





was Doyle he wanted to do—but if he did some work now, saw what he could come up with, then he'd have an excuse for retiring early to bed.

A very pleasant prospect, when he stopped to think about, which he did fairly often, being of a very libidinous bent—in more ways than one. The crowd was slowly diminishing, filtering down into the men who liked to play with long hard sticks and smooth round balls and those who liked to watch them do it. Bodie, needless to say, was one of the people who stayed. He listened in to sundry conversations as he wandered round the room, but the only drugs he heard mentioned were ones that apparently worked wonders on dogs with worms. Not quite what Bodie was interested in. He meandered over to the walls with their racks upon racks of cues, tidy rows of chalk lined up on the shelf and someone came up behind him.

“Do you play? Fancy a game?”

Bodie turned round, took one look at the exceedingly pretty boy, stifled a laugh and said, “Only if there's some money at stake to make it interesting.”

“Oh, brilliant, absolutely brilliant! I'm Trevor, but everyone calls me Trevvie or Trevhead, something of that nature and how about twenty pounds to start, an extra fiver for every ball pocketed on the break?”

It took half a second, but Bodie sorted the tangled spaghetti of words out and agreed, looking out over Trevor's shoulder to grin at Doyle, sultrily.

Trevor whirled around, saw where Bodie had been looking and was fortunately dim enough to think it was the horsey blonde that had attracted Bodie. “Oh, shouldn't waste my time with her, she's taken. By my elder brother actually, Jeffrey, or Jeffers, but we don't call him that to his face, of course, he'd have a fit if we did, he's always been rather a pretentious shit, actually, so we always call him Marquis—Sadey for short!”

This last speech had carried them across the room and to the billiard table, where the previous had left the table ready for play and Doyle was chatting to a blonde—not the horsey one, but one who would go down a treat at the Miss World competition—which

decided Bodie, of course, that he was going to be positively scintillating.

“Toss?”

Thoughts on carnal overdrive, it took Bodie a second to realise that Trevhead wasn't offering him a wank, but a coin to toss for heads or tails. Which thought immediately brought Doyle to mind, head or tail—Bodie wasn't fussy.

“Hello? Anyone in there?” and Trevvie was snorting at his own brilliant humour. Bodie decided that if no-one was smuggling drugs into this set, then he'd start, just to give them an excuse for being such idiots.

“Heads,” he said, remembering to be nice.

“And tails it is! I get to break,” Trevor said.

Hopefully your neck, Bodie thought.

Cue poised, face screwed up in concentration, ready to shoot, and then someone poked their head round the door, announced, “Freda!”, at which mysterious summons most of the room—and none of them called Freda—departed, leaving Bodie, Doyle, Doyle's blonde, her two friends and a matched set of old ladies dozing in the corner.

“Oh, what a shame, Higgins, you shan't go to the ball.”

Bodie curtseyed sweetly and then made a very rude gesture indeed with his cue.

“I was looking forward to that,” he said, pouting very nicely.

“I suppose you think that's a subtle hint?”

“No, I thought that was a fairly direct question. Oh, go on, Ray, play with me.” And there was enough innuendo in that to sink the Bismarck.

Doyle gave him an old-fashioned look, but came over to take Trevor's abandoned cue, whispering as he passed Bodie, “D'you think we should be finding out what this Freda is? Could be the drugs.”

“Pull the other one, Doyle, you just don't want me to score one over you.”

And there was a smirk to go with that one as well.

Doyle, ever the gentleman—only when it meant he could score points, of course—ignored that with a lofty and superior snort. He went back round to his side of the table, flirting outrageously with the blonde, but purely for Bodie's benefit. It was the perverse

streak in him: he enjoyed seeing Bodie cross-eyed with lust.

“My turn to break the balls?” he queried with an air of tangible innocence.

It wasn't his innocence that Bodie wanted to touch. “You've been doing that for weeks, why stop now?”

“Why indeed?” Doyle grinned at him, street arab in fancy clothes and prick-tease *extraordinaire*. One swift draw back of his arm, and crack, the balls careened all over the table in a riot of clacking colour. “Bodie, I've just thought of something. Am I supposed to pocket the balls at this stage?”

“Absolutely, Ray,” Bodie breathed, fingering his own balls that he wouldn't half mind Doyle pocketing for him: he had a slit cut in the pocket of these trousers precisely for such an activity. Useful, really, if you had a willing friend. He looked, not entirely surprisingly, at Doyle.

“You're supposed to pocket as many of your balls as you can—although most blokes don't get more than two at a time—then you work your stick through them in numerical order, from smallest all the way up to biggest.”

“Is that a fact?” Doyle said, again with the wide-eyed innocence that wouldn't have fooled a blind gnat. “And only two at a time? Oh, I *am* surprised. Okay, so I've pocketed two—number two, Bodie, so get that look off your face. Right, number three up next. In the bottom pocket, I think.”

“Awkward position, that,” Bodie murmured. “Might have to screw under it,” he added, wickedly, “to get it in the hole.”

Doyle ignored him, although he missed the ball by a mile.

“Oh, what a shame, you're off your stroke, Ray. If you want, I could give you some lessons later?”

“And as I've already said,” Doyle retorted with all the saccharine he could muster, “the answer is no.”

“I shall leave you to struggle to find your stroke yourself then, shall I?”

“You just do that, Bodie,” and he stepped aside as Bodie came round to take the shot himself.

“I think I'll pocket your ball—” a pause for a terribly sweet smile, “with a touch of English

bringing the cue ball round to kiss the number three ball and drop it down.”

Doyle waited until precisely the right moment. “I'm surprised your balls haven't dropped yet.”

That was when Bodie left the first large chalk mark on the green felt.

He turned round, missing Doyle only because that young man did a quick two-step out of the way. Then it was Bodie's turn to wait until precisely the right moment, when Doyle was bent over the table, arse in the air, cue on the table. “At least I've got you perfectly positioned now.”

Large chalk mark number two. And by sheer fluke, the number four ball dropped out of sight.

Bodie, for the life of him, couldn't remember what happened when the balls were pocketed out of order. He said, hurriedly to hide his ignorance, “You lose a point for that. And it's my turn now.”

Playgirl would have been delighted by the way he managed to turn so simple a manoeuvre into so ogle-some a spectacle. Doyle was, of course, completely unmoved. Completely, that is, bar a few recalcitrant inches that knew what they wanted even if they were attached to a complete wally.

“Oh, look,” Bodie said, pointing at the lie of the table, “the balls are open. I might even be able to run them.”

“Which means that I'd get to rack them, doesn't it, Bodie?”

Bodie took the hint, slowly working his way round the table, sinking the number three, the number five and getting a bead on the number six. He kept up a running commentary the entire time. “Learned this game from some Yanks I was barracksed with. One of them claimed his dad was the 1975 winner of the Brunswick championship—the opening year, that was, the nine ball championship.” That last one was too good to resist. “I tried to get in, but they wouldn't let me play. I only had two balls.”

“You won't have any if you don't shut up, Bodie.”

“Then I'd match you, wouldn't I?”

That was large chalk mark number three, as Bodie heard what he'd just said to Doyle.





