"WE'LL TAKE

the coach to Rome," Doyle had said, and after half a litre of red wine it had sounded like a brilliant idea, a storming idea, quite possibly the best idea Ray Doyle had ever had in a lifetime of good ideas: sun, splendour, Ray Doyle, all in one cheap and cheerful package.

Bodie couldn't remember actually giving the journey itself any consideration at all: taking a bus to Rome. Of course he had realised that, as journeys go, it would hardly be on a par with, say, the tube to Shepherd's Bush. But then again, neither would it be on the scale of a donkey trek through the Hindu Kush. In his mind's eye he had seen a road: and, at the end of it, Rome.

After the first twenty-two hours on the coach, Bodie remembered the tube: such a neat idea, and only seconds between stops.

Meanwhile the road went on: and Rome was not yet in sight. The scenery rose, flattened, rose again. Incomprehensible road signs sprang up out of nowhere, then vanished too quickly for Bodie to get a grip on the sense of them. And another inch of the map crawled by.

Only ten more inches to go till the bottom of page 31. And then they could progress to page 36! Bodie was looking forward to page 36. They had been on page 31 a long, long time. The man from CI5 was hot, tired, bored, sweaty, uncomfortable, and he already hated all the other passengers, who ranged from about 82 right down to the youngsters of 65. Oh, not forgetting—the child. The one three seats behind. The one whose voice was pitched so exactly at the frequency of a chainsaw.

And then there was Ray Doyle, in the window seat (of course) though from Bodie's observations he had not yet looked out once. Instead his eyes behind the Armani shades were closed in bliss, his head nodding 93

and his foot tapping as he absorbed the bassy emanations from the Walkman clamped to his ears. Ray too was scruffy, sweaty, and unkempt—but that style suited Ray Doyle, from the stubble on his chin to the well-worn look of his jeans and the light drifting odour of his sweat: While Bodie, in creased cords, mouth like a vulture's crotch, felt rank and bristly. He had in fact many complaints, and from time to time he would list them all in his head, a little entertainment for himself. For example: they had left home at seven this morning—correction, yesterday morning—and it was now five AM the next morning. They had been travelling 22 hours: they would not arrive at their destination until seven tonight. He wanted a shower. He needed a beer. He had never needed a beer more. There was of course no beer, but instead the grumpy driver's assistant would arrive by each seat every five hours offering cups of boiling water, brownish in hue, which he called coffee: he would then take fifty pence from you and slop the drink into your lap. Bodie felt the man could learn a lot from air hostesses—

"Let's fly next time, Doyle," Bodie said aloud.
"Me wings get too tired," came the mumbled reply.

Presumably conditions were similar in the many other coaches which were all part of this ongoing convoy bound for Rome. Their own coach was number 99, which seemed somehow to suggest it was a bit of a failure of a coach, undistinguished, not even smart enough for triple figures. Its occupants were all packed as close together as 64 sardines in a sardine tin. Bags and plastic carriers spilled everywhere, in every free centimetre of space. Everyone else seemed to eat more or less constantly, crunching and munching their way through vast mounds of provisions. When they weren't eating they were asleep, dozing, mouths agape, heads lolling to one side, snoring, or in their brief moments of consciousness having rivetting conversations about the weather and kids' TV programmes from the 1960s.

Bodie looked down at the map again. 9" inches till page 36. It's Hell, Bodie thought with conviction, that must be it: he'd died and gone to Hell. The coach would never arrive. It would just travel on, and on, into Eternity.

Inches and hours and continents later, when the door of the coach finally opened to disgorge its bleary-eyed, unshaven, unwashed passengers it was 8 PM Italian time.

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Ray Doyle unfolded himself like a flower beneath the sun, breathed in the fresh Italian air, and grinned as he bounced on the balls of his feet. "This is a bit of all right, isn't it?"

"Yeah," croaked Bodie, stumbling along behind him on woolly legs, one huge grip bag in each hand. Doyle lightly tossed his Walkman from hand to hand and looked around. "No, look, Bodie. It's brilliant."

From somewhere Bodie found the energy to lift his hanging head.

All around them, reaching high to each side, were snowtipped mountains, little redtiled houses perching on the slopes as far up as the eye could see, nearly up to the clouds. They were standing in a little piazza, the sun was shining, and the scent of fresh coffee was in the air. Bodie's nose lifted. Doyle was watching him, grinning.

"Glad you came?" and behind them the coach, unloaded, melted away as if it had never been.

Neither of them spoke a word of Italian. In the clean, sparse bedroom allotted to them they were surprised to find not two beds, but one.

Admittedly it was a huge bed, five feet or more across. Bodie was already on it, stretching out, really luxuriating for the first time in 36 long, cramped hours. They had their own little bathroom and a small wroughtiron balcony with views to the mountains and the little piazza below. But Doyle was not happy.

"Does it really matter, Doyle?" Bodie yawned, a hand over his eyes.

"Yes, it does. If you think I'm sleeping in there with you—! You need all that space, my son."

So, after they had showered—no shower curtain, indeed, no shower tray, the water flooded the bathroom floor and drained slowly into a hole in the corner—the two agents went down to the lobby to explain the problem to the grimfaced Italian proprietor.

"One bed," Bodie shouted. He pointed at Doyle, then turned the finger towards his own chest. "Two of us."

Like an opera star the proprietor made a flamboyant gesture in the air, and all but spat on the floor. "Maricones!"

"He doesn't get it," Doyle said, amused now, from where he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. "In fact, I think he thinks you're saying we're the sort of fellas who want one bed."

Bodie turned violent at that. He grabbed the proprietor's jacket, puce in the face. "Look, mate. We've got one bed. One—fucking—bed. We need two—fucking—beds." He accompanied this with a double-fingered depiction of the numbers involved. The proprietor appeared to misinterpret this.

Doyle would have separated them earlier, but laughter prevented him. They ended up back in the room some minutes later.

"Looks like one bed then, mate." Bodie still wasn't over it. He slouched about, brooding. "If that greasy eyetie's not careful, I'll bloody well remind him about Italy's performance in the last bloody world war."

Doyle tilted his head. "It's Germans you mustn't mention the war to, innit?"

"This isn't Fawlty Towers, Doyle. Come to think of it though—"

"Don't think we'd better eat here, mind, d'you?"

Sitting, not even chilled, at a pavement cafe while the stars came out, a pint of good beer in front of him, replete with pasta and roast veal and potatoes, Bodie felt—bloody wonderful.

"This is good, innit, Doyle?"

"Makes a change, yeah," Doyle agreed, leaning back in his chair, finishing the last of his coffee, picking up his glass of red wine.

Bodie felt mellow and relaxed; almost too relaxed. Muzzyheaded with the beer and fatigue. "About time we got back, innit?" he yawned.

Doyle looked disappointed. "Can't stand the pace, eh?" "All right for those who slept nearly all the way,"

Bodie pointed out waspishly, but Doyle merely smiled enigmatically. "Where we off to tomorrow, then?"

Doyle extricated from his wallet a yellow square of itinerary, unfolding it and scanning. "Pompeii in the morning. Some monastery in the afternoon."

"Mm," grunted Bodie, who had vaguely interpreted 'Italy' as a beach, and comely young women in bikinis.

Afterwards they walked in the town for a while, through the territory of flowery squares and pavement cafes until they came to a more commercial area, hotels everywhere. Stopping at a tiny, very foreign 'supermarket' they bought some bottled water and a litre of whisky for nightcaps. Bodie also stocked up on bread and cheese and some vacuum-packed sausage—somehow he had a premonition about breakfast. All this came to 18,000 lire. Doyle nearly threw an apoplectic fit.

"About £6," Bodie said, amused at him. Doyle calmed down and stopped feverishly checking his wallet. "And you're paying for the next meal, matey, because I paid for tonight's—in case you'd forgotten." He felt—bone-weary. No-one would believe that sitting down in a coach all day could wring you out so limp.

They were walking back now, towards their own little pensione. "Gonna hit the town tonight, then?" Doyle was asking, swinging along at Bodie's side. "Find some signorinas?"

They were entering the doors now, Doyle plucking their room key off the hook at Reception, dodging the lift

shaft where five morose old people queued, leaping up the stairs with Bodie behind him. "Not me, mate," Bodie answered secretly into his ear as he often did. "I couldn't get up a ladder tonight, let alone anything else."

Doyle sighed. "Wish I could say the same. However—" the key went into the lock, turned— "I can manage by myself for one night."

Bodie was amused by him. "Sex with someone you really love, Doyle?"

They were passing in through the door now, into their own clean, white little room. "You're not kidding," Doyle observed seriously.

The bed beckoned like a vision of paradise. Bodie threw himself across it and yawned hugely. "Well. You could always have me. If you don't mind the fact that I'm a fella."

"Yeah?"

"Just don't wake me up till you've finished, okay." His mind clouded thickly with sleep: the bizarre wanderings of dreamtime began.

"D'you mean it?" Doyle asked casually.

Bodie's eyes sprang wide open. "Mean what?"

"Doesn't matter. You sounded for a minute like you meant it, that's all."

"Come off it, Doyle."

"Okay, okay, don't make a big thing out of it."

Sleep had flown away. Bodie stared across the room at Doyle's back. "And what if I had? Don't tell me you were going to say 'right, here I come then', were you?"

"Well, you'll never know now, will you?" Doyle was in the bathroom by now, stripping off his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor while he cleaned his teeth, then sweeping them up, grimacing as he found them damp. Too tired to care, he threw them over the chair by the desk and then lay down next to Bodie naked, on top of the covers.

Bodie's turn to get up now to strip. "Remember Captain Pugwash," he remarked, his mind replaying a conversation he had overheard on the coach.

"What?"

"Ever watch that when you were a kid?"

Doyle la-la-ed the theme music slowly and tiredly in answer. Bodie had to cut in after a minute—

"—was very risqué, y'know. Dunno how they got away with it, but it was the '60s—they were so bloody innocent in those days, they never noticed."

"Noticed what?" Doyle was kicking down the covers by now, scrambling in and drawing up the sheet over his shoulder as he turned onto one side to face the middle of the bed. Bodie grinned at him as he got in on the other side.

"You obviously don't remember old Puggers shouting: 'Roger the cabin boy!'"

Doyle wasn't convinced. "Just your dirty mind, that, mate."

"Yeah? Well, what about the first mate—remember him? Master Bates."

A crease appeared in Doyle's cheek, a flash of white teeth. "Really?"

"Not forgetting," Bodie played his trump card with a flourish, "good old Seaman Staines—!"

Doyle choked on a gurgle of laughter. "You're kidding me."

"—I'm not."

"Seaman Staines!" Doyle chuckled, rolling onto his back.

"Logical, innit? Master Bates, Seaman Staines," Bodie grinned with him, highly delighted, but Doyle's laughter subsided into a sudden groan.

"Well, thanks, Bodie."

"Wha'for?"

"There I was, tryin' to keep me thoughts on the straight an' narrow. I'll have to do it now, never get to sleep otherwise."

Doyle was flinging back the covers, a lean and compact figure darkly shadowed at chest and groin. He stalked into the bathroom, but he didn't shut the door, and tossed himself off standing there, ten or twelve fast strokes, used a piece of toilet paper, chucked it down the loo, washed his hands, came back and got into bed where he settled himself down, turning this way and that until he got comfortable, said 'night' and closed his eyes.

Bodie's heart was still thudding with shock. Well, that just about took the prize for cool, didn't it?

Cool—or kinky.

He was forever getting little hints about Ray Doyle's offbeat sexuality, just little things, the way Doyle never missed the chance to take a look at Bodie's cock, for example: nothing furtive at all, just that in the men's room Doyle would stand nearby, back against the wall, might even keep talking, and his eyes would move down and never leave until Bodie tucked himself away and zipped himself up.

Bodie had lost count of the times Doyle had done that.

Well, everyone had their own little quirks. Bodie himself had a bit of a thing about women in football shorts. Not an obsession, exactly, nothing as strong as that. Just he found it a fierce turn-on, that was all.

But to toss yourself off, five feet away from another

man then walk back into the room as cool as you like... Weird? Or not?

Doyle might have his kinks, okay. But it didn't stop one of Bodie's girlfriends, who had gone out with Doyle some months before, from describing him as the sexiest man she had ever made it with. Given Bodie something to live up to, anyway. Never knew whether he'd succeeded or not, but he'd risen to the challenge. Yeah, Doyle had it all right. Knew how to turn a woman on.

Bodie too, right at this moment. He wanted nothing so much as an action replay as he lay there in the neardark, eyes closed, feigning sleep while his heart pounded with excitement and his body ached for him to touch it. It had happened too quickly, it was already fading in his mind, the little movements of Doyle's elbow as his hand blurred on his cock, the tiny sounds he had made, the way, practical, he had held the tissue to the end of his cock as he came, wiped off the spunk, and dumped it down the pan.

Wouldn't he, if he'd been lying down in the bed and alone, have played with it for a while? Bodie would have expected him to dabble with it, admire the silken slippery texture of it, maybe even the milky taste—

But perhaps that was kinky. Maybe Ray Doyle would think that more perverted than what he had just done.

Bodie fell asleep, into restless dreams.

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Breakfast time at the Pensione Alberto. Bacon, eggs and a fried slice he had not been expecting. But the little basket of stony bread with two stamp-sized butter pats and a thimbleful of yellow jam—

Doyle eyed it without appetite. "No thanks. Think I'll wait for the cereal."

"Doyle," Bodie said patiently, "there isn't going to be any cereal."

"Sausages?" Doyle hazarded.

"Coffee," Bodie said, and held out his cup meaningfully as a haughty dark-eyed woman passed by with two steaming jugs. She had done several circuits of the tables, he reckoned, without ever actually pausing to fill anyone's cup. It was a little game, probably: she would try to evade his eye for as long as possible, but when it persisted she would have to capitulate and fill his cup without a grudge. And yes: she did. First round to Bodie, then. But one battle won didn't mean the end of the war: there was still the matter of the refill.

"Where'd you say we were going today?"

"Pompeii. And we're leaving in—" Bodie checked his watch— "five minutes."

No refill.

Doyle swung himself into the seat by the window. Bodie grimaced as he folded himself in next to him. The coach was filling rapidly with their fellow passengers, all bright and bouncy as veterans can be on holiday after a good night's sleep. Some of them were sporting tracksuits, with baseball caps on their bald heads: a nod to the holiday feel. Doyle, however, was wearing faded Levis, a sage green T-shirt, shades, and a white jacket which he had folded and put in the overhead rack. Bodie had gone for a white shirt. The climate was difficult at this time of year: here in this spa town high in the mountains there was snow on the ground in places, yet the April sun was warm enough for shirtsleeves. In Coach 99, however, you would not feel underdressed in bathing trunks and flippers.

The coach engine sprang into life. Bodie settled back into his seat. His body knew it by now. He opened up the map. Pompeii was a little tiny dot on the map the other side of Naples. Which was—six inches away. On—god—page 37.

Despite intentions it wasn't long before Bodie found himself engaging in a little social intercourse with some other passengers: the tightlipped British rule of the first day, that you might address only your seat partner, and then in muted tones, was gradually giving way to some tentative feelers of communication across the aisles. Clearly some baptism of fire had been undergone: 36 hours in the hot hell of Coach 99 had felled them, but only momentarily: they were British, they had arisen, they had come down for breakfast ready to fight another day. They did not like it when Coach 98 or Coach 100 arrived before them and got a better parking spot. They were, by now, a team.

The lady in front of Bodie's seat was very large: she took up one and a half seats. Her husband, however, only took up half a seat: perhaps she had selected him as her lifetime partner on that basis. A friendly couple, they took a fancy to Bodie and seemed to decide that he needed feeding. He had already noticed that they travelled everywhere with not one but two large square cool-boxes, from which was produced an astonishing succession of rolls, cakes, fruit, sweets, etcetera. After Bodie had politely refused several offers, the moment came when it would have been rude to refuse again; in any case, after this morning's stone bread regime he was glad to accept (an egg and lettuce roll) and found

himself included thereafter in any round of snack-time, roughly every hour and a half. He discovered that they had two grown-up daughters, five grandchildren, that Fred was retired and Edna worked as a dinner lady in the local primary school.

Meanwhile Doyle listened to his Walkman, stared out of the window beneath his shades, and refused all offerings except a Polo.

"He doesn't eat much, does he?" Edna commented.

"Keep Fit fanatic," Bodie said; Doyle's flat belly and narrow thighs were on a tighter scale altogether than his own bulkier musculature. It was still hot in the coach, but Doyle looked the epitome of cool in his shades. Except that beneath each armpit was a dark green patch of sweat.

By midmorning they had arrived at Pompeii, and left the coach in a carpark called 'Pliny', which name they were advised to remember, since there were apparently 6000 coaches expected in Pompeii today. Bodie, who had vaguely expected a small archaeological site atop a hill and themselves the only visitors, found this evidence of mechanical rollover tourism depressing, and also the fact that on first appearance Pompeii, a name which conjured up so many notions of antiquity, looked so far exactly like every other Italian town they had passed through.

They crossed the wide road through two streams of fast and evil Italian traffic, turned through a park, and began to climb a hill. And suddenly it was there. Appearing out of the hillside was ancient Roman Italy, unmistakable, just like the reruns of *Quo Vadis* had conditioned him to expect. Magical. Bodie scarcely noticed the thronging crowds at the ticket barriers, so entranced was he by the climb to the walls and the city gates.

The place was a marvel: an ancient city sheared off at the shoulder. Every column, every wall, all truncated. And yet it was all miraculously preserved, the market square, the temples, the cobbled cart-tracks with stepping stones so that long-dead citizens could keep their feet dry in the rain. Shops with seats for patrons, stone vats for wine still there beneath the ground.

And there at the end of every street loomed a dark mountain lopped off at the top. Vesuvius. Sleeping, as it must have slept while this city prospered. The citizens must have seen it every day of their lives, from the temples, the houses, the market place, framed by temple columns, imprinted as a backdrop against the azure sky. A landmark, a local curiosity, but nothing more. Until the night it awoke in monstrous mood, spat fire and lava to dowse the life of the doomed little city and its people and buried them. To lie undisturbed for two thousand

years, now disinterred for modern man to get his eerie kicks.

Those people had been real once, and here was the proof. There was a rich man's villa, with a pool, a garden, and frescos on the walls. One of the paintings was very rude. At Bodie's side Doyle looked at Priapus weighing his overlarge male organ on a pair of scales and laughed crudely with him.

"Looks like yours," Doyle snorted, hitting him on the arm, and Bodie noticed one or two people in their party glance their way. Next stop was a little house with a low doorway: this was, their guide explained, one of the many brothels in the town. And indeed, remarkably preserved and explicit pictures on the wall depicted the many and varied services Pompeiian man might like to avail himself of on the way home to the wife. And all for the price of a cup of wine.

"Isn't it open today?" Doyle mourned into Bodie's ear as they jostled for position in the crowd for a better look. Again several people heard him and smiled; Bodie thought that at least it might wipe out the effect of Doyle's earlier remark which seemed destined to mark them out as a pair of nancys.

He sighed. "Can't do without it for one bloody week, can you?" Abruptly he remembered last night, and his eyes flew open wide.

"We'll see, won't we?" was Doyle's reply, and the dark glasses which shadowed his eyes made him enigmatic as the sphinx.

The tour was topped off by a visit to the museum. Here, plaster poured into the holes in the lava where bodies had long ago rotted away meant that one could view the death agonies of many citizens in nastily graphic detail. Bodie turned away from the cast of a dog, teeth bared in rictus, legs frozen as they paddled in panic while the boiling lava melted its skin—

"Bit creepy, this, innit?"

"Don't let it put you off your lunch."

"Nothing puts me off my lunch, Doyle." And they left the haunting, timeless drama of the ruined city behind and passed out through the City Gates, there to run the gauntlet of the countless souvenir stalls manned by small dark hyperactive Italians grabbing at them, pestering them to look, to hold, to buy. The driver of Coach 99 informed his passengers that there would be a three-course meal available at a nearby hotel for a very reasonable price. Bodie was tempted by the thought of it, tablecloths, waitresses, a hearty main course between two tasty fripperies, but Doyle didn't fancy it so instead they bought warm pizzas and a beer at a roadside stall and sat on a wall to watch the world go by.

A happy interlude: the pizza was filling and tasty, the beer cold and moreish. So moreish, in fact, that they had another bottle. After all, they were on holiday, the sun was warm, the air fresh, and they had had a rare glimpse into precious antiquity this morning. It was all a long, long way from the hot plastic aroma of CI5, the tensions there: the 'keep your wits about you or you die' frame they lived in day by day. This was what normal people did: sat in the sun, drank a beer.

"We could come back in October," Doyle said, uncanny, right there with him, sunglasses dangling idly from one hand.

"Yeah," Bodie drawled, uncomplicatedly happy, and on a swift alcohol high he slung his arm around Doyle's shoulders. It was only after a moment he realised that Doyle's green eyes were dwelling curiously on him as if he were mad.

He withdrew his arm so quickly it seemed to enhance the awkwardness of the moment; did Doyle think that was some kind of a pass at him or something?

"Next time we'll bring some birds along," Doyle said, reflectively, which only seemed to confirm it.

He ought to feel sorry for Doyle really. Bodie had met people like him before, far too many of them, never content with what they had in the here and now, a pint of beer and a full belly and the sun on your back and the company you had, instead of the company you wished for.

He didn't reply. Doyle nudged him after a moment. "Agreed, eh? Next time we bring Sylvie and whatsername along."

Bodie got down from the wall and began to dust himself off. "Shall we go? About time we meet up with the coach, I reckon."

"Don't you fancy it, then?" Doyle asked him as they trekked down the hot dusty street towards the coach park.

"Fancy what? There. Pliny."

"Coming back in October."

"Ah, come off it, Doyle. Can't look that far ahead. Carpe diem, and all that."

"It was you who said we ought to come back."

"Yeah, pipe dream." Try as he might, standing in a hot carpark in a long queue for a stinking urinal, he couldn't recapture the euphoria that had made him suggest it in the first place.

"Bit bitter and twisted all of a sudden?" Doyle was jogging gently on the spot, the beer obviously on its way through.

"Look, Doyle, you can tell yourself anything you like. Don't need my say-so, do you? Let's see, bringing Sylvie, aren't you? Ideal. Perfect. Don't forget to send me a postcard."

Getting the vibes, Doyle withdrew from the conversation. They reboarded Coach 99, sitting patiently beside Coach 96 today, and probably feeling superior.

There had been a bit of a reshuffle since the journey began 2000 miles ago. Some people would clearly be dissatisfied wherever they were seated, but some wheeling and dealing and squabbling and swapping had resulted in a new pair of companions across the aisle from Bodie. His eye slid across to them as the coach pulled out of the carpark: youngish, good-looking. Fred and Edna in front were opening up the coolbox and offering biscuits all round. Bodie made a particular epicurean feast of his Bourbon cream, bulging his eyes and crunching loudly in the hope of annoying Doyle, who was under his Walkman again and leafing through a guidebook he had bought at Pompeii, clearly not open to conversation.

Suki and Gianni across the aisle were better value: Suki a sharp little woman with Oriental blood, Gianni a meek and disconsolate type often in trouble, large frame drooping as Suki berated him for some misdemeanour. It wasn't long before Bodie learned that they were Londoners, had yuppie-style jobs with names like 'marketing research developer' and 'systems support analyst', and were an entertaining pair, Gianni Italian by birth and Suki Indian, but both spoke very cultured English with a flat Northern accent.

"What do you do?" Suki asked him, sharp brown eyes peering over her spectacles.

"Civil servant." Bodie snapped out his standard reply, but Suki burst into laughter.

"I thought you were going to say something exciting."
"Why?"

"You look exciting."

"Thanks. Any kids?" Usually a good diversion when speaking to women.

"No-childfree, actually."

"Dinkies," Doyle said profoundly, unexpectedly joining in the conversation.

"What?" Suki probed, leaning forward.

"They're dinkies," Doyle nodded across the aisle. "Dual Income—No Kids—right?"

It turned out that Gianni and Suki had never heard of this particular coding of pairs; it amused not only them but several people in the surrounding seats, and started off quite a lively group discussion—

"What about you and him?" Suki nodded at them—
"Two blokes, no kids—I suppose you're Twinkies?"
Her voice was unusually clear and penetrating, and it

caused a ripple of mirth to spread outwards beyond the immediate circle. Bodie shifted in his seat.

"What would that stand for, then?" Gianni was pondering.

Suki's reply was a highly audible mutter which had herself and Gianni and several others around convulsed:

"Two winkles!"

Bodie took his cue from Doyle his partner, who grinned widely and said nothing, leaning back in his seat at ease, settling the headphones back over his ears.

The coach left the main road soon after and began a winding trail up the side of a mountain. From the window next to Doyle there would be only a high stone wall visible, and then the coach would turn through a hairpin bend, and suddenly instead of the wall there would be a dizzying drop, the ground falling away, a tiny toy-town far, far beneath them with miniature cars crawling along like ants on a log. It was quite startling even for someone used to swooping low and high in a bareboned army chopper open to the air.

"Where are we going?"

"Monastery—remember?"

Doyle yawned and leaned back, interest fading. But it was stunning. When the coach had parked beside its stablemate Coach 98 the party walked up and up a paved road, and came to the very top of the mountain where there was, most unexpectedly, a white palatial edifice sparkling in the sun. Huge, ornate gates opened to let them pass through, and there they were standing in a courtyard of neat lawns, a huge marble statue at the centre. Fronting the four sides of the courtyard were windows: cells? They passed on from here between marble columns into an inner courtyard.

Breathtaking. To the left, framed by white marble pillars, the Italian countryside, far, far below. To the right, a huge, wide flight of snow-white steps, and at the top of these, more pillars. From the bottom, looking up, the steps seemed to go on forever, an endless flight of stairs reaching up to the blue skies of heaven. To the right and to the left they were flanked by huge, winged statues of saints and angels.

As Bodie began to ascend, Doyle at his side, it struck him fancifully that the place was exactly some Renaissance artist's vision of heaven; the golden gates, the fluted marble columns, the endless, dazzlingly white steps reaching to the skies, the stone angels. Then of course there was Ray Doyle by his side, in his white jacket, severe in his Armani shades: certain aspects of an angel there.

He apprised Doyle of this notion of Heaven as they mounted swiftly and easily to the very top of the steps, leaving less fit aspirants to the summit well behind. "Could we 'ave died without noticing, Doyle?"
At the top was another courtyard and more steps.
"Can't be Heaven, even if we 'ave," Doyle said
grimly. "There'd be at least a coffee machine."

"God," Bodie groaned with feeling, "Doesn't Architecture say anything to you, Doyle?"

"Yeah," Doyle drawled. "It says—build a coffee shop. About there."

No coffee shop, alas, but instead a chapel. Here the annoying child from three seats behind raised a smile when its perpetually cross mother, clearly desperate to keep it quiet in this most hallowed place, hissed at it:

"Be quiet!"

"Why?" it questioned, predictably, as it did one hundred times a day.

Mother said slowly and impressively— "This is God's House."

Pause. The child whispered at fifty decibels "Is he in?"

Even Doyle sniggered. But God, were he indeed in, would surely care little about the antics of mere Humans in the face of this, perhaps one of the more minor of his Houses, but glorious for all that. "Wait till you see the Sistine Chapel," whispered Fred, gliding past, but this one here was good enough for the obviously lower cultural expectations of your average CI5 agent; Doyle was even silenced on the subject of coffee shops (lack of) as they prowled slowly around the magnificent interior of the chapel. Huge Renaissance-style Old Masters in rich oil colours stretched along every wall, and every candlestick, every scroll, gleamed dully with the opulence of gold. Every seat was furnished with the plushest, deepest crimson velvet. Far from striking one as an ideal setting for the purity of prayer, it was like wandering around the insides of a rich lady's trinket box. And here it was, right out in the middle of nowhere, in acres of barren olive-growing land. Bodie doubted that many people even knew of its existence.

"This say anything to you about man's relationship with God, Doyle?"

Doyle smiled, said deeply, "No, but it says quite a lot about this order's relationship with church funds." He stopped and craned his neck to stare upwards at the mightiest organ he had ever seen; it stretched from floor to the huge domed ceiling, and each of its massive pipes was richly golden in hue. "Imagine that belting out 'Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus' come Sunday morning."

"Wanna watch out," Bodie warned him. "Some people hear voices, y'know, calling them to be Saved."

Doyle cocked his head. "'Ang on—is that what I heard?" "Shall I," Bodie asked primly, "propose you as a

novice?" Having completed the circuit by now they were heading out through the huge carved wooden doors and briskly taking the steps down, Doyle's head swivelling about from side to side as if checking for assassins. Or—"Don't tell me," Bodie said into Doyle's ear, "Now you're looking for the souvenir shop?"

But ironically enough, a souvenir shop there was, albeit souvenirs of the oddest kind: lumpy beeswax candles— "Hand-hewn by the monks," Bodie opined—rosaries by the dozen, and little plastic models of the Virgin Mary.

They signed the visitors' book under the names Leyton and Bentley and left the splendour of religious glory behind, taking the trail downwards and finding something much more to their taste, an ice cream stand. They sat on a wall to eat, waiting for the rallying-call to rejoin Coach 99.

"Does have a certain appeal, though, doesn't it?"

"What does?" Bodie shoved the last of his cornetto down his throat, licked his fingers and looked sideways at Doyle as the other man dangled his shades from one idle hand.

"Life of a monk," Doyle replied, meditative, and lifted his eyes.

"You a monk?" scoffed Bodie, to escape the strange green blaze. "Not got the nature for it, Doyle."

"How d'you mean?" Doyle asked him, and yawned: the heat rising off the gold stone walls was making him sleepy, hazy.

Bodie gazed in disbelief. "Come off it. You'd have to give up too many earthly pleasures, m'lad."

"Ah. But you get unearthly ones in exchange," Doyle remarked; and strangely enough, at that moment Bodie could imagine him as a monk, every day the will of steel battling to subdue his leanings to sin. And what a battle it would be: Doyle, with his tastes for wild sex, and mood-altering substances both legal and illegal, and the flair he had for seriously harming other people who got in his way: killing people, dealing out the retribution of death, was a part of Doyle's life, and not often a part he seemed particularly to regret, either.

Challenging material, to say the least.

But then those who had the greatest struggle and the thorniest path attained, it was said, the greatest glory. Purity: to extreme. Bodie could just see Doyle there alone in his cell: the whips, the bleeding palms, those eyes burning green fire from that strange saint's face.

Bodie tensed all over with shock as he realised that for some reason he was hard: cock straining at the fly of his cords. And all tied up with it was the sudden memory of last night: Doyle, masturbating for him, the sebastian ET IN ITALIA EGO...

tense sighs he had made, those thin strong fingers flexing on his own body as he came—

He came back to himself with a start. Doyle was leaping off the wall, brushing his hands down his jeans, grabbing his hand peremptorily: "Coach."

Hot. Stuffy. Claustrophobic.

"What did you think of that then?" Suki was leaning across to address Bodie: Gianni was clearly in trouble again, head drooping, large frame bent over in utter chagrin.

Bodie shifted in his seat. "Yeah, pretty impressive. Ray liked it so much he's thinkin' of taking Holy Orders."

"He's not a monk already then?" and Doyle gave an earthy little chuckle, sleepy green eyes flashing over to her: acknowledging in that look that she was a very pretty woman, and alone with him she would be in serious trouble—

Bodie noted all this. No wonder Gianni took the aisle seat, fending off all-comers! And from the high radiation of the glance Suki was sending back to Doyle the attraction was mutual. Either that or Gianni was very out of favour today: bought the wrong Cornetto, probably.

"What does he do?" Suki asked of Bodie.

"Civil servant," Doyle answered for himself. "Just like 'im. On the same pepsin scheme." And the dark glasses were tipped back on his nose, robbing his face of any expression.

"I can't make you two out at all," she said, shaking her head, settling back into her seat with her travel pillow behind her head. Going to sleep again—! Bodie marvelled at these people who could doze on and off all day between stops.

He felt restless. If he shut his eyes disturbing images came to mind. It was a relief to accept a mini swiss roll from Fred and Edna in front; it took his mind off sex, pain, and Ray Doyle, which for some reason seemed for the moment to have become entangled in it.

Beside him Doyle passed him the guidebook without speaking. Bodie finished off his swiss roll, accepted another, and settled back in his seat as the coach crawled down the side of the mountain. After a few moments of gazing out at what he could see past Ray Doyle's head of curls, his gaze dropped down to the book Doyle had placed so carefully on his lap.

It was open at a full-colour photograph of the oversized Pompeiian Priapus.

*** * * * ***

Most of the other Coach 99 inmates had apparently opted for the evening excursion of a Dinner-and-Dance

at a restaurant in a local village. Bodie and Doyle decided instead on a meal out near their hotel, which decision, Bodie fancied, rather disappointed some of the other passengers who were hoping, perhaps, to see the two of them embark on a tango or a quickstep and put an end to speculation.

He said as much to Doyle over two wonderfully chilled pints of beer at an open-air cafe in the little spa town's main square.

Doyle regarded him with those heavy-lidded eyes. "You reckon?"

"Yeah," Bodie said grimly. "'Twinkies', and all that." His partner was looking so pronouncedly butch at that moment, short hair, leather jacket, sulky macho pout etc., that Doyle had to laugh. "Don't worry, Bodie, you 'aven't got the looks for it."

Bodie said gloomily, "Yeah, but what about you? If you will keep wearin' that bracelet. No wonder people talk."

Doyle's glance flicked down to the copper circle around his wrist and then up again to engage Bodie's eyes for a curious little moment: Bodie's heart missed its beat and he kept his gaze, steady as Doyle's own while his thoughts raced ahead of him:.

Come on, Doyle. Flirt with me. I want you to.

But at that moment their meals arrived, borne aloft by a cheerful Italian waiter: omelettes, chips and salad. Putting it all away took quite some time, not to mention washing it down with another couple of beers, and normality reigned once more.

"Wanna look for a bar, disco or something?" Bodie offered; because that was the last chance. A woman: that was what he needed, and so did Doyle. Something dangerous was hovering round them right now, he knew it, he was just in the mood for it. And they should be trying to fight it off, they really should. But it was not relief but a stab of excitement he felt when Doyle shook his head, leaning back and draining the last mouthful of beer: "Knackered. Couldn't be bothered to put me best bird-pullin' act on."

"I thought you just had to stand there, and they all got knocked over in the rush."

Doyle shook his head. "That's your luck, my son. Some of us 'ave to work a bit harder at it."

When they had first met, Bodie had categorised Doyle as no threat in the looks department. His perceptions had since undergone a dizzying tilt. Doyle might not be good-looking in the conventional sense, but he was put together in an interesting way. A sexy ease of movement, a harmony of line: viewed in a soft light everything slipped into place. He never had any trouble

getting birds, despite what he said. Mind you, Bodie had nothing to grumble about on his own account: women found him attractive, full stop. Dark hair, eyes, powerful male strength Never one to be modest, Bodie knew it. But Doyle, Bodie considered, had something of his own. A remote kind of—it could take you unawares, stop your heart, the way he looked sometimes.

Bodie jumped as a pair of lean fingers snapped briskly underneath his nose. "You there?" Doyle said caustically.

"Just thinking."

"Something good, was it?"

"Why'd you say that?" Bodie said sourly. "You're right, mind you—I was thinking about my chances of getting you to pay the bill."

"All right," Doyle said amiably enough, and Bodie did a double take as Doyle raised a finger and an eyebrow to summon the waiter.

"Starting on that long hard path to salvation, Doyle?"

They were back at the hotel in five minutes. "Drink?" Bodie jerked an eye at the gloomy bartender, alone in the empty bar, polishing a glass very slowly.

"Nah, he'd only have to dirty another one. We've got something in the room, haven't we?"

Only one toothmug (plastic) and they took turns with it. The little room looked clean and cosy as the day outside grew darker. For a while they had the balcony doors open so that they could see the stars and the lights of the villages dotted about the mountains and let the smell and the spirit of Italy enter: but by ten PM the air blowing in was too chilly, so they shut it. At one side of the room was a desk and one chair which looked uncomfortable, so they shoved a bolster along the head of the bed and lounged on it side by side.

Doyle had a paperback Harold Robbins which he read with one arm propped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles. When it was his turn for the toothglass of whisky he balanced that precariously on his belly and risked a spillage every time he had to let go to turn the page. Bodie was reading the guidebook from Pompeii: he found a page with illustrations from the brothel wall and held it up for Doyle to see.

"What d'you think, eh?"

Doyle passed over the empty glass and took the book, which he brought close to his eyes—then took it abruptly away. "'Ang on. Just trying to get me going, aren't you?"

Bodie raised an eyebrow. "Would I?"

"Yeah, you like to watch me suffer."

"Shouldn't wear such tight jeans then, should you.

Go on, Doyle, at least you can tell yourself it's Art."

One of the scenes depicted fellatio, one a man taking a woman from behind. "Pretty forward for their age, weren't they?" Doyle commented.

"How d'you mean?"

Doyle took his time: clearly the whisky was taking its toll on the transfer of electrons. "What I mean is, considering the human race 'ad only been on the evolutionary clock face about half a second, seems funny they got into fellatio that early on."

Bodie was wincing. "It rhymes with 'ratio', Doyle."

"How d'you know?" Doyle challenged swiftly.
"Debriefing from Cowley, was it?" This he found amusing, convulsing with a fit of laughter. Bodie stayed dignified.

"Hasn't anyone ever put you right before?"

Doyle stopped laughing to observe: "Well, I've never had to ask for it."

No answer to that. Bodie tried to snatch back the book. Doyle put up a fight for it then surrendered, sweeping his paperback off the bed and onto the floor and closing his eyes. "Fellatio," he tried out, a couple of times

Bodie yawned suddenly. Long, hard day. Another tomorrow. Rome.

"What time shall I set the alarm for?" Doyle was reaching out for the little clock.

"Breakfast at seven," Bodie yawned again.

His partner said grimly, "We get breakfast tomorrow, do we?" He threw back the covers; the bed creaked.

The moment was upon him.

Bodie's hand shot out and caught Doyle's vanishing arm. Doyle turned, brow mildly creased in query.

"Don't go away, " Bodie said, low, strung-out, and Doyle stared at him as if he were unreal.

"Wha---?"

Bodie swallowed over the sudden dryness in his throat, but his smile was devilish enough as he tilted his head at Doyle:

"Shouldn't have started something if you didn't want to finish it, Ray."

"What are you on about?" Doyle said, but Bodie saw the very moment that sudden understanding struck in and Doyle's eyes narrowed on him, still as a cat and tensed: Bodie grinned again.

"Ah, don't be like that. Weren't so innocent last night, were you? Why else'd you do it, if not to give me a thrill? Well, I gotta hand it to you. Thrill's about right." He lifted a finger, touched Doyle's hand, trailing it down and around to his palm, making a caress of it; perhaps a sardonic one. "Must have felt pretty good for you, came

off in about ten seconds flat, didn't you? Got me wonderin' what it looks like with a better view, that's all."

Doyle took a deep breath, his chest expanding hugely, and he breathed out fast. "What exactly are you suggestin', Bodie?"

"You get yourself off. I watch."

"Bodie. That's wicked," Doyle said, with the glimmerings of a smile, almost provocative in the way he glanced at Bodie. The other man shrugged.

"Who cares?"

Doyle took another deep breath; his eyes were widepupilled with alcohol and alarm. But he made a quick decision: "Lock the door, then."

Bodie had done that automatically when they came in; nevertheless he got up to check it. "Put the big light off," Doyle said behind him.

"No." Bodie denied him that. He came back to the bed and threw himself down next to his partner, turning so that he was propped on his elbow. Doyle was already unzipping his Levis, pushing them roughly and impatiently down his thighs, shoving his T-shirt up under his armpits, and then dragging down the waistband of a green slip of cotton to grasp his cock in his right hand, his left hand sliding automatically into his groin to press against his balls. And Bodie's response was instantaneous, a leap of astonished desire whipping through him, his cock up-thrust and ironhard.

"All right then... Be quicker with a copy of *Playboy*," Doyle said, shutting his eyes.

"Use your imagination. And I'll just bet yours is something else." They were both a little drunk, which helped. Doyle's cock as he touched himself was already semi-hard; clearly the idea of doing this turned him on even if he wasn't going to admit it. He sighed as he arched his back, hand sweeping up the strong shaft, caressing the head of it with his fingers, coaxing the slippery slit. "If Cowley ever gets one whiff of this we're dead, you know that?" he said, without opening his eyes.

Bodie felt dizzy, almost sick with excitement. "Well, who's gonna tell him."

Doyle's eyes came wide open at that: his left hand came away from the snugness of his groin though his thumb still slipped over and over the tip of his cock as if he could not bear to stop, "I'd never put it past you to gloat about this with one of your mates."

"What mates?"

"'Guess what Ray did in Italy'—"

"Of course I bloody well won't."

"Well, you'd better not, that's all, or I'll kill you."

"Look Doyle, I swear it, it's just between you and me. It's no big deal, is it? Some blokes do this kind of thing all the time, ever been to a porn flick, have you?"

Doyle gave a grim smile, almost more like a snarl. "Not quite the same thing, is it?"

"Why isn't it?"

"Fifty blokes all jerking off together at the movies is one thing, you wanting to watch me do it is something else. Something, I dunno, a bit perverted about it, I'd say. So you'd better make bloody sure you keep it to yourself." Again that thumb slipping in a sweet, caressing pattern over the rosy, shining tip of his cock. Bodie had to swallow as he watched. "Now shut up," Doyle said, losing his breath a little, and the fingertips of his left hand went in to press his balls again, his right beginning to fly.

Bodie watched it all, to the very end. Doyle didn't go in for anything exotic, not this time anyway, didn't even touch his nipples as Bodie had always imagined he would, didn't spit into his hand for something wet to stroke himself with, didn't do any of the interesting things he might have done, and yet it was still the most powerfully sexual charge Bodie had ever had, watching Doyle with his jeans and pants almost casually down his thighs, the T-shirt pushed up above his nipples He watched with breath held the way Doyle listened to the inner voice of his body, touching himself delicately at first then working swiftly to the end when he tired of playing, the way his hips thrust off the bed and his hands stilled as his cock was shooting off, and then his fingers moving gently again, giving himself the very last gentle pleasure, right at the end of it all.

His stuff had flown everywhere: when it was all over he sat up, swearing, dragged his T-shirt over his head and mopped himself up with it.

Strong emotions were moving within Bodie; he wanted—

So many strange things.

When Doyle glanced over at him Bodie managed a shaky grin.

"Enjoy yourself, did you?" Doyle asked him almost sourly, still swabbing himself off, then chucking the soiled T-shirt into the far-off corner of the room. There were still little semen pearls in the dark hair on his lower belly, and one silvery trail of it along his ribcage which he had missed; and as Bodie watched he opened his hand, looked at his palm without expression, obviously about to go and wash it off.

Half-mad with wanting Bodie grabbed the hand and jerked it downwards and murmured into his ear, "Please, Ray. Please."

Doyle's whiplash rebuff was instant, every sinew in his wrist resisting. But Bodie, ruthless, overpowered him and pressed Doyle's slick hand to his cock and closed the fingers around the aching, throbbing length of it. His voice sounded harsh, sadistic almost: "Just do it, Ray." He squeezed his eyes shut: erotic visions beguiled him. "Do it for me."

"Oh, Bodie," Doyle murmured; angry? disturbed? but he stroked Bodie's cock, oh the sweet feelings that evoked, kneaded it hard, harder, and Bodie convulsed as he got there, painful lust melting suddenly into a wonderful release, holding Doyle's hand hard onto himself until the very last.

Even in the fading glow he clutched Doyle hard and would not let him go.

"Jesus, Bodie," Doyle whispered to him again, breath warm and close against his face.

"It's all right," Bodie murmured. "Ssh, it's okay." Sleepy now, he muttered a little protest as Doyle extricated himself from his grip, and then fell back into sleep.

Doyle put the light off: went to the bathroom and washed, used the toilet, then came back to bed. Stretching over Bodie, careful not to touch him, he switched out the bedside lamp and the room went dark.

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Bodie opened his eyes to the morning light coming in between the shutters, his brain engaging bit by bit, running the startup routine: who am I—? where am I—? Feeling okay—?

Everything checked out. But then higher brain function struck in and caused instant chaos.

Did I really—? Did he—?

Doyle was still peacefully asleep, breathing light and quick. Looking at him, at the hand curled around the bedclothes, Bodie experienced a detailed physical memory of Doyle touching him last night, making him come the way he had. His insides dissolved: they were not tender men, and yet it had been a peculiarly tender thing they had done.

He looked at Doyle's sleeping mouth, the shape of it, and knew what he was going to do. Careful to move gently he slipped an arm around Doyle and pulled himself closer, close enough to catch the warm, sleepy smell of his body and his breath. He kissed him on the mouth. At the same time his fingers brushed against Doyle's cheek.

"Wha' the hell—"

"Ssh," Bodie said. He closed his eyes in bliss and moved himself against Doyle's warm thigh.

"Bodie—"

"Just shut up, will you?" His hand rubbed down Doyle's chest to distract him and went lower, found his warm and willing cock waking up and ready to play. He gave it an encouraging squeeze and it seemed to like him, shy but sexy, nudging gently at his palm.

Bodie murmured again in pure pleasure, and then Doyle whipped himself and his sweet cock away. He glared.

"What the hell are you up to?"

"Oh." Bodie murmured in reproach, "He was enjoying that." He threw back the covers and nodded down at Doyle's cock, now drooping disconsolately over his belly.

"Well, 'e shouldn't have been, then," Doyle snapped. "For godsake, Bodie... are you trying to turn me queer or something?"

"Why not, you haven't got far to go, have you?" All this time Bodie was following him around the bed and Doyle was trying to evade him, not always successfully, slapping his hands away, eventually laughing:

"Bodie, stop it—! Stop it now!"

"Ah, come on, Ray," Bodie said, serious now, sitting back on his heels. "We did it last night."

"Yeah, but that didn't mean we 'ad to do it again this morning."

"Ah, just once more. Please."

"Get off me, Bodie! Look, for the fifth and final time, I'm not queer, okay? An' I'm beginning to wonder about you."

Bodie groaned in exasperation, hands resting empty on his thighs. "Lots of blokes do it, Ray, doesn't make them queer."

"Yeah?" Doyle challenged. "Mates of yours, are they?"

"Look, we're both in the mood for it, and there's no women around unless you fancy trying your luck with Edna. They even have a name for it in the States—"

"Yeah, I just bet they do."

"Fuck buddies," Bodie pronounced.

Doyle looked as if he were going to be sick. Seizing his chance Bodie was on him again, seizing him by the upper arms and pushing him down to the pillow and throwing everything he could into the look he gave him—

"Just a kiss then, Doyle. One kiss."

Utter stillness and silence. Doyle looked up at him, and Bodie smiled down, as tender and intoxicated as he had ever been in his life.

Meaning to let fly with something sharp Doyle looked up into his partner's eyes; soft, dark blue, a sort of gentleness about him as he waited: "All right," he heard himself say, astonishing himself, and Bodie came in for it: he knew, somehow, just how to kiss Doyle to make him want it, and as his tongue, gentle, dipped into and caressed the inside of his mouth he ran his hand down Doyle's chest

again, touched his nipples, found his cock again and held it, sliding it up and down against his palm.

The kiss, passionate and ardent and from the heart, was not what he would have expected from Bodie at all. Knowing himself too well, Doyle thought: If he keeps touching me like that I could be in trouble... Doyle's eyes opened to see Bodie's tightly shut, a trusting gesture from a dangerous man like Bodie. Those lashes: long and black, like silken threads. And over his shoulder, the clock—

"Bodie!!" he dragged his mouth away and hit out. "Have you seen the fuckin' time—bloody alarm didn't go off—"

Fifteen minutes till the coach was due to leave. Well, they could forget breakfast—Bodie caught Doyle's arm to prevent his mad leap out of bed.

"Tonight then?"

Clearly Bodie's mind was not on fallible timepieces, the hard bread he wasn't now going to get, and the splendour of the Eternal City. In fact, it seemed more than likely that Bodie at this moment would sacrifice the glories of Rome for the briefer glory of sex—and think he'd had the best of the deal.

His eyes besought Doyle's, urgent. "Tonight?"

"God, I dunno, Bodie," Doyle said inelegantly, disappearing into the bathroom. "See how I feel—okay?" Now water could be heard pelting down onto the tiled floor.

Bodie dropped his head back on the pillow and sighed deeply and dramatically. "This how you keep your women so hot for it, Ray?"

"What?" came the faint voice from the bathroom, wrapped around a toothbrush.

"Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen, eh?"

Doyle reappeared, naked, wet in places, and began to rummage through his bag for a suitable clean T-shirt. "Bodie. Behave." But the look which he flicked, flirtatious, over to the other man seemed full of promise.

And thus it was that 3.7 and 4.5 took the long road down to Rome, nearly in love like many before them. In the hot hell of Coach 99, Bodie could not help running through the night again and again, what he had said, what Doyle had countered with, how Doyle had looked as he lay down, how he had made himself come and wiped himself off with the T-shirt: how these things might never come to pass again. He scarcely noticed the journey and did not even open the map. Gradually, though, he began to tune into the conversation around him, which was concerned mainly with the dinner-dance of the night before, evidently a roaring success: every different type of pasta, free wine, and an Italian

tenor crooning throughout. Suki and Gianni had danced cheek to cheek by the light of the moon—and, presumably, spent the night thereafter in carnal acts from the way their hands were so intimately entwined this morning, the long, dewy-eyed looks they felt moved every few minutes to exchange.

Whatever the acts, he could not imagine it had been any sweeter than what he and his partner had done.

Me and Ray—we've got that same secret, today.

The objectionable child from three seats back was bouncing up and down and shrieking, its mother unsuccessfully trying to control it— "get down!" "stop it!" "This is the last time I'm going to tell you!" (A licence to continue—? It did.)

"Pity I didn't bring me gun, innit?" Doyle said gently, at Bodie's side.

"Browning, yeh? Good for stopping small wildlife at close range."

"Or the Uzi? Couldn't miss."

"Take a few of the others out as well, mind."

"I could live with that."

Fred's ears in front looked unnaturally cocked and alert to Bodie. Not a line of conversation to pursue: Fred had surprised him once or twice already by turning round to join enthusiastically in a conversation Bodie had not been aware was public domain. Bodie leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Enjoy yourself last night, did you?"

"Lovely. Lovely. You?" Fred half twisted round in his seat to nod and grin at them.

Doyle stirred himself and said in a quiet sort of way: "Yeh, we 'ad a very good night, thank you," and at the mischief of it Bodie jolted beside him, but Doyle's face did not so much as flicker; too quickly Bodie began to explain about the meal out, the walk, the visit to the supermarket.

"Didn't see you at breakfast?" Edna cranked her huge bulk around to ask.

Nosy cow. "Overslept," Bodie growled.

"Can't say we did," Fred yawned. "Not a wink."

"Bed's very comfy," was Doyle's offering.

"Not ours," Fred said with deep gloom.

"No breakfast, eh?" Edna said. ""The boys must be starving—here, Fred, pass them these."

And a sandwich or three later, when Fred seemed to have dozed off and Edna had her head deep in an oversized ham roll, Bodie said *sotto voce* to his partner:

"Shouldn't you have said are very comfy?"

"What?" Doyle stared at him as if he were mad.

"The beds are very comfy," Bodie hissed, looking around. "Don't want people getting the wrong idea, do we?"

"Too late now," Doyle shrugged. "Gonna look even worse, innit, if I tap 'im on the shoulder now going 'you know just now, when you thought I said 'the bed's comfy'? What I really said was, the beds are—"

"Ah, stoppit and shuddup." Bodie stretched out as far as possible—about three inches—and pressed his thigh to Doyle's. The answering pressure he perhaps imagined, for when he opened his eyes Doyle was looking away from him, out of the window.

Bodie dozed, jerking in and out of sleep with the swaying of the coach and the piercing chatter of the child. The journey seemed, as ever, very long. As they turned onto the Rome ringroad he foolishly imagined that they must be nearly there, and sat up to look around with interest. However, one and a half hours later he began to understand that Rome consisted of 31 huge Zonas, through every one of which they had to pass before they arrived at the tiny bit in the middle containing anything of interest. And by the time they did he was hot, tired, bored, and fit to strangle the singing child behind.

"Shame, innit," Doyle muttered beside him, "Just think, they could have bought a cat instead."

And then the coach swung around a corner in heavy traffic to enter a long, impressive avenue. Huge white marble columns every few yards along the wide pavements signalled grandeur, the sense that the road led to somewhere highly important. The roadsides were lined with coaches, and at the end of the avenue could be seen a domed edifice.

"What's that then?" Bodie said blankly.

"Church or something," Doyle shrugged.

Fred turned around, unable to overlook such ignorance. "That's the Vatican."

"The Vatican!" Bodie breathed, and when Fred's eyes had swivelled frontwards, wiggled his eyebrows irreverently at Doyle. Their driver gave them their instructions, two and a half hours of freedom before they were collected up again. The next thing was to stand up, wincing with cramp and stiffness, shuffle down the aisles hopping over people's legs, bags and rubbish, waiting politely every so often for exceptionally large, slow people to amass their bags and waddle, puffing, out of their seats—Bodie grimly remarked they'd need a week of training to recover.

"You absolutely must go to the Sistine Chapel," Edna instructed them with great firmness.

They never got there. Perhaps the glories of an imagined Paradise meant less to a CI5 agent than to the average man in the street: they had seen death, they

knew it. And as they could testify, death was not about some dazzling golden vision of angels, trumpets, and the Lord. Far more pressing than such fancies were the calls of freedom—fresh air—! so that, perfectly happy in their own way, they wandered along the streets between the columns, bought warm pizza from a street vendor and chilled cans of drink. They investigated dozens of dark little shops selling jewellery, clothes, postcards, with old Italian women dressed in black sitting beady-eyed behind the tills. Bodie bought a Liverpool football shirt—

"What the 'ell's that for?"

"Always wanted one," Bodie said shamefaced, "and it was cheap."

Doyle spent a long time browsing through the racks of T-shirts which, they discovered, cost no more than £1 each: but being particularly fussy, despite there being a choice of thousands he found neither the exact shade nor style to please him.

"Come on, Doyle. There must be one you fancy... how about this one?"

"I don't want a picture of the Coliseum stretched across me chest."

"Don't blame you, mate. Why'd anyone want a flickhouse on his chest?"

Doyle looked at him askance. "D'you think we'd better buy a guidebook—?"

But there was so much to do and see in that one street that it took them over an hour to walk the 200 yards to St Peter's Square. And they found it wonderful: a huge circle laid out like the rays of the sun, and after so much time in their half a cubic metre of Coach 99 it was bliss, just to stand out in the sun in so much open space. There was even a fountain and squabbling pigeons in case they felt homesick for Trafalgar. Before they could enter they had to pass the inspection of the Swiss Guard, who took a distrust to both of them and frisked them officiously. Bodie rolled his eyes as he raised his hands; so strange, these young uniformed men so arrogant, so important of themselves, versus himself and Doyle, so apparently tame, Doyle standing so patient and still for the search: and yet Bodie had the feeling that for all the guns and the Hitler boots and the macho posturings of strength they were cream puffs: that he and Doyle could take them all if they tried.

The thought of violence and Doyle on to kill set off a chain reaction; he looked down at his partner kneeling casually on the stone paving adjusting the focus of his camera, and Doyle, acute, looked up. Time stopped: it froze the moment like a snapshot, sealing them into a private world.

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"Remember tonight," Bodie said, low, warm.

Doyle cocked a quizzical eyebrow at him, rising slowly on well-toned muscles to stand. He applied his eye to the viewfinder, reached his hand around the front to fiddle with the zoom as he said: "How can I remember tonight? It 'asn't 'appened yet."

And that seemed to Bodie full of promise for the night to come: a hint, nothing certain, still the challenge of seduction before him. "Stand there," Doyle ushered him into place, pointed the camera at him. "Say cheese—"

His finger pressed the shutter release, the lens blinked once. Click.

In the photograph, which exists today, Bodie, in cords, a black T-shirt, dangling his jacket from one finger, looks not at the camera but through it to some unimaginable yonder: a man with something on his mind. Behind him there are rows and rows of chairs, and beyond those, the steps of the Vatican, upon which there is a tiny red dot—

Slinging his camera over his shoulder, "Look, Bodie—" Doyle nodded towards the dot— "I reckon that's the Pope."

Bodie crossed his eyes like a gibbon. "Who?" "That's who lives in the Vatican, innit?"

Bodie squinted. Certainly the crowds in the thousands of seats arranged before the steps seemed to be getting excited: a swelling roar had gone up, and then subsided to a simmering murmur. The little red dot had placed itself centrally at the top of the steps. It raised its arms, held out its hands. The crowd roared again.

"I dunno. Looks like George Cowley to me."
"He's come all this way just to check up on us."

"Can't get away with anything, can we?"

A voice began to intone something sonorous through loudspeakers over the whole of St Peter's Square. Bodie winced. "Not old George, after all... because, if I'm not mistaken Ray m'lad, that is a prayer."

Doyle was grimacing, holding up a hand to fend it off. "Time to go?"

On the way out they passed Fred and Edna at the back of a queue as long as the Serpentine, winding its way all around the sides of St Peter's and round to the back: "Sistine Chapel!" Fred mouthed at them.

Of one mind about the Sistine Chapel and the queue thereof the two CI5 men turned back to walk along the street again: this time they took the other side and browsed there, buying a guidebook, two cans of beer, and a postcard for the office. They sat on a marble seat to consume the beer and compose the postcard, pleased with their final effort, which encompassed Rome,

Pompeii, and the monastery in a few well-chosen words: "HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME—SEEN THE POPE, VISITED A BROTHEL, BEEN TO HEAVEN.

3.7, 4.5."

*** * * * ***

In search of a postbox Doyle turned off the main street into a side one, popped the card into a box, and spotted a bridge arching over the horizon in the distance. They walked to it, crossing en route a major road between streams of mad Italian Grand Prix traffic, and found their bridge. It was an immensely imposing and ancient structure of grey stone, crossing a wide river which was a strange pale green gooseberry shade. "Just like your eyes," Bodie said inconsequentially to Doyle, who was gazing down into the waters with some vestigial long-ago classics lesson tweaking at his brain—

"Isn't that the Tiber?"

"The what?"

"The actual Tiber."

"Could be, I suppose."

"Amazin', innit?"

"Yeah, amazing," Bodie humoured him.

"It was there all those years flowing through ancient Rome, and here it is—"

"—still flowing. And still in Rome! As you say, Doyle, amazing."

Doyle hit him on the arm. "No soul, Bodie. No feeling for the past." But in fact as they leaned on the stone parapets, for a moment it was there for both of them: literature browsed once long ago had left its legacy of words, the Senate, the Forum, Caesar and the legions, *Et Tu, Brute*. Doyle leaned against Bodie, and for a moment history came alive, here on this ancient bridge crossing a river of green water.

And then it was time for their rendezvous upon the Via del ???, the Street of Many Coaches, to pile back into the warm, fuggy atmosphere of Coach 99, its inhabitants all agog with the beauty of the Sistine Chapel, or the horrors of the queues in the money-changing banks.

Bodie didn't mind about the Sistine Chapel. They had had the Tiber instead.

The sightseeing tour was next. First port of call was a high viewpoint where huge antiquities and monuments could be glimpsed all over the city, popping up like incongruous mushrooms amid the office blocks and flats. Doyle leaned on the wall overlooking the panorama and gazed out, the wind blowing back his hair: Bodie materialised at his side bearing two cornettos. "Don't say I never buy you nuffink." Taking one, Doyle

blew him an impromptu kiss. Sharp-eyed Suki spotted it and telegraphed a speaking glance to her husband. Bodie saw Doyle track the exchange but not react to it. Good on you, Doyle. What do we care what they think, anyway?

But in a way he did care.

The next stop was the Coliseum, a giant antiquity, far huger than one would ever imagine from its regular appearances on mugs, jugs and ladies' headscarves. Doyle and Bodie peered through solid iron bars at the vast circus ring inside, the tiers of seats rising to the skyline, and tried to visualise screaming Christians scattered by leaping, pouncing lions as crowds of ancient Romans roared and cheered. The violence of the past seemed so much nobler and more magnificent than the violence of today: it was only moments before they faced their first brush with the roguery they had been warned was rife in modern Rome when a crowd of narrowfaced blank-eyed gipsy children milled about them, young girls who looked no more than twelve carrying dirty, pretty babies on their skinny hips—

"Oi!" Bodie jumped and slapped a hand away from his pocket: Doyle caught the offending wrist as it withdrew bearing Bodie's wallet. "Prego, prego, signori," muttered the girl and melted away into the crowd, but others were not so lucky, several inhabitants of Coach 99 returning to it without their purses.

Back onto the coach. On and off again. After a while it all became a bit of a blur. People began to argue about which famous antiquity they had just been whisked past because after a while everything began to look the same, all huge, all fabulous, all ancient.

But there was one place they never forgot. Hustled off the coach, whisked down narrow alleyways, all 64 inhabitants of Coach 99 arrived in a tiny square at the back of which loomed a huge snowy marble sculpture of pillars and men and horses ejecting plumes of water into a bluish pool. Tourists thronged around this pool in their hundreds. Bodie and Doyle pushed their way right to the front in seconds: they were young, they were arrogant, they had no manners. Doyle knelt and dipped a hand into the cool water.

"Wait a minute," Bodie said, looking down at Doyle meditatively, "This is something famous, this is. 'Ang on. It'll come to me."

"Well, don't force it."

"No, it's coming. 'S a fountain, innit? Three coins—something about three coins in a fountain—"

"It's the heat, Bodie, it's getting to you. Here—sit down. I'll duck your head in."

Dodging— "It's the Trevi Fountain," Bodie arrived at it

triumphantly. "You 'ave to throw a coin in, it's traditional."

Doyle snorted where he knelt, one wrist draped artistically across his knee. "Yeah, sounds like a tradition worth encouragin'."

"Cynic. You throw in a coin, see, and that means you're sure to come back to Rome one day."

Obviously thinking deeply Doyle tossed up the alternatives and came to a decision. "Nope: think I'll keep the money." He began to rise and Bodie thumped him. Laughing, Doyle half-fell against the low fountain wall, might have tipped backwards over it if Bodie hadn't rescued him with a lazy hand.

"Tighter than Cowley's arse, aren't you, mate?" "—only you would know that, Bodie—"

"Okay, okay. I'll pay for you, that's what you want, isn't it." Bodie fished in his pocket for a coin but Doyle slapped his hand away.

"No thanks, I'll pay for meself. Won't work otherwise."

They stood there on the steps of the Trevi fountain, each with a lire coin in their hand, looking at the blue water, the dazzling white marble, the thronging holiday crowds. Then Doyle drew back his arm, let gently fly with his coin: it twisted through the air, glistening in the strong sunlight and fell with a gentle splash into the water. Bodie did the same, the coin describing an arc through the air before it fell. Bodie had a good eye for such things; he reckoned that if he could dive beneath the surface his own coin would be as near to Doyle's as it could be, perhaps even atop it. And Doyle turned and grinned at him, acknowledging without words the little feat of skill, and Bodie watched his hair change colour as the sun drifted in and out of clouds, and the patterns of moving water rippling across the green of his eyes; and into his mind came the thought, curiously exact and complete:

I'm going to fall in love with you. And you won't fight.

A shout recalled them to rejoin ranks: rounded up and counted they left the Trevi fountain and their coins, slumbering together on the ancient fountain floor.

They were going back up through the maze of alleyways, Bodie and Doyle dropping back to the rear of the party, loping along at a steady pace, soaking up the unexpectedly atmospheric aura of this back-street vista, not intended for tourists—narrow cobbled paths, scraggy washing hanging everywhere from windows, rubbish in the gutters and urchins running barefoot. Squalour: but somehow rather splendid squalour, the smell of Italian cooking herbs in the air. Then they became aware of a

little drama taking place ahead: the cross Coach 99 mother had lost, it seemed, the Coach 99 child.

"So there is a God," murmured Bodie, reverently bowed head, and "I'd just cut me losses and run, meself," was Doyle's offering, which made them both inclined to laugh: that was until they saw the woman's utter panic and distress and joined in the search without further ado. Mother love! inexplicable.

Going down one street so narrow it was more like a cart-track, Bodie turned a corner and ran into trouble. There was Fred, three youths with him, and they had hold of the elderly gent's camera strap. The expressions on their faces made the encounter instantly recognisable: "Hey!" Bodie shouted, and powered up into a run, and wrenched the strap away, interposing himself, solid and brutish, between the little gang and Fred. He even allowed himself a grin as he put up his hands: nice odds, just the way he liked it. He was definitely going to enjoy this, missing infants were really not much in his line at all.

Until three more thugs arrived as if from nowhere—and two of them carrying knives, sharp wicked-looking things, the sort of knives which could do a lot of damage in an unethical hand. The hands holding these looked very unethical indeed. Bodie judged right and left distances quickly, dived, grabbed a wrist, jerked its owner towards him and kneed it in the groin extremely hard. It fell to the ground writhing in a most satisfactory way. The remaining thugs seemed to take this up as a challenge: five swarthy, grinning Italians, the scent of garlic and sweat hanging heavy in the air. "Fred?" Bodie said over his shoulder, "Get back to the others—and if you see Ray anywhere—"

Alert, he leaped to one side as the knife went for him, got in under the man's armpit and threw him off, chopping his hand down hard on his wrist so that the hand flew open and released the knife: misguidedly brave, Fred had not left after all, was muddling about behind getting in Bodie's way: one more softskinned target for Bodie to protect. By now his reflexes were zinging into gear, sending messages like lightning along his nerves: he didn't even feel the knife that caught his wrist, but it was all getting nasty and it made him angry. Bodie thumped and chopped and ducked with violent intent: and then, there behind him, was Ray Doyle.

"About bloody time." Relief, and yes: excitement: this was more like it, this was the life they knew and the game they always won. Doyle was taking off his jacket, looping it swiftly around his arm.

"Big strong lad like you—and you need me?"
"Good experience for you, m'boy. Watch and you

might learn something." He saw the thugs weighing up the new arrival: not rating it overhigh on first impressions. They moved in closer. Watching them, Doyle gave a quick, ferocious smile. "You wanna watch 'im," Bodie warned, "'e kicks—" And in a blur of action Doyle's boot was jabbing a vulnerable Italian crotch with a vicious-sounding crunch.

"—told you." Bodie said with a smug smile.

The balance of power having tipped, the Italians were soon on the run. Exchanging a look, just one little glance of acknowledgment of a job well done, the CI5 men turned their attention to Fred, who far from being exhilarated was obviously very shaken up.

"You'd never have thought it," he kept repeating as Doyle's hand eased beneath one armpit to guide him gently on his way, "You'd never think it would you? Not when you're on your holidays."

As they rounded a corner and recognised the way back Doyle nodded at Bodie's wrist— "That need a stitch, does it?" It was bleeding quite profusely. Bodie was pinching it between the finger and thumb of his other hand.

"Nah, the power of my will's enough," Bodie said impressively, but he accepted the offer of the clean white hanky Doyle flourished at him and stood still while Doyle neatly and tightly tied it around the wound. They had reached the rest of the party now, standing around in the square where Coach 99 awaited them; there was an excited babble of speech all around as Fred tried to tell the story of his adventure, himself and Bodie and Doyle fending off a crazed gang of robbers, while others regurgitated the tale of the found child, and from one side came the sounds—

"Don't you ever—" slap, slap, scream— "ever—" slap— "ever do that again, do you understand me?"

So much excitement, the glories of Rome, the lost-and-found child, the Muggers and the Heroes, united Coach 99 in a tight band of gang-spirit: the return journey had the feel of a travelling party, quite rowdy at times, duty free booze passed around in plastic cups and eagerly downed. And when they spotted from the coach window a line of men peeing into a stream and the child asked loudly what they were doing and its mother replied quickly 'fishing', Doyle's audible snort of "Short rods!" brought the house down. It had been, everyone agreed, a good day, a really Good Day, the stuff of lifetime memory.

Later on people were quietening down, and the child was evidently asleep—either that or, as Bodie cruelly suggested, had been garotted by the man behind with the strap of his sunglasses; Doyle too was dozing,

swaying with the rhythm of the journey, heavy and limp against Bodie as the coach took corners. Bodie, as always the only one left awake, took the opportunity to unwind the bloody hanky and examine his hand—the cut, extending from his wrist to his forearm, was long but not deep and the bleeding had slowed to a reddish ooze.

He looked up from the wound to find Doyle's eyes unexpectedly watching him, drowsy green." That bothering you?" Doyle asked, yawning; he took Bodie's hand into his and drew it onto his lap, turning it gently this way and that. The touch sent little shocks racing along Bodie's nerves and raised all the hairs on his skin. Doyle's fingers were so tender on him, the small pain he was causing quite exquisite— "I'll look at it later for you," Doyle promised, green gaze dwelling intently on his face; Bodie wondered, winded, if Doyle knew what the look, the touch, was doing to him. His hand lay on Doyle's lap; gently, almost imperceptibly, he pressed his knuckles against him. Doyle stayed very still, head down, as if just looking at Bodie's arm; beneath his touch Bodie sensed a tension, a springing to life. Heart pounding, head spinning, he lifted his arm away and stared for some time out of the window across the aisle without seeing a thing.

What a risk to take, all but touching Doyle up in public. Yet it had been—thrilling. He felt—brilliant, boundless with life and energy and excitement. He was just, so, glad that they had taken this path. Whatever came of it, something, nothing, it was a strange and wonderful new dimension to his life.

He must have dozed off himself, for the next he knew was the world filtering back into his ears and Doyle shifting about next to him as the coach drew up outside Pensione Alberto. The time was 6.30pm. They went to their room for a pee and a wash. Doyle came out of the bathroom yawning widely: "Hard work this, innit?"

"Need a holiday when you get back to recover from the holiday," Bodie agreed, flopping back full length on the bed.

"I tell you what, though. We'd better jog off to the shop—no chance tomorrow, full day out."

"Where is it tomorrow. Just remind me."

"Capri. Where the cars come from."

"Ah yeah," Bodie sighed romantically, "Napoleon's Isle."

Doyle canted a disbelieving glance his way. "Nah, don't think so. This is the one with the volcano."

"No way. You're thinking of Sicily."

"What makes you think Capri's an island anyway?"

Doyle was opening the bedroom door. Wishing he could

stay where he was Bodie swung his weary legs off the bed and followed him.

"Why else would we be going by boat, Mastermind?"
"Because we're on an island now, of course."

"Italy isn't an island, Doyle. What's the matter with you?"

"Well, it's part of one, innit? Came across by ferry, didn't we? Can't walk off Italy, can you?"

"Yeh, you can. But only if you're going to Switzerland." They were clattering down the narrow stairway by now, jostling and laughing as Bodie tried to get past Doyle and take the lead, Doyle neatly retaining pole position by dint of some fancy footwork. "Going out to eat?" kindly Fred asked of them as they arrived in the foyer.

"Haven't decided yet," Doyle was answering, flying off the bottom step with the help of a hefty thump to the small of his back. "Of!—But I can't say I fancy Bodie's cold sausages and bottled water."

"We've found a little place down the road. Fancy joining us? Suki and Gianni are coming, and Don and Eileen, and—"

Bodie met Doyle's eyes, read no violent dissent there, so that was settled. First of all though they went to the little supermarket because it might be their last shopping opportunity, and stocked up on beer and bottled water and a few duty-frees to take back home—some Italian Scotch for Cowley, which should annoy him nicely, and a fancy bottle of olive oil for Doyle, who had chef-like pretensions. Then they joined the others on a party-spirited expedition to the local pizza restaurant.

Throughout this evening Bodie was peripherally aware of a feeling of alienation: it didn't unsettle him, he was too used to it: he could watch these ordinary human beings at play, even join in for a while, but he was essentially apart. Doyle too. Was it that life in CI5 was so desensitising, so that everywhere they looked they saw life's blackest side, always ready to draw a gun and fire, that they had lost the knack of being normal?

Or, Bodie mused, was it the other way round entirely. That they had always been different, and that was how and why George Cowley had spotted them, and recruited them for CI5?

Of all the people here, he could be close only to one: another outsider, like himself, one who would also be a devil if he had not been cast by George Cowley in the role of saint. They did not fit in here among this party of chattering tourists; six days away playing in this dreamtime was long enough, it was time he and Doyle were back in their world.

Doyle nudged him. "Oi. What's on your mind?"

sebastian ET IN ITALIA EGO...

"Dunno really. Just feel—"

"Homesick?"

"Nah, not really."

Doyle studied him for a moment longer. "That wrist okay?"

Bodie had forgotten it, looked down at it in surprise. Oozing redly through the clean hanky he had applied in the room.

"Let's get back," Doyle said, rising.

Bodie looked around. The party was in full swing, Suki was in a violent mood with Gianni who had apparently ordered her the wrong sort of pasta, spitting fire at him; everyone was a little bit drunk, but dessert had not yet arrived. "Bit difficult to get away, don't you think?" Social nicety was not high on Doyle's agenda; Bodie sat back and watched, detachedly admiring, as Doyle sorted out payment with Fred and made their understated farewells. Someone, however, noticed their premature departure:

"Off so soon?" bright-eyed Suki asked, head on side. "Anyone'd think you two were a pair of honeymooners."

Doyle had his claws sheathed among the general public, but all the same there were not many people who ever walked away smiling from a joust with Ray Doyle. He leaned over the table and smiled a blazing smile and spoke through his teeth: "Well, sweetheart, no-one'd make that mistake about you."

The streets were dark, and they walked side by side in silence. Lacking a gun to fondle, Bodie had his hands thrust into his pockets, but Doyle, that most harmonious of movers, had his thumbs tucked through the belt-holds of his jeans. Neither of them went in for idle chat, and it wasn't until Doyle noticed something— "Starting to rain, innit?" that the first word was spoken. Doyle was wearing a white jacket, Bodie a cream one— "Better run—" and they darted through the streets beneath a sudden drenching rush of rain, finally tumbling, wet and panting, in through the doors of the pensione Alberto.

In their room Doyle flung open the balcony doors and the shutters and let the fresh, rain-chilled air roll into the room while Bodie pushed past him and went in to use the toilet. Doyle followed him in and began to wash his hands at the basin, looking in the mirror at himself as he did it. Lifting his eyes from the lavatory bowl as he tucked himself in, Bodie met his eyes in the mirror: Doyle looked solemn, eyes wide, rosebud mouth set in a grave repose, but Bodie looked pale, skin almost translucent, a ghost behind. Impatient, Bodie shoved him out of the way and began to wash his own hands, turning the soap over and over to get a good lather; it got

in his cut which began fiercely to sting and he snatched it out of the water, wincing. Doyle noticed: "Lemme look at that again."

They looked at it together in silence. Finally Doyle shook his head. "I dunno, Bodie. Even on holiday you can't leave it alone, can you? Got a first aid kit on you?"

Not as such: but he had a little tin army box of aspirin, stomach pills and plasters. "Come on then, Dr Doyle." He sat on the edge of the bed and extended his arm. Doyle took Bodie's hand in his and flexed his other arm so that it rested on Bodie's thigh, and looked again at the sliced wrist. It was a clean cut, no ragged edges. Used to years of small injuries, the two of them no longer believed in Savlon or the like: they had learned from experience that wounds healed faster the less they were mucked about with. But—

"I dunno, Bodie, nasty innit? I reckon it could do with a stitch."

"Don't be daft. Just stick it back together, will you?"
Bodie was always loftily heroic about his injuries.
Shrugging, Doyle cut some little strips of plaster and began to work in silence. Not moving, Bodie looked down as Doyle knelt before him; his curls were soft with the heat and brightened by the Italian sun. Bodie breathed in deliberately; Doyle was very close to him, leaning against Bodie's thighs; he smelt warm, a little aftershave, a little sweat, the tang of alcohol. An erotic sensation began to crawl across his skin, a moth's wing brushing on his nerves. It might go either way: might be killed off before it gained a life, if Doyle did or said the wrong thing, or seemed cold, or ugly, when he looked up—

And when he did, the shadows in the room played across his face; half in shade Bodie saw there again the face of the monk, the ascete, a purity astride whatever inner demons he might have. Seemingly lost for words Doyle looked into his eyes, and held Bodie's hand lightly in his own, his other wrist draped negligently across his own denimclad thigh. Bodie cleared his throat and tried out his voice: "Thanks."

That seemed to remind Doyle that he had finished: he let go of Bodie's hand. "Feel any better?"

"Yeah, much. Thanks."

"Better get ready for tomorrow?" Doyle said, almost with the lilt of a question, bouncing on his haunches, ready to rise.

Bodie roused himself. "Yeah. Yeh, good idea." They assembled stuff in silence, clothes for the morning, money, passports, a jacket each for the boat, camera. Finished, Bodie went back to the bathroom, washed, brushed his teeth, looked at his pale face and his

darkened eyes in the mirror. Still that sensation in the pit of his stomach: dread? excitement? When he got back into the bedroom Doyle was closing up the shutters and locking the windows. The air in the room was fresh and chilly. Bodie threw off his clothes quickly and got in between the covers, lying on his back with his hands behind his head.

For the first time in his life it felt odd to be lying here with Ray Doyle in the room, and to be naked. Yet to abandon normal practice and wear some token garment would be equally odd: what sort of message would that give out? I am unafraid to be naked with you = you are no threat to me: I must garb myself in your presence = there is some doubt about your intentions.

Oh yeah, it was even almost funny, put like that. Maybe one day they could share the joke. He lay quite still, open-eyed, as Doyle pulled back the covers and got in beside him. Bodie said nothing, and had nothing in mind to say. For Doyle must know how he felt. Bodie knew quite well his response must have been obvious as Doyle knelt there before him: if not quite trembling, he had certainly been hard enough to show.

"Light out?" Doyle queried.

"Yeh."

The sudden blackness and silence was disorienting. Bodie's senses fought for and gained some meaning out of it: gradually dark shapes appeared here and there around the room. Still Doyle did not touch him.

Oh, get real, Bodie. Doyle wasn't going to, was he? The realisation came to him in a rush, and almost as a relief. His fingers began to unclench on the sheet. It had all been a fantasy. He had been mad to even dream that Doyle might be going to make some sexual overture towards him: no such thing was ever going to happen, and that was just how it should be.

"Bodie?"

The whisper made him jump. "What?"

And in disbelief he heard Doyle do it, take that astonishing leap into the dark: "Still fancy it, do you?"

Bodie had to force the answer out through dry lips. "How d'you mean?"

"Ah, come on. You haven't forgotten this morning, have you? I've been thinking about it all day."

Christ almighty. His heart jolting and his blood singing in his ears Bodie said, lips hardly moving, "Have you?"

"Course I have. Haven't you?"

Bodie swallowed, and made the no-way-back admission: "Yeah."

"Well, come on then."

As Doyle moved closer to him Bodie felt the brush of

his skin across the lifted hairs on his body, Doyle's breath light and warm on his face. "We've gotta keep this closer than MI5, Bodie," the soft voice warned, "We'd lose our jobs just like that if anyone even knew about last night, let alone anything else."

"You think I don't know that? I read the bloody small-print too, y'know."

"Just wanna get it straight. Whatever we do out here—it's not going back with us, okay?"

Bodie always had lived for the moment in hand and the promise came from him easily: "Yeah—now stop carryin' on like an old woman."

"And if anyone did twig it—let's get the story right—we're on holiday and these things happen," Doyle improvised rapidly, "—we 'ad too much to drink one night, we tried it for a laugh, can't remember exactly what we did but nothing much happened, that sound okay?"

"Look, Doyle," Bodie was surprised at the acid thinness of his own voice, "it's not gonna make the *Nine O'clock News* when we get back, y'know."

"Just in case. What if Cowley put a tail on us?"

"Why the hell would he do that?" Bodie gazed at him in disbelief. "And use your bloody common sense—where would it all end? If he's that suspicious he'd have to put a tail on the tail, and another tail on that and he's short of manpower as it is with us away. We've never been asked to tail anyone, have we—3.7, 4.5, would ye mind tailing Murph and Jones tae Amsterdam, just tae make sure they're no' bonking each other on the quiet, ye understand—!" and he felt Doyle laughing a little beside him, paranoia edged out by absurdity. He went on, groping for and finding Doyle's hand, placing it on himself, "And in any case, even if we did have a bloody tail it's not here in the room with us now, is it, so shut up or I'll lose interest."

Doyle moved closer, seemed to be hesitating. "I'm nearly asleep as it is," Bodie yawned, "reckon you can wake me up?" He shut his eyes as he felt Doyle's hand pass across his chest in a brief, heartstopping caress; then, implausibly, deliciously, thin cool fingers travelling lower, running lightly over his sensitive skin. Bodie winced and shivered as Doyle touched him on his nipples, rougher than a woman but surer; after a moment he seized Doyle's wandering hand and pushed it down to where he wanted it. Doyle seemed to understand that, murmuring sexily to Bodie: "Yeah, you liked this last night didn't you, you made me do it," and squeezed him long and hard. Bodie made a low, helpless sound, turning his head away from Doyle and then towards him again, searching for his face, but he could

see nothing more than shadows, the gleam of an eye, a tooth.

"Put the light on." And Doyle reached out over him and switched on the small bedside light. Bodie lay on his back, arms behind his head, and Doyle came back to him, laid his hands along the sides of Bodie's face and found Bodie's mouth with his own, parting his lips with a gentle tongue, dipping inside and tasting him slowly. The kiss was long and fluid. "You're so sexy, Ray," Bodie murmured against his mouth when they paused to draw breath, "Watching you doin' it last night—got me so hot—"

Doyle gave a little sigh, remembering. "Yeah, wasn't that something else?" He moved in again to kiss Bodie's mouth, his cheek, his ear, dipping his tongue inside to make Bodie shiver again.

"How often d'you do it, Ray?"

"Do what?"

"You know."

Doyle nuzzled his sensitive earlobe and broke off to whisper into it: "When I feel like it."

"Once a week—? Once a day—?"

"Bodie." Lightly, Doyle straddled the other man's body and looked down at him, palms massaging Bodie's nipples slowly, eyes closing as he found Bodie's cock with his own and pressed into it, moving in a slow, sexy way.

"How often, Doyle?" Bodie persisted, voice a little hoarse, thrills of pleasure shooting through him as Doyle sighed again and kept up the slow and gentle rhythm of massage, answering him:

"Oh Bodie, I dunno. I don't write it in my diary, y'know."

"Don't you?" Bodie whispered, hands rising to take hold of Doyle's hips, guide him more firmly.

"Why d'you want me to tell you, anyway?"

"Why d'you think?"

"Turns you on, does it?" Doyle had it now, that certain tidal rhythm, rubbing their cocks sweetly together, the bliss of it closing his eyes for a moment then opening them to stare down in a hazy sort of way: "This doesn't turn you on enough, then?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah... Doyle. Keep it going, will you?"
He fought to hold it there, keep that sense of lazy pleasure building, knowing all the while that in the way of things it could not last. Doyle moved on top of him and he made himself be still, not to spoil Doyle's perfect timing; Doyle raised himself on his elbows and looked down into Bodie's face, his gaze drifting, his lashes lifting and falling as he breathed, quite hurried now, almost panting. Bodie could no longer be still, thrusting

hard upwards again and again and the rhythm broke; it became a struggle, Doyle wild, nipping and plunging, desperate only to please himself, and Bodie left to fight alone. At one point there was a scuffling outside the door of their room, and voices shouting: Doyle raised his head, tensing, and appeared for a moment to be listening, but then, shuddering, he dropped his head again to Bodie's shoulder and thrust himself violently at Bodie, freezing perfectly still: Bodie, sweating and trembling, felt the tremors of the other man's ejaculation pulsing sharply, wetly onto Bodie's skin.

Doyle slumped on top of him, limp, heart pounding right on top of Bodie's own. Bodie grabbed him and threw him off and rolled on top of him, thrusting urgently between thighs which tumbled apart for him, coming in seconds, Doyle's hand over his mouth keeping in the long, imploring moan he could not help but make as the orgasm ripped through him.

Bodie slept for a moment afterwards and then awoke, and watched over Doyle, fiercely, in the silence of the Italian night.

When at last his eyes unclosed to bright morning light, he was alone in the bed. He lay on his back for a moment, and tracked Doyle's whereabouts at last: he was on the little balcony, fully dressed, leaning out.

"All right?" Bodie said, and had to try his voice out again before it worked.

"Nice mornin'," Doyle said, coming in. He was wearing a green v-necked jumper today, and the lighter denim jeans. He had washed his hair.

"What time is it?" Bodie asked, yawning.

"No hurry. Got time for breakfast this morning."

Right. He knew where he was, then. Bodie had a thorough shower and washed his hair. The slash on his wrist was healing nicely so he gritted his teeth and yanked the plasters off. Then he had a complete change of clothes, clean white cords, cream shirt. Good job they were going home tomorrow; his dirty garments now outnumbered the clean by about two to one.

And if Doyle was going to play it cool today, well, fine. He needed a breathing space himself; he didn't know where he was any longer, life seemed to have changed.

Suki just happened to look their way and happened to wave just as they entered the dining room, so they sat with the London couple for breakfast. The bread and jam routine was unchanged, as was the battle for the coffee. However, here Gianni's Italian birth came in handy as the waitresses rushed to fill his cup even before he lifted it into the air, and then he would graciously indicate to

them Bodie's, obviously enjoying the little condescension: Bodie then had to fight with himself to get the expected syllable of gratitude out. Suki seemed to spend most of the time leaning across the table and staring deeply and meaningfully into Doyle's eyes, at least when he deigned to lift them from his plate.

"Ever go to any of the London clubs, Ray?"

"Yeh, sometimes."

"He go with you?" she nodded at Bodie.

"Nope," Doyle said, "Not a clubbing type."

"Oh, you never asked me," Bodie camped. Doyle ignored him: Bodie's expression did not change, though his senses registered the direct hit. Reaction's certainly set in there, then.

Doyle left the table soon afterwards to go back to the room with five minutes to spare. "You two fallen out?" Suki asked Bodie, big brown eyes peering over the rim of her very expensive glasses.

"Not as far as I know... still, Ray's the moody type. You won't believe this. He's booking again for October, got the idea to bring his bird back with him: good luck to her, I say." Bodie dropped this in with a cool smile and did not look their way as they tried hard not to exchange glances. Doyle was weaving his way back through the tables at that point: "Isn't that right, Ray," Bodie said as Doyle came within earshot

"What?" Doyle picked up his last piece of dry bread and looked at it without appetite.

"Bringing Sylvie with you next time, weren't you saying?"

"Not if she hears about breakfast," was Doyle's only comment, dropping the bread back onto the table.

By 6.30 AM they were on their way. In his seat Bodie shut his eyes and tipped his head back and made no attempt at conversation. He was, he realised, very tired: travelling nonstop, so many impressions coming and going, lack of a regular routine or even the chance to stop and breathe and take stock between things of large historical or cultural importance. Every minute of their time seemed to be accounted for by the tour itinerary, except of course for the hours between dusk and dawn, and those too had their story.

He was awoken by a nudge in his side and there was Doyle, holding two steaming cups of the liquid which the driver's grumpy assistant passed off as coffee.

"Thanks," Bodie grunted, still half asleep, and took it.

Doyle pushed back the bracelet on his arm and grinned at him as he yawned and stretched in his seat. "Worn you out, have I?" His voice was quiet, but not unduly so.

"You're not kidding." He took a sip of the coffee, grimaced. "Talking to me now, are you?"

"Shouldn't I be?" His hand was lying alongside Bodie's between them, and for one moment Bodie felt the hair-raising sensation of a fingertip touching his, though Doyle's head was turned away, looking out of the window.

"Thought I'd upset you," Bodie said, and took another cautious sip.

Doyle turned his way, and his expression was cool, appraising: "Oh, you have."

Bodie's heart flipped over in his chest. He gulped the coffee down and crumpled the plastic cup in his hand, staring ahead.

"Might never be the same again," Doyle added, unsmiling; and then he seemed to look away from troubling inner thoughts to see Bodie himself, his lips curving up, his eyes suddenly friendly, warm. As if he would touch him, if he could. Kiss him, perhaps.

Bodie's heart quickened in a way it did not under gunfire. Things had changed; it scared him a little bit, excited him more. And there was still the night to come.

Meanwhile there were the motions of tourism to be gone through. Coach 99 was left forlornly at the Naples harbour alongside Coach 101 to watch all of its 64 inhabitants board a ferry and sail away across the Mediterranean. Today had a truly holiday feel to it, away from the dusty roads of cities ancient and modern and out onto the deep blue ocean. On deck it was breezy, and they soon got chilled standing there by the railings watching the ferry's white and foaming wake streaming out behind them, the hot reek of engine oil in the air; it was time to go below decks, where to their delight they found a bar. Also many of their fellow Coach 99-ers, but as Bodie said, nothing in life was perfect. He bought two beers—

"Bit early, innit?"

"We're on holiday—" they chorused together and rounded the corner in search of a private spot to drink it. And there behind a capstan coiled about with thick rope lurked the Coach 99 child, with something sticky in its hand. Bodie smiled at it pleasantly then goggled his eyes— "Boo!" he said quietly. The child fled, wide-eyed.

Acknowledging the success of this Doyle raised an eyebrow at Bodie, then took up a pose leaning on the capstan and had a swig from his can. "Like kids, do you?"

"All right in their place, I suppose."

"Want some of your own?" Doyle tipped up his can again, one hand raking through his hair; he looked out to sea, at the factories and the smoke of Naples all along the coastline.

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"I dunno. Maybe one day." Odd question. "Don't just get 'em out of the blue, y'know. But I suppose I'd like to leave something behind."

Doyle nodded, eyes fixed on the view to sea. "Yeah, I reckon most people feel like that."

Bodie didn't like the mood of this conversation. If Doyle was trying to send him some subliminal message by it he sensed it was a message he did not want to hear. "Look, Doyle, I'm not looking to the future at the moment. Can't see further than tomorrow right now. Leave it at that, yeah?"

Doyle just looked at him, eyes grey and reflective, the wind blowing back his hair. "Tomorrow may never come, remember?" Bodie continued determinedly. He stamped disparagingly on the somewhat scruffy deck. "They say 'see Naples and die' don't they? This boat's on its last legs, for a start."

That did the trick. Doyle's lip lifted cheerily. "Yeah, noticed it was listing to the left just now. You were stood over that side at the time, but I don't know if—"

He was gone, and Bodie after him, armed with a dripping can.

Capri rose up like a jewel set in the sea: it sparkled. Emerald greenery crawled up the sides of its cliffs; white houses, pink houses, blue houses were set higgledypiggledy around the harbour they were fast approaching. "This is the life," Doyle yawned as he leaped with lazy energy off the ferry onto the gangway.

"Yeah, isn't it?" The place was bustling with life and vigour, pleasure boats and fishing smacks side by side at the quay, souvenir shops and cafe-bars clustering along the narrow street. But any thoughts they might have had of freedom were quelled by the appearance of a guide bearing down upon the Coach 99 crowd; he carried a rainbow-coloured golf umbrella for easy recognition, but this did seem superfluous given his huge and shining bald cranium, and the fringe of hair to his earlobes beneath just like a cake-frill.

Cake-Frill rounded them up, coralled them into sections, loaded them onto several minibuses which then took to the narrow streets and up hills to the smart and stylish little square named AnaCapri, where expensive shops for leather, marquetry, lace and jewellery predominated. Most of Coach 99 seemed keen to browse here but Bodie had thoughts of insurrection on his mind. He pushed through the crowds to find his partner.

"Fancy going off with me?"

"Oh, Bodie, you know how to tempt a bloke," Doyle automatically fluttered his lashes and Bodie swatted him

on the rear.

"—I mean, shall we make our excuses and go?"
Doyle merely raised an eyebrow at him this time, his glance significant, and Bodie felt a shockwave strike right through him: Doyle had lain on top of him and come all over him last night. It didn't bear thinking about, not now, and soon not ever. "Yeah," was all Doyle said, and took things immediately in hand, strolling over with that easy swagger to the coach driver, who was soon shaking his head, obviously not keen on splitting up the party. Bodie saw the insolent tilt of his partner's head; Ray Doyle could be rude for England if called upon.

"Okay?" Bodie asked as Doyle shouldered his way back through the throng to him.

"Yes—" Doyle stopped to consider, lips pursed: "But we mustn't get lost, we must be back by 3.30, we must remember we are ambassadors for our country and—" he paused again, primly— "we must wash our hands if we go to the toilet."

"No problem," Bodie said, "Brought up proper, we was," and heads together, laughing, they made their escape.

Once they had got through the crowds and run the gauntlet of lace stalls they found a beautiful walk along a high coastal path, passing by the cool and shady gardens of a lovely classical villa: they came to a viewing point and paused there to look out at the sparkling sapphire sea and the white sands beneath.

Doyle mused: "Bet the likes of George Cowley retire somewhere like this."

"Yeah," Bodie agreed with him, "and bloody Clacton for the likes of you and me."

Doyle propped his elbows on the railings and gazed out. His skin had turned an easy brown and his teeth looked very white; he looked fit and strong and healthy. His shirt, shortsleeved white aertex, was damp here and there; the hairs on his honey-coloured forearms were stiffly raised, trying in vain to bring his body heat down. There was nobody about; on impulse Bodie ducked his head and laid his cheek there for a moment on Doyle's arm, breathing in the warm scent of the other man's body, always a familiar background to a life where he was often confined in small spaces with Ray Doyle: sweat and soap and sometimes, but not today, gunsmoke. Here in Italy he and Doyle were just men, just tourists: but they had something very special about them today: they had kissed in the night and made each other come, and nobody in the world knew it, a secret they would never share with another living soul.

Withdrawing his gaze from the view, Doyle looked down at the dark head, felt the graze of Bodie's mouth gentle on his skin, and said: "If Fred and Edna come around that corner right now you can do the talking," but he didn't sound bothered.

Against his lips the other man's skin was salty, warm. Bodie said, quiet, intense, "I want—"

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Let's do it again. Ray. Let's."

"Right here?" Doyle scoffed, but there was tension in his own body now, the veins in his forearms standing out stark and blue. Desire spread through Bodie's blood like a sickness: he slipped an arm around Doyle, found and fingered the tiny bud of his nipple through damp cotton. And Doyle stood there registering the shock of it, eyes closing for a second, blanking out the blue dazzle of the sea and Bodie's eyes beguiling him, the better to focus on the feel of Bodie's warm, strong fingers pinching him, sending thrilling messages all across his nerves and down to his cock.

Bodie came closer still, grazed his sensitive ear with the lightest of whispers, a thought which had come to him last night at a crucial moment—

"I'll go down on you, Ray, just say you want me to."
The offer was mad, extravagant, dangerous: anyone could come round here at any moment, but Doyle's eyes, wild, tempted, met his, and for a moment time stood still for them—

"Oh yes, I want you to," Doyle whispered back to him at last. "Gonna swallow it for me, are you?"

A huge jolt hit Bodie just like that, his cock swelling, throbbing. He stared at Doyle without saying anything. Electricity alive between them: the heat in the air beating down. And then a sudden babble of voices nearby, coming nearer. Doyle actually jumped, fingers whipping into his armpit for his gun, and then his arm dropped empty down by his side as he moved to look out at the view again, and Bodie's own hand trembled as he raised it to smooth down his hair and aim a friendly grin at the tourists coming their way.

Without a word Doyle swung away from the sea view and began to move off fast down the narrow path. Bodie followed him, heart like a hammer in his chest; sweat prickled all over him, his loins as heavy as lead, the pulse of his blood banging in his veins.

That was the end of Bodie's sightseeing: to this day he could tell you nothing about the elegant little town of AnaCapri and the beautiful white villa of Axel Munthe, save that the heat of the sun beat down on him and his head swam with the wine they had with an untasted lunch, and desire for Doyle intoxicated him still more

than that; so that every sense in him urged him on to hunt him, kiss him, force him if he had to.

They were lunching on the terrace of the first hotel they had come to, overlooking the magnificent panorama of the cliff and the ocean: the food was going to cost a packet but Bodie was not thinking about that. In the shade of a potted cypress tree, beneath the white iron fretwork table his knee pressed against Doyle's, hard. His partner was leaning forward, chin almost on his forearms, peering out over the terrace to the cliffs below. His curls shone copper in the sun; the nape of his neck was damp.

"Come in the heads with me," Bodie said, low and fast, and Doyle turned a fierce little smile on him, the chipped tooth flashing.

"No thanks, Bodie, be just my luck to get done for indecent behaviour."

Just the way he said it, low and sexy, indecent made Bodie's heart thrill and flutter, nor less the knowledge that Doyle had said it to arouse him. He sought out Doyle's eyes and stared at him very hard. "You look good enough to eat today."

Doyle lowered his lashes. "Yeah, so you said." He looked up quickly, to catch the hard and hungry gaze. "What is it with you today, Bodie? Oysters or something?"

"It's you, something about you's just getting to me."
Doyle met his eyes amused; but Bodie's intensity, the moody passion of the man, seemed to be altering the very air around them; he was finding it very hard to breathe. Bodie looked very trim today; wearing the white trousers which suited him, almost a James Bond figure, cool and dark—and sexy. If Bodie just touched

And Bodie did touch him; his hand gripped Doyle's knee under cover of the table then slipped upwards over the hardness of his thigh and traced over the line of his cock with a finger.

"You're half way there already," he said softly, oddly touched by that, and it made him all but beg in uncharacteristic submission, voice low: "Come to the heads with me Ray, just get ourselves off so I can think straight again."

Doyle shook his head, his cock throbbing under the careless touch of Bodie's hand. Oh, brilliant. Now he was as desperate as Bodie. But not quite to the point of insanity.

"In a hotel? Come on, Bodie, this isn't a Hampstead cottage, y'know. Be waiters and tourists an' all in and out the whole time. Forget it. Look down there."

Leaning right over him to look, fingers still caressing

him again—

his thigh, inhaling the sunwarm scent of his hair Bodie saw what Doyle wanted him to: a narrow path winding down the cliffs.

Doyle stared at him with cool green eyes. "Could go for a walk." And Bodie's hand clenched tight at that.

Having paid the astronomical bill by credit card (Bodie's) they left the pretty terrace with its panoramic view and the white latticed tables and dark green cypress trees in pots and took the coastal path downwards. It was just wide enough for them to walk abreast: to the right of them there was a dizzying drop down to the dark blue Mediterranean. Shielded by rusty railings the path was steep, and rough in places, which was presumably why it was deserted. "Look," Doyle said, pointing further along, and soon they came to a little structure beside the path, an arch of ancient-looking stone, mossy in parts.

"A rest for weary travellers?" Doyle guessed, and poked his head in, then laughed. "Nah, mate, reckon you got yourself your cottage after all."

A comfort stop for weary travellers. Just some holes in the ground, and not much used these days from the look of it. Doyle put his nose in the air and sniffed: only a vague redolence of the shelter's purpose. He went to the back wall, slowly turned, and waited for Bodie to come to him, sliding his hands immediately beneath Bodie's shirt to touch his warm and naked skin.

"Oh Ray," Bodie said, the words dragged out of him as the dark head dropped onto Doyle's shoulder, and Bodie's hands stroked up and down his sides, slowly, languidly, "It's good, this, isn't it?"

Doyle smiled at that, and then with both hands he lifted Bodie's head and looked deep into his eyes while his fingertips stroked back the feathery dark hair at his temples:

"We can't go on with it though, Bodie, you do know that, don't you?"

Bodie looked back at him, took stock of Doyle's rare mood, and the fact that he meant it exactly and precisely: they could not go on with this once the holiday magic was revoked. The decision had been made, and it wasn't going to go to appeal.

In any case, Doyle was right. They could not go on with it. They could not.

"Yeah, so you keep sayin'. Better make the most of it now then," Bodie said harshly, "hadn't I?"

Hands twining in his shirt Doyle dragged him close and kissed him then, a long, deep, searching kiss, drinking down thirstily all he could discover in the winesweet darkness of Bodie's mouth. Falling in love with each other was not an option: at best they would lose their jobs, at worst it would kill them. But for all that Doyle could not hold back the moan which left him as Bodie's hand slipped between them to undo his belt and touch him secretly, thrillingly; he rested his head against Bodie's broad shoulder and looked down and watched the movement of Bodie's strong hand between their bodies and saw himself come before Bodie did, astonishingly sweet, swift; and then, panting, watching while Bodie finished the job on himself, head thrown back, cock in his hand, beautiful.

Doyle leaned on the railing and looked out to the sea again. A tiny yacht with a red sail was passing. An arm went around his shoulders and Bodie briefly kissed his cheek.

He leaned towards Bodie. "Feel better now, do you?" Bodie closed his eyes briefly. Doyle marvelled for a moment at the sooty length of his lashes. Then the eyes opened and all the ripples of the sea flickered across them. "Dunno what came over me."

"Me," said Doyle, lashes fluttering modestly, sardonic little smile. Bodie dug an elbow into his ribs.

"Not cross with me, then?"

"Nah, I love it," Doyle returned ironically. "None of my girlfriends ever get that hot for me."

Bodie grinned at that, quirky eyebrows raised. "Well, just remember, Doyle, you started it."

"You keep sayin' that. Not quite how I remember it."

"Doyle, you got up and went to the loo and tossed yourself off cool as you like."

"What was wrong with that? Like you said, I was in the loo."

"I think most people might have shut the door."

"Didn't have time."

Bodie's lips curved delightedly. "Randy old toad, aren't you?" Doyle laughed, and shoved him in the side. Bodie shoved him back. "How did that compare?" he nodded to the shelter behind them. "Ah, I know you, Doyle. I suppose you're going to tell me no-one can do it so well as you can yourself, go on, is that what you're going to say?"

The crease in Doyle's cheek deepened. "Well. 's true enough up to a point, innit?" He gazed at Bodie contemplatively. "But what you did seemed to do the trick, I'm not complainin'."

"Sounds like a complaint to me."

"No, I didn't mean it to be." Too difficult to explain if Bodie didn't know what he meant. In any case he suspected Bodie knew exactly what he meant: Bodie just seemed to like him to talk about it. Well, talk was free. They stayed there in silence for a few minutes more.

Loners by nature, the claustrophobic togetherness of Coach 99 did not suit them, and it was so beautiful here, the sky azure blue and the sea sparkling and glittering beneath, the little yacht, the fresh warm air. Then they began to lope up the path, enjoying the sheer physicality of it, making a little unspoken war of it, keeping in front, taking the shallowest breaths etc., until they came out onto the streets again, back in mainstream life.

They took a minibus down from the elusive heights of AnaCapri down to a halfway point, where there was a pleasant park to wander around—more of those glorious views out to sea—Bodie snapped Doyle sitting on a wall with a palm tree behind, brown skin, white shirt, cheeky grin. Then they meandered through the narrow cobbled streets window-shopping and found themselves eventually back at the harbour.

"Ever 'eard of the Blue Grotto?" Bodie asked of Doyle, reading one of the many signs chalked on blackboards.

"Nope," said Doyle thoughtfully, "Blue as in movie, d'you think?"

"Go and find out, shall we?"

Another magical experience, though Bodie had not been expecting anything. They went in a motorboat with about twenty other tourists, captained by an Italian youth with a deep and swarthy tan and the habit of crooning throaty Italian love songs to the lady passengers as he pulled the tiller this way and that and the boat sailed around the spectacular coastline. Bodie leaned over the edge of the boat and thrust his hands into the cool water rushing past the prow. Doyle raised an eyebrow at him, commenting deeply, "Sticky fingers?" and Bodie grinned back at him, knowing, cocky as the wind blew briskly and coolly through his hair, and Doyle's hands joined his in the water, feeling the pull and the force of it as the boat ploughed on through. They must be in deep water, and perhaps over rocks: the sea was a dark blue, the darkest, with a silvery sparkle in it put there by the rays of the sun.

"Colour of your eyes," Doyle said. He looked from one to the other, assessingly.

"Exactly."

It struck through him like a power surge: Ray Doyle, looking at him in that way. Made him shiver— "Careful, Ray," Bodie warned, low, sardonic. "As you keep sayin', no point starting off the romance of the century."

"Just makin' conversation," was Doyle's comment, and stayed quiet thereafter, eyes drifting over the horizon

Loud shouts heralded arrival at their destination—which was an uncompromisingly small hole at the foot

of a huge, black cliff towering to the skyline. Little rowing boats lay at anchor nearby, each crewed by another sunblackened Italian, now upping anchors and rowing as fast as they could towards the pleasure boats in the race for customers. When their turn came Bodie followed Doyle over the edge into the narrow, rocking boat indicated to them and the boatman began to row fast and furious for the hole.

"No preety ladies," he observed, looking back over his shoulder.

"Not this time," Doyle said.

"You like preety ladies?"

Doyle met Bodie's eye, gave him a little smirky grin. "You bet, mate," Bodie said, amiably enough, just in case the chap had some sort of a threesome in mind, though surely nothing much could be accomplished in a narrow rocking rowboat. The boat, propelled by those muscular Italian arms, was now approaching the impossibly tiny hole in the side of the cliff.

"Tell me we're not going in there," Bodie said, claustrophobia or whatever phobia it would be regarding tiny holes in the sides of mountainous cliffs striking in, but yes, going in they were, ordered imperiously by the boatman to lie almost flat on the floor of the boat as the low arch of rock passed overhead and sudden darkness made them blink.

They emerged into a vast black rocky cavern, highroofed. In here where no sunshine ever reached the air was dank and chill. But, astonishingly, the seawater had changed into the lightest, brightest turquoise, sparkling like liquid aquamarine all around the boat.

"That's amazing," Bodie said.

"You being sarcastic?"

"No, it's really amazing."

"Yeah, I was thinkin' that."

"Underwater floodlights?"

"No, I think it's a natural phenomenon. Didn't that American guy back on the boat say so?"

"Engleesh?" The boatman, moodily lounging on his oar, interrupted this exchange.

"Yup."

"I donta like Engleesh."

"Oh, right," Doyle said faintly, exchanging a look with Bodie.

"Know where we stand then mate, don't we?" Bodie said with a humorous curve to his lips.

"Smoll teeps," said the boatman with meaning. Bodie met Doyle's eyes. "I suppose we could swim out if it came to it."

"Just give 'im a beeg teep, Bodie, and let's stay dry." Bodie handed over a 5000 lire note. The boatman folded it and stuffed it into his pouch and began to row fast for the tiny crack the other side of which lay the world and daylight. "Duck!" Doyle said urgently as they approached at speed.

Bodie twisted his head around, searching for one.

Doyle hit him. "Idiot." And as their laughter echoed eerily in the vast spaces of the dark cavern, all around them the sparkling turquoise water flowed, incandescent with supernatural light: fantastic, magical, the stuff of dreams.

They were quiet on the way back in the coach. Bodie sat half-listening to the conversations around, unaware that two or three times his reply to some conversation-opener made to him by Suki or Fred or someone bordered on the curt; after a while their efforts died out and he didn't notice that, either. At one point he turned his head to the window to find Doyle watching him, quizzical: "Wanna sit by the window for a bit?"

"What's brought this on?" Bodie asked in disbelief. "Oh wait, I get it, sun's in your eyes, right?"

Doyle only shrugged. "Just thought you might like a turn at it, thassall." His eyelashes, long, tipped gold by the sun, fluttered up and down as he stared steadily at his partner. "Get a better view."

"I like this one. You're going brown," Bodie said, not smiling.

Doyle studied him in return. "Pink for you, mate. Just an English rose, aren't you?"

"Bring any suntan oil?"

"Nope, never thought of it."

"Pity," Bodie said, hard and dark, a million miles away, and he watched Doyle's eyes fly wide as he made the same connection Bodie had, and at about the same time. Without knowing he was doing it Bodie's hand clenched tightly, nails biting into his palm. "Could get some," Doyle said, tense, on edge. Bodie threw a glance his way.

"It was just a thought, Doyle." He nearly jumped out of his skin when Edna's face appeared through the divided back of the seats in front of them, followed by her hand bearing two Kit-Kats still in their scarlet wrappers:

"They've been in the coolbox."

"Thanks," said Bodie, taking them.

"Have a good time, did you?"

"Yeah, thanks."

After a further moment the face and the hand disappeared. Bodie unwrapped his Kit-Kat and ate it in several crunches. Beside him Doyle broke his in half, ate one finger and passed the other across. Taking it, Bodie said: "That's what I love about you, Doyle. Your sharing nature."

"Anything else?" Doyle asked, glancing sideways, definitely provocative.

Bodie's short reply was accompanied by a long, darkly blue stare: "You really want to know?"

The Pensione Alberto was humming tonight as the overexcited holiday makers got their packing done with their doors left open, called to one another and joked, and suitcases went in convoys down the stairs. Little clusters of people who had formed lifelong bonds in the claustrophobic confines of Coach 99 got into their groups and made plans for a last, wildly celebratory night out.

Up in Room 25 the two CI5 agents packed alone and nearly in silence. Used to a lifestyle of quick changes they were both efficient packers and the room was soon cleared and neat again, their kit bags standing ready by the door, left open for last minute things to be put in in the morning.

Finished first, Doyle threw himself flat on the bed. "We eating out tonight?" he asked with a yawning lack of enthusiasm.

Bodie watched with fascination as Doyle's hand began a lazy quest around his belt, found the buckle and began slowly to unfasten it one-handed. "Room Service?" he suggested.

Doyle smiled to himself, eyes closed. The belt flipped loose, the zip began to come down. "I shouldn't try askin', if I were you. The last person who asked—"

"I know. Ended up in the lasagne."

"But—" The hand had stilled now, just lying there.

"But what?"

"—we've gotta eat at some point. One of us better go to the shop and get some stuff to eat here."

"Which one of us were you thinking of?" Bodie said grimly.

Doyle thumped the pillow and shoved it under his head. "Take your time," he yawned, and firmly shut his eyes.

Bodie did not mind the early evening walk, especially in the light of what was to come tomorrow—at 6 AM they would be in that bloody coach again, for 33 hours on the trot!

And then, the day after, London. CI5.

The Italians in this non-touristy spa town did not seem to know about pre-packaged sandwiches a la Marks and Spencer, or even Littlewoods. He had to settle for bread rolls, which the dour old grocer sliced for him and stuffed in a generous quantity of thin cured ham and cheese. They still had whisky in the room, just about the right amount to see off tonight, and he bought some

beers as well and set off back to the Pensione with his shopping bags, meeting Fred and Edna on the way and managing to be a touch more gracious than he felt he had probably been of late. When he got back to the room he shut the door and locked it behind him and turned to look at the bed.

The shutters were closed and the curtains drawn. It took his eyes a moment to adjust. Doyle was lying on his back, asleep, long legs sprawling. His jeans were in a heap on the floor; he wore only the white aertex and dark underpants, one leg drawn up with bent knee, one hanging off the bed.

Bodie remembered to breathe after a moment, his lungs sucking in a vast amount of air; slowly, quietly, he set the shopping down on the floor, eyes never leaving the bed.

Christ, but he was turned on to Doyle at the moment and no mistake. Every hair on his skin was erect; he was so fiercely aroused, cock throbbing with an urgency he seldom felt these days, nerves screaming at him to whip it out and jerk himself off just standing there and who cared if Doyle woke up and saw him? That need not stop him, not any more.

And it would be wiser, too: get it over with, get rid of it before it had a chance to settle and take root, because he was getting into trouble here. He knew all the signs: deep, deep water. For he knew what he wanted now. What he wanted was not to mess around with Doyle on the fringes: he wanted to take him all the way, as far as they could go, take them both out to the limit and stay there.

His hand clenched. Sorry, Ray. Doyle, who had only wanted to play around a bit, have his fancy tickled for him; caught instead in the web of Bodie's obsession. Unless Bodie could stop it in its tracks before he ever knew.

And he did not want to. He knew he should be shocked at himself, but what he wanted now was the clearest, most direct and most primitive of urges, expressed at its most crude: to give it to Doyle long and hard up the arse, spit him like a pig on the prong of his cock and never mind if he squealed, thrust and thrust until he emptied out this huge and terrifying desire into Doyle's body. Here it is: pass it on.

Perhaps alarmed on some psychic level by the resonances in the room, Doyle stirred; his breathing faltered, then changed its rhythm. He opened his eyes to see his partner standing at the foot of the bed staring at him. He smiled, but Bodie did not smile back, just kept up that powerful smouldering stare.

"Whassamatter?" Doyle said, coming fully awake,

propping himself up on an elbow, and at the sound of his voice the demons fled back into the shadows, the fixed blaze of Bodie's eyes shattering as he blinked. After a moment the tense set of his mouth broke and reformed into a smile, a smile of great charm, tenderness almost, and it dragged an answering smile from Doyle.

"Did you get it?" he yawned, remembering Bodie's mission, and the bed dipped under Bodie's weight as Bodie rapidly knelt and took Doyle's bare foot in his hand, bringing it to his mouth and kissing the sole.

"Christ, Bodie, you're shaking." Doyle's head was falling back onto the pillow as Bodie kissed warmly and swiftly from his ankle bone right up his leg to the sensitive inner thigh. "Wha'happened? Suki chase you back or something?"

"Ssh." Bodie was deftly pulling the tight underpants down a little more. Doyle lifted his rump obligingly off the bed but Bodie did not take the offered chance to rip them off, simply settled them beneath his cock so that the tight cotton band rubbed against his balls, a welcome pressure which made his eyes fly wide: clever of Bodie, intuitive, or perhaps more intimate even than that, perhaps an echo of Bodie's own secrets "Nice," he said aloud, his body springing to life. He reached behind him to thump the pillow back into plumpness, propped it behind his head so that he could watch Bodie touch him, stroking his balls very carefully, stretching the skin tight over the precious sacs inside, tracing the line between them with a fingertip. Something women didn't seem to know about, yet it could bring him off quicker than almost anything. Then Bodie's lips touched him there, gently, almost reverently. "Oh, Bodie," he said, and shut his eyes for an instant.

"Bodie," he said again after a moment, just for the hell of it, just to hear his name. The touch of Bodie's mouth was so sweet it was making stars dance before his eyes—I didn't know anything could be so bloody wonderful, I want him to go on doing this forever—and that was when he remembered Bodie's promise.

"Want me to have a shower?" but Bodie shook his head briefly, nuzzled at his groin in the dark curls of hair there, and Doyle remembered that Bodie had a thing for words—

His voice was soft, seductive as he reached down and ran his fingertips through Bodie's dark hair: "Gonna make me happy, then? Suck it for me." His cock leapt off his belly as he spoke: obviously wasn't only Bodie liked to hear it.

And he watched all the while, stiffly aroused by the sight of Bodie opening his mouth wide and taking in his cock, sucking it immediately and deliciously deep, lips closing tightly over the root, then drawing sweetly down the length of the shaft in one gliding motion, making Doyle shudder and gasp.

This could be the quickest blowjob on record. Again, that sliding pleasure, and then Bodie's tongue flickered across the slit at the tip and fluttered around the frenulum in the most exquisite way. "Oh yeah Bodie, that's it—" and in willing response that delicious tongue fluttered around again and his balls lifted up, pressed and soothed by the constricting band beneath them. Christ, he was going to come—

Had Bodie remembered to lock the door? He could hear noises outside, people talking, passing by just a few feet away from them. God, he was so nearly there. He looked down at his own body in a sensuous sprawl, seeing what someone would see if they opened the door and looked into the room: his legs wide apart, Bodie's dark head moving at his groin in unmistakable activity, unchanged since the days of Pompeii. As Bodie's mouth glided again from root to tip Doyle reached down to touch Bodie's lips with a finger, touching too his own cock in Bodie's mouth, and the thought flashed into his head that a photograph of this would be a high security risk, blackmailable material, a matter of national security: 3.7., in an Italian bedroom, sucking off 4.5.

His hips lifted off the bed: he cried out.

Bodie finished it off. Doyle's last, yearning thrust hit the back of his throat: the liquid pulsings slid sweetly down. He swallowed it all before he had to cough. There. Easy. What a way to make someone happy. He rested his head on Doyle's belly near the damp curl of his cock, pleased with himself: that had been good for Doyle, a damn sight better than being fucked up the arse by a big hard cock. He had the urge well in hand now, Doyle was safe. Just as well too: how nearly had he blown it? Rape was probably not on Doyle's list of fantasies: not that way round, anyway.

He had even enjoyed it in an odd sort of way: it had been a thrill to see his cool partner so wild for it. If Cowley had marched into the room and stood by the bed uttering shocked Scottish oaths—och, ye bad, bad laddies—Doyle would have begged Bodie to carry on regardless, he'd lay money on it. Doyle was stroking his hair gently as Bodie's head lay on his belly; and that made him feel—

"Bodie." The throaty whisper above him made him lift his head.

"What?"

"Come up here."

"Hang on a bit." He rolled over and got off the bed, went to take off his clothes, folding them automatically

and leaving them on the chair. Then he lay back down on the bed in the circle of Doyle's arms; Doyle was kicking off his underpants then lying still, half under him. Bodie laid his head on the aertex shirt Doyle still wore and listened to the kick of his heart.

"Well," he said deeply, "can't tell me you can do that better by yourself."

Doyle chuckled near to his ear. "Wasn't going to."

"Ever tried?"

"Have you?"

Bodie stroked a fingertip very carefully around the contours of the other man's lips. "You've got a beautiful mouth."

"Is that a hint, yeah?"

If not exactly enthusiastic, Doyle sounded perfectly cool about it. As if he would. God, the thought of it: Doyle's gorgeous mouth closing willingly around his cock.

"There are other ways, you know," came the low voice in his ear.

Yeah, right. But getting sucked off by Ray Doyle was not something he was going to pass up in favour of a handjob. Come on, Doyle. You can do it. It's better than doing it to a bird, I promise you.

Impatient with his silence, "Oh, come on, Bodie, don't tell me you haven't thought about us fucking."

Well, that was—Bodie's head shot up off the pillow: he stared. In the semi-darkness of the shuttered room it was not easy to read the subtler shadings of expression.

Doyle remarked, "Must be your lucky day, mustn't it? You get to fuck me, and no, I haven't ever done it before." He gazed at Bodie consideringly. "Will that make it—special for you? Yeah, I reckon that'll push your buttons, Bodie. I just bet deflowering virgins is right up your street." Silence. Bodie said nothing. Doyle prodded him with a lean hard finger. "Ey. This is the only chance you're gonna get, mate, so I'd say yes quick if I were you."

Bodie closed his mouth, his heart thudding in shock, and then opened it again. "You don't really want to, do you?"

"I don't want to go back and always wonder what it might have been like."

Finish it off with one final act, the ultimate. No daydreams necessary to disturb their lives back home, never to have to wonder what it might have been like: they would have done it all, played it through to the last card and they could shut the door on it for all time. Still Bodie said nothing.

Doyle was lying flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "And while we're on the subject—this is another thing, mate, that you aren't going to tell Murphy—'Oh,

by the way Murph, good old Doyle let me screw him when we were in Italy'—"

Bodie was shaking his head in disbelief. "Ray, you know I wouldn't."

Still lying there, cool and relaxed, Doyle gave him a smile, surprisingly sweet. "Just checkin'. Wouldn't do much for my macho image if they knew I let you up my arse, now would it?"

He meant it. Bodie felt a sense of disbelief: he was going to get what he wanted. For all the wrong reasons, probably, but anyway he was going to get it. He leaned up on one elbow over Doyle, touched his hair, stroked a curl around one finger, hardly aware. "You won't like it," he said, bluntly, abruptly.

Doyle looked up at him for a moment, and then a quirky little smile twisted his mouth; the flawed tooth flashed rakishly. "Well, that's okay, Bodie. I don't plan to get the taste for it, y'know."

Something about the way he said it, a sort of sadness, courage, moved Bodie: go out in a blaze of glory, is that what you're thinking? Well, how wrong can you be.

Helpless nonetheless, Bodie leaned down to kiss him, and found the taste of his mouth intoxicating enough to stay for a while. But all while thoughts raced around his mind: temptation warred with intuition. And temptation won. At last he withdrew to whisper ironically, "I've got a feeling we shouldn't do this, Ray. So don't blame me afterwards."

Doyle said, almost bitterly, "I won't."

Bodie kissed him again, and let his hands range over him freely and possessively, and whispered to him, "Suntan oil?"

Doyle only took a moment to answer, though Bodie heard him catch his breath; perhaps that made it all too real for him, brought it right down out of the hearts and flowers, blaze of glory league, but Doyle was always practical: "Olive—in my gripbag."

Trancelike, Bodie got out of bed and groped around in the bag and the heavy bottle came straight away to his hand. Back on the bed he unscrewed the cap and the peculiar aromatic scent of it was in the air: very Italian. His erection seemed to have subsided, awed perhaps by the sense that something more profound than sheer lust was abroad, but Doyle took care of that for him, sitting up, stripping off his own shirt, and Bodie looked at him, the neat, well-defined muscles overlying bone, and touched his nipples then kissed each in turn, lips suckling, yearning, while Doyle caressed his cock, stroking it back into stiffness, finger and thumb ringing him as carefully and exactly as he might oil the barrel of his Browning.

Doyle poured the stuff into the palm of his hand and smoothed it onto Bodie's cock and Bodie tipped his head back to watch: the tall rod rising, redly tipped, from the dark hair at his groin and Doyle's fingers on him, stroking, then slipping beneath to cradle his testes in a firm, comforting grip and Doyle's curly head tilted up to look into Bodie's face, a slow grin beginning: "That nice, was it?" He tossed Bodie the bottle. "Do me—just for fun." And as Bodie began to unscrew it— "'Ang on. This is going to be messy, Bodie, better chuck some towels on the bed."

Good job one of them was thinking straight. Bodie eyed the white counterpane with horror, stripped it off and left it over the chair, then got their own bath towels from the bathroom, where they still hung over the rail ready for last-minute packing in the morning. While Doyle shunted over Bodie laid the towels side by side on top of the sheets. "Just make sure you don't slip through the crack."

Doyle leaned back on both elbows and grinned lopsidedly up at him. "As the actress said to the bishop."

"Drycleaning bill arriving in London could be embarrassing." Bodie poured out the last of the whisky, took two small sips, and gave the rest to Doyle, whose eyes regarded him thoughtfully over the rim of the glass as he downed it in three rapid swallows.

"Think I need to be anaesthetised, do you?"

"Might help." He poured some of the oil into his hands, rolled it about to warm it. Doyle's cock grew bolder as he rubbed it sweetly and seductively, but it was time to move on, his body was arrogant, demanding my turn. He's had his.

"Turn over," Bodie said. If Doyle was nervous he wasn't showing it, rolling in one neat quick movement onto his stomach, then drawing himself up onto his knees and burying his forehead in the hard white pillow. The muffled voice floated back to Bodie, "Leave enough for a stir-fry, will you? That was expensive, you know, extra-virgin."

"Like you then." Bodie bit him lightly on the buttocks: lean, muscular, very different from a woman's. He laid his face there for a moment. The smell of the oil and Doyle's body was making him feel strange, heated. "Ray..."

"What--?"

"Nothing." He was thinking—that for all their bravado, this was a tragedy in the making. The end of it all, before they were truly ready for the beginning. And like the song—there's no-one left can help us now/we're in too deep/there's no way out.

Bodie stroked him between the cheeks of his arse,

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finding the little depression there with his oily fingers, circling it then pressing inside. More oil—and Bodie looked down at his own cock, darkly swollen, rearing up towards his chest. "What's that thing—about passing a camel through the eye of a needle?"

"Yeh, but take heart, kingdom of heaven's supposed to be just the other side." Doyle, flip as ever, wringing from Bodie a tortured grin..

"Well, I'll let you know." He shook out more oil and stroked it inwards. In other circumstances he would have enjoyed something like this for the sheer crude thrill of it. Doyle's body was relaxing for him now, opening outwards. Doyle shivered and thrust back at him, which looked like encouragement. "Ah, that's—" Bodie heard him swallow— "Yeah, I like that."

"Think this is all a dream, Doyle?" Bodie asked him shortly; he was having difficulty breathing, looking, privileged, at the shining entrance to Doyle's body.

"Could be, I suppose. Had one like it once. That must be enough..."

"Look, if it means that much to you, I'll buy you another bottle."

"Oh yeah, and where will you get it?"

"Harrods do it. And it's cheaper there."

"You say the sweetest things."

Doyle was so cool, so together, just lying there waiting to get screwed; Bodie didn't trust himself one half so much as Doyle seemed to. The vulnerability and the courage of the man was doing peculiar things to him, really getting to him: in another minute he was going to lose it, his body on a countdown now, all too ready to run away with him. There was something he had to say—

"Ray?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me if it hurts, will you?"

"Oh yeah, you know me."

He did know him. Doyle would draw blood on his tongue first. "I'll try to go slow, okay?" He straddled Doyle's back, knees outside his thighs, hands on his shoulders, and let him feel the tip of Bodie's cock at his anus. Just that much made Bodie swallow, hard. "—But don't count on it."

"Just do what you have to do, all right? Want me to lie down?"

"No, stay like this—" He settled one hand on the small of Doyle's back.

"Can you—" and with that same intuition that kept them alive on the streets Doyle used his hands to open himself up. The sight of that made him less careful than he had meant to be and Doyle sighed slowly, a moan perhaps held back by gritted teeth as Bodie's cock passed through the tight muscle and sank into the other man's body, where it was hot, and tight, and desperately exciting.

"Okay?" he whispered, holding himself back with a terrible effort; drops of sweat slid down his temples and fell onto the sharp planes of Doyle's shoulder blades.

Doyle's 'yeah' was only a sigh but it was too late now to change his mind, Bodie knew it and Doyle must know it too. His cock was committed now to see it through whether Doyle liked it or not. And he probably didn't: this whole thing was an abomination, a sin against nature, a crime still in several parts of the world, including this one for all he knew. But the funny thing was that Bodie's body had gone off the scale on it, electric with delight, reacting as if this was the best and only way to do it and for Doyle's sake he was having to fight it every step of the way.

But trying it slow and gentle only seemed to stimulate him more. When, soon, one quick hard thrust was irresistible only Doyle's answering gulp of breath gave him the strength to stop. Then he stayed just exactly where he was, trembling with the effort of it, one hand reaching around Doyle to toy roughly with his nipples—

"Sorry—"

"'S okay."

"'S just, it feels so—"

"-so, what?"

Bodie half laughed, half fought for breath— "wonderful—"

"Does it?" Doyle sighed, curious, exhilarated. In the moment of stillness Bodie reached down to touch his own body where it joined Doyle's, immediate heat flashing over his body at the sight of the tiny glistening opening stretched so wide around the base of his cock. It nearly did for him: he felt his balls draw up, get ready for it—

With a superhuman effort Bodie pulled himself out, very, very gently, wincing

"Now what's the matter?" Doyle's head poked up from the pillow.

"Nothing." He took one sharp breath, and then another. "Just—too good, that's all. You're so—Turn over, will you?"

After a moment Doyle rolled onto his back. "Well, make your mind up." He looked very pale, shadows and pain and the marked cheekbone giving his face a sort of delicacy. Kingdom of heaven was about right: and here I am, fucking an angel.

"Gotta slow myself down, my angel," Bodie said aloud, looking down into his partner's face, taking

another deep, calming breath, "Or it's all going to be a bit too fast and furious for you... You've got the sexiest mouth on the squad," tracing it with a slow finger. "Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Nope, you're the first," Doyle said, considering, breathing. Probably relieved at the break he was getting. Die before he'd admit it, though, and Bodie loved him for that.

"Mm. Lovely mouth. I'd love to see it round my cock..."

But now I never will.

As a calming thought this was not well-qualified. Maybe kissing him, with its diffuse pleasures, would slow the dizzying pace of things. Still it was only moments later that Bodie raised his head, a last lingering parting of their lips, and breathed in again, gathering strength. "This isn't going to take long, Ray. Can you stand it this way?" Rearing up he slid his hands beneath Doyle's thighs, urged them onto his own shoulders, and his cock, quick on the uptake, found the angle for him. Doyle the yoga expert adapted to it with ease, knotting his legs behind Bodie's neck and arching his hips:

"Come on then Bodie, go for it, I can take it."

"I know you can," whispered Bodie, eyes closing as he entered Doyle for the second time, the last time, easier now, as if Doyle's body knew him now. As if he belonged.

And he did belong.

Oh, we shouldn't have done this.

We shouldn't...

Once and once only. A sweet, sharp pain stabbed Bodie's heart, like the pain he was all the time aware of causing Doyle, and Doyle taking it for his sake without a murmur, with a sort of tender understanding that Bodie could not help it, did not want to hurt him, it was just implicit in the act. He tried to hold onto the feelings, every one of them, so that he would have something to remember; Doyle's wide-open eyes the only glimmer of light in the darkness of the room, the sweetness of the mouth beneath his own, the abrasion of stubble as their chins grazed together, the willing lips that parted for his tongue. Doyle's hands gripping his hips, not to hold him off but to pull him closer; the sights and sounds and smells, oh, the sweet intoxicating scents of the two of them, his sweat rubbing on Doyle's, his cock deep, deep inside him, lovely, the feeling of it...

He rested his head against Doyle's on the pillow, and felt their hearts beating together, and the pulses of his own body inside the other man's, way outside his control now, he had lost it for sure, lost it all.

"You see? I knew it. Now look what you've done—"

and Doyle's eyes were wide, wider as he began to understand: "I'm going to come, Ray," Bodie whispered, feeling it start to happen; a last moment of stillness, of peace for them, and then it began; the last and most powerful thrust, the moment of glory suddenly there inside him, spreading, and then a shattering shockwave of pleasure breaking inside him, his body lifting and coming and falling apart all in one go.

And then afterwards an astonished, exhausted wonder at the beauty of it all, and the fierce, possessive gratitude for Doyle, who had let him do this, not knowing what he would unleash upon them: well, but how could he have known? How could either of them: Bodie had earlier dreamed of rape and feared it; by what means could he have known it was not violence but tenderness which would defeat them?

He was gripping onto Doyle's hand like a lifeline. At one point he lifted his head, but Doyle drew him back down again against his own wet body, sweat drying, cooling off now. They lay there together, quiet, hit by all the same things. All the universe off-centre, and only themselves to blame.

"Sorry, Doyle," Bodie said at last, his cheek pressed, hard, to the thinly fleshed bones of Doyle's shoulder, "Just happened..."

"Can't blame you. My idea, wasn't it? And it was special for you all right, wasn't it?"

That bloke had got it wrong, about the universe. Not with a whimper, but a bang... "Bit too special, mate...
I'll get over it," Bodie added, harshly. In about ten years.

"Will you?" was Doyle's response to that.

Bodie lifted his head again and looked at the clock, and deciphered the numbers. It was still early evening, they could go out, get a meal, try to rediscover some normality.

But at the moment he could not stand that there were other people in the world: all he wanted to do was stay here, and lie close against the other man's side, and look at him, and feel him breathe.

He felt so possessive that it hurt him, fiercely jealous, another side-effect he had not counted on. What price the lovely Sylvie now—? He would take a gun and make her eat it if she so much as looked at Ray as if she owned him.

Owned him! She wasn't fit to touch him.

"This must be how women feel," Doyle said, a little later. "Virgins. You know." Outside the window someone shrieked down in the square below and someone else replied. Fun and games. "The first time. No wonder they fall in love."

"Don't, Doyle." He squeezed his eyes shut.

"No. I'm just sayin'. I always wondered what it must feel like."

"Well, now you know."

"Yeah. Now I know."

"Did you really dream about it?"

"Eh?" Doyle lifted his head off the pillow to look at his face, then he remembered. "Yeah—once or twice." "Was it like that?"

"Yeah. Sometimes it was me fucking you. Anyway, it was the two of us."

"Sure it wasn't Cowley?" A certain grim teasing seemed in order. They had to fight their way back to the surface somehow; couldn't stay down here forever drowning...

"Then once I was with this bird—not that long ago—she came around but I wasn't in the mood, you know? Too tired or something, but you know how they expect you to get it up any time they feel like it, take it very personal if you can't. We'd been shooting that day, you and me, you had the Uzi on the targets, you couldn't miss, even Macklin couldn't get it past you. It kept coming back to me, picture of you, standing there with the gun in your hand. Sort of ugly sneer on your face—Don't mess with me, mate, that sort of look."

How little we know of other people. "And?" Bodie prompted, since the story seemed to have run itself out. Doyle roused himself from reverie.

"Only thing did the trick for me. So I just let her have it. Must have been the quickest fuck in history but she didn't complain."

Even Bodie was grinning by now. "Didn't tell her, did you?"

"What do you think?" Doyle's thigh brushed against his; and suddenly it was all there again, that fierce, hurting need to touch him, hold him, and he gathered him up in his arms, speechless, and buried his mouth in Doyle's ridiculous curls..

"It's funny, innit?" Doyle said softly, deeply against him, "I never knew it would be like this."

That wrung a smile out of Bodie, and even that hurt him. "And if you had—?"

"I'd still have wanted to. Even more."

"Can't exactly have been the best sex of your life, though, eh, Doyle?" Unlike mine...

Doyle was looking at him incredulously. "You think that sort of thing happens to me all the time?"

"Didn't make you come though, did it?" Bodie said, and for all the world he could not stop the bitter twist to his mouth.

Doyle was silent for a moment, thinking that one over. Then: "It was still the most beautiful thing I've ever had done to me."

The delight that bounded through Bodie was ill-informed: it was just one more thing that would hurt him later. "Was it?"

"I've had women say that to me, haven't you? Doesn't matter whether they come or not. I never quite believed them. Know better now, don't I?."

Danger, looming fast and sharp from nowhere, like rocks at night in black water. "Don't, Doyle. Please don't."

But Doyle kept on, relentless. "You know, I'll always—Doing that with you—changed something. Best thing I've ever done in my life."

"And the most stupid," Bodie added harshly; he hadn't cried in years.

"Well, I thought you'd want me to tell you."

Silence, or nearly. Doyle found Bodie's face with his hands, stroked around his eyes with the pads of his thumbs. "Hey, Bodie. We really screwed this one up, didn't we?"

"You're telling me." He had already considered every possible way out, and ditched them all. Jacking in their jobs, running away together, was the stuff of childish fantasy, nothing more. He knew what they would be doing tomorrow: not making more strange and beautiful discoveries in each other, not getting on with the greatest love affair the world was never going to see. No, tomorrow they would be tossing that in the bin and taking the first step of the journey back to the real world. A one-way ride: from here, to there.

There was nothing he could do. He had never felt more helpless. Facing up for the first time to the fact that he could not change the world, at least not in any way that counted. He could help George Cowley balance right and wrong until the day he died for him; but here was something he could never have.

He looked down into his partner's face, and Doyle looked back up at him. For a very long while no-one spoke in the room.

Bodie stroked Doyle's hair with his fingers, very gently. "I'll never forget this, Doyle. Never. Just because I never mention it—I don't want you to think it didn't mean anything to me."

"I know what it meant. Hey, look. Maybe once a year we'll get a bottle of Chianti and remember. Like an anniversary—no, okay, stupid idea. Ssh. Bodie. It's okay."

All night they stayed there in the darkened room of the Pensione Alberto in the still Italian night, close, touching, jealous of each second lost to sleep. And in the cool fresh dawn, they packed up everything and left the room as clean and as empty as if they had never ET IN ITALIA EGO...

inhabited it and took the coach back home, the longest journey they had ever made and with nothing for them at the end of it.

Thanks for everything, mate. Was nice, while it lasted.

"The best part of our lives was over much too soon"

My journey through Italy inspired this story... Some of the things happened—except that I did not (quite) fall in love, and I did not lose the dreadful Coach 99 child in Rome—though by that time I would quite have liked to. Some names have been changed.

Coach 99, however, appears as itself.

Background listening essential for the creation of this story:

Bon Jovi—These Days (the stars ain't out of reach)

Gin Blossoms—I'll follow you down

Soul Asylum—Runaway Train (we're in too deep, we can't go back...)

Belinda Carlisle—In Too Deep (likewise)

Dodgy-In a Room

And, most of all—

Pulp—Something Changed. Jarvis Cocker's sighs are inspirational.

Sebastian, June 1996

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