillow. And then there was the rest of the night to get through. Alone. And for however long it took Bodie.

HE KNEW IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TONIGHT, HAD KNOWN IT FROM THE MOMENT BODIE HAD MET HIM TO GO TO THE GAME. They’d been building up to this for only a week, but it was definitely going to happen. In fact, considering how they both felt, he was surprised they’d managed to wait this long. The fact that they had was tribute only to Bodie’s need for proof, Bodie’s endless need

for reassurance. *Not that I can blame him, much. Probably done the same in his shoes, considering what happened the last time. Be different this time, though, he’ll see.* He smiled at Bodie, a smile warm enough to elicit loud whispers of ‘look at that poofter!’. That only made his smile all the warmer, priorities being one of the things he’d learned as a result of that night. There were times when you had to let the world go to hell in its own hand-basket while you took care of your own little world and its special denizens. Or in Doyle’s case, denizen, singular. There wasn’t room yet for anyone else, not even room enough for Cowley or Murph or anyone else. All that could come later, when he and Bodie were settled, when he knew for definite that they were together and no-one—least of all himself—could put them asunder. He’d always liked that phrase, liked the archaic, pompous music of it, if not the being chained to someone forever. Vows were not something he would ever take lightly, not when the world and his own nature held so many variables and quirks. Not until he could be sure it *would* be for the rest of his natural—or unnatural, as the Mary Whitehouses of the world would have it—life. He was still smiling that same smile and Bodie was beginning to look at him a bit funny.

“You all right, mate?”

“Yeh, ‘m fine. You all right?”

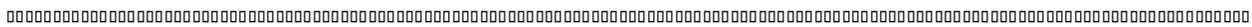
“All right? All right? Listen, Doyle, no one’s ever called me just ‘all right’. Usually got bloody fantastic, actually.”

“I didn’t know all your girlfriends were virgins.”

Bodie licked one finger, drew a score in the air, conceding that he had walked right into that one. “D’you want another?” he said, in lieu of a come-back.

“Nah. Rather go home.”

It was the way it was said rather than the words that made clear what he was asking. And he was asking, not demanding, nor subverting nor seducing. Just asking. Putting himself up on offer, giving Bodie the control, the power, the right to make the decision. There was a long



skylight overhead, stars dreaming, beckoning, and Bodie came up beside him, looking at him levelly, all attempts to keep this on the same even keel abandoned, for this was so much more than what had gone before. His key then, the door open, a deep breath and they were both through it, in the living room, facing each other, as jackets and coat were dropped on chairs and then they were simply staring at each other. A fulcrum, that instant when the moment could have become fraught with tension, but Doyle smiled, deprecating, laughing at them both standing here like awkward, knobby-kneed teenagers. Bodie came forward to him then, reaching out, taking the hand that reached out to his, then Bodie was leading them both into the bedroom.

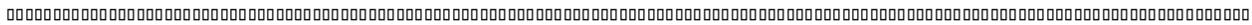
Small looks, small kisses, a hand brushing the sensitive small of Doyle's back in the almost-dark of the bedroom. Light spilled in from the hall, not quite meeting up with the streetlight that eased in from the window, the dark blue curtains hanging forgotten and undrawn. Bodie's eyes were closed, Doyle's wide open as he watched that much-loved face so concentrated with the pleasure and the unease of intimacy. This time, Doyle had promised himself, this time, he would listen properly to Bodie, would actually see him, would not become lost in the largeness of his own pleasure. He stroked the crisp starch of Bodie's shirt, pulling it free of trousers, needing to touch the softness of skin, needing to feel the ciliated spine quiver under his touch. He found the arch of Bodie's spine, felt those miniscule hairs erect at his caress. Bodie pushed him away, just a bit, far enough for them to each to unbutton the other's shirt, their lips meeting and parting in promissory kisses. His shirt was smoothed from off his shoulders, dropping unheeded to the floor as Bodie's fell, hands free to roam, his across the smoothness of skin, Bodie's to striate through swirling hair. Lower then, back to being a team in perfect harmony, one with the other, belts disposed of, buttons undone and then...a pause, a hesitation in the way Bodie was kissing him and fear took up

residence in Doyle's belly. He could feel words gather in Bodie's chest where it was pressed to his own and he waited.

"You know something, Ray? We're going to feel a right pair of prats. Here we are being all romantic the way we're getting our clothes off, and we've gone and forgotten our shoes and socks. Going to spoil the mood something rotten, that it."

He couldn't help but laugh then. "You great wally," he said, punching Bodie—but lightly—in the chest, moving back to sit on the edge of the bed, unlacing his trainers and pulling everything off, still laughing as Bodie hopped around getting rid of his own shoes. "Trust you to think about that in the middle of the great seduction scene. Sure you don't want to check that the oven's off and the telly's unplugged and the cat's..."

His mouth was stopped with a kiss, Bodie's tongue entering him, filling him with moisture and heat, love coming through as clear as the chiming of the church bell. Only nine o'clock, but he didn't think this was even slightly too early for bed, in more ways than one. They were ready, oh, they were both more than ready, Bodie's erection digging into Doyle as he was brought to his feet. Bodie's hands were at his waistband then, Bodie's mouth feathering over his face, tongue darting, setting little bonfires of delight burning. "Now where were we then?" Bodie's voice was in his ear, all warm and lascivious, the humour so benign and a blessing to Doyle. "Right about here was it?" and there was a hand pressing on him through his jeans, pressing hard, just right, rubbing him against the top of his own thigh, caught between denim and hair-soft skin. He pushed Bodie away, needing to get his hands between them so that he could get at Bodie, get at the clothes that were in his way, frustrating him, making him desperate. In amongst all the large regrets of 'that night' was the small one that he had been in such a hurry that he couldn't remember how Bodie felt filling his hand or tasted under his tongue. He wanted that, wanted to get on his knees before Bodie in



loving, but the finger had been joined by another, dry, hard, beginning the hurting. *This wasn't how it was supposed to be...* Doyle thought, agony spearing him within and without. *Oh, Bodiemate, don't...*

“And what would that prove, eh? Prove that you'd let me hurt you like you hurt me, prove that you'll do anything to make me forgive you, won't it? But Ray, it's not what I want. Don't want you here like a fucking sacrifice. Want to fuck you when you're so hot for it you're screaming, want to fuck you when I come home one night and you jump me at the door, don't even let me get you into a bed you're so frantic for it. Fuck you up against the wall, or on the sofa, or on the floor or in the honeymoon suite, don't care, but it's got to be cos you're desperate to feel me up you, not to say 'sorry' for something three years ago. So, my lovely, get your backside—and your other little bits—back over here. Come on, wipe your eyes, love, come here, come to me, let me hold you...”

And he was in Bodie's arms, Bodie's forgiveness wrapped warm and large around him, Bodie's tongue lapping up his tears, taking all his sorrow and regret and self-hate into Bodie himself. The healing was almost complete...

More kisses, passion rising again now that the storm of emotion had passed, better emotion, lustier emotion taking its place. Bodie's hands were on Doyle's bum again, a finger in him, but only for the pleasure that brought. Bodie's voice was in his ear, his breath lost in Doyle's curls, tickling his nape. “In the drawer, Ray. Tube of stuff. You forgot it the last time, so I thought I'd better buy some meself, you old skinflint. Well, go on, get it. *I can't reach from here, can I?*”

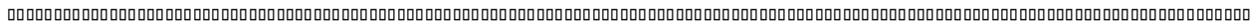
Doyle stretched, refusing to let go of Bodie, scrabbling in the drawer amidst the clutter of books and pens and rubber bands and chewing gum packets; then his questing fingers found it: smooth tube, no mistaking it. Bodie took it from him, unsteady hands anointing Doyle's erection.

“All that for me, eh, love? God, you're

beautiful. Love your prick, never got a real chance to see it before. Want to suck you, Ray, want to have you all the way inside me. All ready now, so slick. Gonna slide in there smooth as silk you are. Here, put a bit in me, make it nice and easy.”

Doyle took the tube, heaving in great gulps of breath to steady himself, overflowing with arousal and need and love. Very gently, he soothed some of the gel into Bodie, taking his time, enjoying the way Bodie's body opened up under his finger, the muscle quivering before his eyes, swallowing him up, Bodie's voice subsiding into silence as the pleasure grew. He'd remember that, that Bodie went quiet when it started getting too good to take. Then he had to kiss Bodie, had to reaffirm that this was between the two of them, not just a faceless fuck. He hooked Bodie's legs over his shoulders, staring down into the face of the man he loved above even his own self-deceptions, then slowly, with exquisite care, staring into those blue, blue eyes, staring, staring, barely blinking, holding them together with love, he began to join them in body. He could feel the head of his cock pressing against the small tightness that was Bodie, felt the muscle yield, felt himself press home into the inner heat that was his mate. Then they were together, hard cock buried in tender flesh, the jut of hip pressing into the soft swell of arse, chest to chest, mouths almost touching, breath mingling as their sweat blended with their pleasure. He had to move, had to, and Bodie was moving with him, grunting with the ecstasy, writhing, eyes finally closing. Doyle did not close his eyes. The need to watch, to guard Bodie from Doyle himself, was far too immutable. So he watched, and grinned, elated and filled with the joy of it all, his body buried in Bodie, Bodie lost in pleasure, dark head tossing side to side on the white pillow, neck cording, arm muscles bunching from holding Doyle so close and tight.

Abruptly, Bodie pushed at him and Doyle jumped back as if burned, almost withdrawing from Bodie, but hard hands were pulling him back in, Bodie's legs wrapping around



his hips, drawing him closer than he had been before and then Bodie was shoving upwards, moaning, fucking them both. Doyle pumped up and down, hard, fierce, unequivocally masculine, but never once, not for a second, more than Bodie wanted, not a fraction more than Bodie could take. The small of his back was aching, from the fucking and from Bodie's heels digging in to him, but that only made the pleasure all the more intense. At this moment, it was all pleasure, it was all delight, it was all perfection. He thrust hard again and Bodie pushed up to meet him, fierce as Doyle, as frantic, as desperate, as close to coming. Doyle sank down a little more, until Bodie's cock was pressing into both their bellies, precum making it all slick and wonderful. Now, with every deep thrust, he rubbed against Bodie, felt Bodie's unyielding masculinity even as Bodie's flesh yielded to him. More, and harder, and all the while, Doyle was watching. They were so close now, both on the verge of orgasm. Bodie opened his eyes, locking their gazes together, cocooning them completely in each other. Another buck of Doyle's lean hips, another arch of Bodie's back and then they were both there, heaven, with Bodie's cum streaming between them, wetting their bellies and Doyle's seed anointing Bodie inside, filling him with heat and wetness.

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Doyle collapsed then, exhausted, sated. Forgiven. It was palpable, the forgiveness. He could reach out and touch it, if he wanted to. And he did. So he reached out, touching Bodie's chest, feeling the heartbeat under his fingertips.

There were no words, for there was no need for words, not now, not with the love still tingling through them, not with the sense of completion making heavy their limbs and eyes. Only small touches, small caresses, the soft kiss of lips on nipple, the slow, languorous embrace of tongue on skin. Sleep was there, waiting in the wings, hovering over them, misty comfort to hold them. Still entwined, their seed upon and in each other, they slept.

In the morning, with newly risen sun stretching fingers of sunlight towards their bed,

they began it all again, with kisses and loving and words, until they slept again. And so life finally began, the healing complete.

Almost.

THE YEAR WAS DIFFERENT, THE DECADE DIFFERENT, THE BED THE SAME, THE MEN THE SAME. In the stillness of the morning, indulging in the luxury of breakfast and morning paper in bed, Doyle lay and watched as Bodie's chest rose and fell with every breath. He lay there, thinking about what the doctors had said, thinking about how Bodie paid only lip service, then went right on eating even more high cholesterol food than ever before. And Doyle knew why. Knew all about this man's bone-deep need for commitment, the inbred need to belong, to know that everything was settled. To know that Raymond Doyle was never going to leave William Andrew Philip Bodie. To know that he was never going to waken up alone. No matter how happy they were, that was always there, nagging silently, never mentioned, Bodie acting as if it didn't exist. But it showed, more in its absence than in anything Bodie ever did. No, there were no demands, never had been, but it was there in the way Bodie lit up like Trafalgar Square at Christmas, all because Doyle had remembered the anniversary of the time when it had all *really* started between them. He'd made a point after that, to remember every date of significance in their shared lives, but still, it was always lingering around them like a pauper, hungry, big-eyed, miserably waiting. Bodie's need for something, anything, that he could hold in his hands and say, 'see? Ray *does* love me and he *is* going to stay with me.' In these days of AIDS and couples splitting up under the pressure or never getting together because of the fear, Doyle could almost feel it himself. Except he had no doubts at all about Bodie, was as sure of him as a child is of the family dog. Always there, he knew that. And that was a luxury Bodie didn't have, the lack of it slowly eating him alive. Almost literally. Doyle thought again about his private conversation with Bodie's doctor, thinking about what Bodie had given up



and what he had continued with. Being an agent on the streets had passed without a parting glance; moving into the lucrative private sector bodyguard business with Ray had been done with nary a murmur, but the food... Oh, Bodie was careful to exercise properly, had given up all the things that could cause the fatal surge of adrenalin, but he still ate all the wrong stuff, ostensibly behind Doyle's back, but Ray was no fool. He'd been watching, had friends keeping an eye on Bodie, saw all the test results, the numbers slowly climbing higher. And the medicine that had been prescribed, the medicine that would stop this genetic predisposition that had caused so much trouble so young—that lay in Bodie's underwear drawer, unopened. It was, Doyle had decided, almost as if Bodie was subconsciously making sure he went before Doyle left him.

There were long groans to match long stretches and then Bodie was quickly out of bed and away to the bathroom, returning minutes later, diving under the covers even as his hands reached out to the breakfast tray. Doyle slurped his tea and glanced over the top of his newspaper with ostentatious casualness at his bedmate. "Been thinking about something, Bodie," he said, again with that falsely casual air, as if discussing the football scores.

"Hang on a minute and I'll 'phone the Sun," Bodie muttered at him, paying not the least little attention. He was used to his Ray in the morning.

"Nah, I'm serious."

"At this time in the morning? Ray my love, you're unnatural, that's what you are."

Doyle didn't have his usual ready retort for that, thereby sending out warning signals by the score. "No, seriously, I mean it. There's something I've been thinking about suggesting."

He got a look for that. "I am *not* into gerbils and you had better bloodywell not be either."

"Don't be any more disgusting than usual, Bodie. Listen, I was reading here in the

paper about a court case that just got settled in the High Court." He paused for dramatic effect. "Upholding the validity of other EC country licences, even if both parties involved are British."

Bodie paused with blank incomprehension, EC licences already well-established in their firm and not in question at all. "That's lovely, and I'm very pleased for you but look Ray, will you just get on with it? I'm trying to have me breakfast here."

Again carefully perusing the paper, again watching Bodie with surreptitious fervour, he asked: "Fancy going to Denmark?"

Bodie's face lit up, a lovely leer brightening his eyes, a marmalade-tipped hand reaching out to Ray, wagging his eyebrows like a dirty old man. "A dirty weekend? Are you suggesting a weekend of illicit and illegal pleasures—none of them involving gerbils of course—housed in the sinful shores of Denmark?"

"Well, I *was* thinking of a bit more than just a weekend and I was going to suggest tons of pleasures... But I wasn't thinking about any illegal ones. Actually," he said, eyes lowered, long pink tongue licking Bodie-flavoured silver shred marmalade, savouring the taste, drawing his moment out, suddenly flashing his eyes open to stare wide and green into Bodie, needing to see the moment when the commitment was offered, "I was actually thinking of making it a bit more legal than it already is."

Bodie just looked at him, words on the tip of his tongue as it wet his lips, but caution, and common sense holding them in. Doyle smiled wryly at that, knowing he had only himself to blame for Bodie not grabbing him. Oh yeh, Bodie had been watching the original news about Denmark's new laws as avidly as any other man in a gay relationship, but Doyle's steadfast lack of interest had killed that particular hope long before the Danish law was established EC wide. Even now, the end of 1992, with all the boundaries down, Bodie hadn't followed up on it, for why should he? Doyle knew per-

being the only bit in reach. “Two and elevenpence ha’penny. Would’ve been three shilling proper, but I had to give me cousin his cut. Nah, I meant, d’you think we could buy his ferry ticket and all that crap?”

“Don’t see why not. Like our Murph to be there. How much would it cost to bring Lisa and the brats as well?”

“Another five hundred grey hairs, mate.”

“True. But you look so distinguished with your silver temples.”

Doyle still snorted with laudable contempt. “Yeh, right. You just want to have the twins over there. Fancy them as flower girl and ring bearer, do you?”

Doyle wondered why Bodie went so still, a flare of excitement going through the larger body.

“We going to exchange rings, then?”

“Married people usually do, don’t they?”

“You’ll wear a ring?”

“Course I’ll wear a ring. *And* it better have an inscription as well. Won’t settle for anything less.”

“Gold?”

“Don’t like wearing gold, turns my skin green. Silver.”

“Platinum.”

“Oh, planning on breaking the bank, are we? Fancy a gold one for yourself, mate?”

“Mm. Or silver or platinum or a brass curtain ring. Doesn’t matter, just want the ring.”

“Doesn’t matter?” Doyle’s hand stroked the length of Bodie’s stomach, stranding through the lush hair at his groin, fingers encircling the rotundity of Bodie’s cock. “In that case, I suppose I could always settle for a nice leather number, eh?”

“Well, it *is* Denmark...”

HE KNEW IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TONIGHT, KNEW BECAUSE THEY’D SPENT WEEKS ON THE PLANS, WEEKS OF JUGGLING DATES AND ARRANGEMENTS AND WORK. But it was ready, they were here in all their

glory. Or rather, *he* was here in all his glory, Bodie hadn’t come downstairs yet. Doyle checked the room once more, a room of chandeliers turned romantically dim, comfortable chairs in a loose semi-circle for the few friends who had been able to come. There was going to be a reception back in London, a combination New Year party and belated wedding meal, or as Bodie was heard to call it, “the biggest fucking party since Charles and Di got married”. Doyle wandered over to the flowers, smelling them, appreciating the greenhouses that could produce blooms in the depths of winter. Once they had started on all this, the oddest things had become important, both of them trying to please the other, both of them trying to make sure that no detail was overlooked. This was definitely a one-off thing for them, an event to end all events and they refused to leave a single thing out, modesty be damned. They were going to tie the knot with the best they could find.

“Lovely, aren’t they? Andrew, you little monster, stop pulling your sister’s ribbons out! Half a mo’, Ray, while I sort this pair out. Sarah! Stop it!”

Doyle leaned back amused at the sight of lanky Murphy trying to catch his two and a half year old twins, grinning as the pair split up into two different directions, ensuring that one of them would elude their father. Experience will out, obviously. Ray laughed outright—Lisa had come up behind them, catching the one that Daddy missed. Experience *definitely* will out.

“They’ll be grand bairns, even if they do look like monsters now.”

“I’m not sure Murph would agree with you on that one, George. Have you ever seen him after he’s tried to give the terrible twins a bath?”

“The terrible twins? Oh, aye, I’ve sympathy for how he feels after a run in with the terrible twins. That’s what I used to call you and Bodie.”

“Among other things, I’ll bet.”

Cowley laughed, the soft lighting kind to his old face and his silvered hair. “Among other things. You look happy, lad,” he said, quietly.

“I’m glad you and Bodie are doing this. It’ll be good for you. Both of you.”

“Yeh, I know. Wasn’t till we started making all the arrangements that it really dawned on me how much I wanted that bit of paper as well.”

“By the way, I’ve spoken to an old friend of mine, an excellent solicitor. If you go in to him at the beginning of the year, he’ll help the pair of you to draw up new wills. Ach, don’t look at me like that, laddie. You have to take care of these things, and a wedding’s the perfect place to remind you. This is for life, Raymond, *life*. There’ll be no changing your mind after this, not for either one of you. Look at it as another commitment.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll do just that, sir,” Doyle answered in the old, long-suffering tone.

Cowley laughed again. “You see that you do, 4.7.”

“Were good years, those, weren’t they?”

“Very good years. But all that’s over now, no place for an insular group like CI5 in the new Europe.”

“Sorry to see it go, George.”

“Aye, well, so was I, in a way. But better it go than I have to hand it over to some bureaucratic, red-tape mad idiot to fritter away what I built. Or to turn it into some kind of secret police.”

They were silent for a moment, each looking elsewhere, one remembering the past and the threats of the future, one thinking only of the good things this room would bring the future. “Oh, we’ll send you a proper card, of course, but thanks for the present, George. I like a nice piece of silver.”

“Not half as much as the case of malt I sent to go with the decanter set, I’ll warrant.”

“You should’ve seen Bodie’s face when he opened that up, god, I thought he was going to fall over. He...”

“Go and get him, lad, you can talk to me any time. Well, go on, don’t just stand there catching flies.”

Doyle walked over to where Bodie was

standing in the doorway, in all his glory. Doyle had put the time and effort into a perfect dinner suit with all the trimmings, including a crisp white Swiss lawn shirt, but Bodie! Bodie had pulled out all the stops, including some Doyle hadn’t even known existed. Then he stopped and looked again and realised it had more to do with the way they were both were feeling than the mere cut of cloth and drape of fabric.

“H’lo, mate,” he said, stopping inches away, his own face as aglow as Bodie’s.

“H’lo yourself, Ray. You all set?”

“Oh, yeh, been ready for ages. You ready?”

Bodie leaned forward and kissed him, lightly, on the lips. “Been ready for years, love. Shall we get on, then?”

“Yeh. I’ll get them to start the music.”

The music had been Doyle’s choice, as the hotel had been Bodie’s, so it was to the soaring strains of Mozart—who else?—that the small group of guests took their places, the twins firmly restrained by maternal or paternal arms, securely bribed by hard sweeties and promises of presents after.

The official stepped forward, a plain man, pleasant of face and appealing of accent. “Tonight, we come here to see the marriage of two men who love each other and who have decided to live together in married union. I will officiate, they will speak their own words and then I shall declare them married. So. Who presents them to be joined?”

“I do,” said the Scots voice, gruffly, but his eyes were bright as he came to stand behind them. “I present William Andrew Philip Bodie and Raymond Stephen Doyle to be joined in matrimony.”

“Are there any to state a legal cause why this cannot be done?”

The only answer was little Sarah sucking loudly on her sweetie.

“Then let them speak their vows to each other. You may proceed.”

A second’s breath, and then Bodie spoke.



“I, William Andrew Philip Bodie, do take thee as my lawfully wedded spouse, to have and to hold, to love, honour and cherish, not to be parted even by death.” He took Ray’s left hand in his own, waiting for Ray to speak.

“I, Raymond Stephen Doyle, take you, William Andrew Philip Bodie, to be my lawfully wedded husband. I promise to be worthy of your trust, and to stand beside you, through thick and thin. And I’ll love you forever, Bodie.” He turned to Cowley, took the ring offered to him and slipped it onto Bodie’s finger. “With this ring, I thee wed. Love you, Bodie.”

Bodie stared at the ring glinting so brightly on his hand, a simple, plain band, all rounded and satin smooth, as if it were old. He raised an eyebrow, and Cowley broke from the planned words. “It was my mother’s, Bodie. I’ve no one of my own flesh and blood to give it to. The pair of you were the only ones I wanted it to go to. Now here, before we all embarrass ourself’s bursting into tears like a bunch of silly fools, take this and give it to Raymond.”

Doyle’s old gold ring winking on his hand as he took the circlet offered him, Bodie held Doyle’s hand in his own, slowly placing the final link in place. The platinum band, a thin circle of fine strands of platinum woven into a pattern so complex it appeared simple, nestled comfortably around Doyle’s slim finger. “With this ring,” Bodie repeated, the generations of

tradition redolent in the words, filling both of them with the sense of time everlasting and bonds made never to be broken, “I thee wed.” His voice trembled a little, fading with emotion. “With my body,” his voice was almost a whisper and Doyle’s clear tones joined his, saying the words with him, making the vows together. They looked directly at each other, no one else in the world beside them.

“With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship. With my heart, I thee adore.”

“By the authority of the state of Denmark, recognised by the European Community of States, I now pronounce you legally and bindingly married.”

They were still holding hands, still rubbing their rings as they rested on each other’s fingers as the strains of ‘Ode to Joy’ welled up around them, turning the secular room into a cathedral. It was Bodie who was the one to speak first. “Married, eh? Does this mean I get to kiss the bride?”

“As long as I don’t have to,” Cowley said, “that’ll be fine.”

It felt strange, to both of them, to kiss in front of others, but it was right, the final seal on their bonding. A cheer went up as their lips met, and what had been a chaste peck turned into a proper, loving kiss.

The healing was complete.

From Red Dwarf to Snow White as per her detailed instructions.