

# JINGLE BALLS

OR

# HARD TIMES



*So what does a Scotsman wear under his kilt? Or more to the point, what does Bodie wear under Cowley's kilt and how will Doyle gain access to it? Here's a little piece that brings together the traditional CI5 Christmas party, a bit of congenial drinking and singing, and...jingle balls? Oh well, for a hard time, call...*

Susan Fischer had, or so Murphy who knew everything claimed, been known to forget to pick up her salary cheque until Betty chased her down. Susan Fischer, or so rumour—and Murphy—had it, had been known to not bother filing for expenses for three whole months in a row. Susan Fischer, obviously, had another source of income. And as long as Cowley didn't seem worried about it, the rest of CI5 was more than happy to sit back and enjoy either the fruits of her unspecified labours or the wastrelling of her family fortunes. Whichever it was, she had a three-storey house in a very pleasant London suburb, an enormous garden with a solid stone wall around it to keep the masses out—or when it came time for CI5's annual Christmas party, an extremely high wall to keep the plebs in.

The date of the party was always somewhat flexible, beginning on whichever January night the Christmas bomb season finally ended for them and finishing whenever all members of CI5 had succumbed irrevocably to the copious amounts of liquid refreshment served. This year,

the party had started at 2.30 P.M. on the first Thursday of the New Year, and by 4 P.M., the house was draped with equal tawdriness in Christmas and New Year gilt and CI5 agents in various stages of relaxation.

By midnight, the first shift was well over the eight and the second shift was already half-way under the table. Or, to be specific, Bodie was several over the eight and Doyle was under the table. Doyle was, despite all appearances to the contrary, working very hard. It wasn't easy to get absolutely paralytic when you had his capacity to hold his booze, but he working on it, staring up in rapt enthusiasm at the table above him, the table in question being of steel and glass and strewn with bottles and cans and crisps and half-eaten Christmas cake, the icing and marzipan gone, only the leaden weight of fruit cake left. The table was also strewn with something else. Or someone else, to be accurate. And that singing and dancing and thoroughly pickled someone was Bodie. In the hungover sanity of morning, those few whose memories were even vaguely intact would be enormously

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grateful that Cowley was absent, their boss' temper being somewhat uncertain when it came to the taking of certain things in vain. Such as his kilt...

How Bodie had managed to get his hands on it, no-one knew and no-one was particularly keen to ask. In fact, for all they knew, Bodie's convoluted tale of purloined security keys and falsified phone messages calling Cowley half-way across London could be the gospel truth. Or he could have borrowed the thing from one of his military cronies and this could be another one of Bodie's jokes, the egg being on the face of whomever he blackmailed into returning 'Cowley's' kilt, stuck trying to explain to his boss why he was in said boss' bedroom stuffing a kilt into the aforementioned boss'—or imminently ex-boss'—wardrobe. Still, it was a good joke, even if it stopped here with Bodie doing his Harry Lauder. Doyle giggled to himself, muttering something to his left shoulder about how typical it was that Bodie, even for a stupid joke, would do things properly.

"Still don't know what a Scotsman wears under his kilt," Doyle snickered to the glass in his hand, some part of his fuddled mind trying to work out how to get another mouthful of his gin without getting it right in the face instead. Something about sitting up, he thought, then remembered what he'd been telling the sadly limp slice of lemon in his glass. "Oh, yeh, don't know what a Scotsman wears under his kilt," he lied, so that he could tell his lemon the punchline, "but I know what a Scouseman wears under his!"

This striking him as being hysterically funny, he collapsed into giggles, dissolving into the plush pile of carpeting, controlling himself only when he realised that his drink was laughing: it was dripping. Onto his nose. Stickily. That stopped him long enough for him to wipe his face, somewhat haphazardly and severely inefficiently—it is, after all, extremely difficult to find the nose on your face when the hand on the end of your arm doesn't seem to know where your face is—and to lie back and gaze, ponderingly, at the sight that was prancing above him, ponderously.

Dimly, he was aware that there was a loud chorus of 'Donald where's yer troosers' going on, although some people seemed to be having

trouble with both the Donald and the troosers, but he dismissed all that to lie there, watching Bodie from this exceedingly interesting angle. He was half cross-eyed by now, and the rest of him was entirely pickled, but even so, he could still appreciate the view above him. It wasn't only Bodie's kilt that was swinging and swaying with such masculine aplomb. Bodie's dangly bits were dangling beautifully, and Doyle grinned up at them with seraphic delight. A warm glow suffused him: he *liked* Bodie. He'd always liked Bodie. Course, he didn't go about saying stuff like that, couldn't do, could he, but still, he liked Bodie.

He swung his glass in a vague approximation of the strangulated chorus being warbled with such enthusiasm and inaccuracy, and kept on smiling up at Bodie. He really did like Bodie. Really, really liked him. Thought the world of him, really. But not that he'd ever say a thing like that, of course. He frowned then, trying to work out why it was that he'd never told Bodie that he really liked him, honest, he really did. He frowned all the harder and worried at this complicated problem. Seriously, why'd he never told Bodie he honestly liked him, really? Lots of blokes liked other blokes, told them all the time. In fact, and the tip of his tongue stuck out as he tried to catch a few drops from his rather sloppy attempt at another drink, he'd told Murphy, that was it, Murphy, told him just the other day that he liked him. His brow furrowed again. Had he told Murph that he liked Bodie, or that he liked Murphy? Or was it that he'd told Murphy that Murphy liked Bodie? Everyone liked Bodie, even Cowley. Christ, and he giggled again, half choking, Cowley'd even been flirting with Bodie the other day. Well, almost nearly just about flirting. All right, he finally sorted out for himself, if it'd been him saying to Bodie what Cowley had said to Bodie, then he'd've been flirting with Bodie. He thought...

Now that was worth thinking about, he decided, glazed eyes focussing with sudden brightness on the bizarre Highland fling being executed—without benefit of Counsel at that—over his head. Did he fancy Bodie? As well as really liking him? Well, of course he fancied Bodie, stood to reason, didn't it, the way his prick stood to attention every time he saw Bodie. He reran the thought through his mind and

decided he liked the pun. “Stands to reason,” he said out loud to himself because it warranted repeating, “I fancy him because my prick stands to attention.” The chuckle was its usual filthy self, and thereby ignored by the listing crowd around him. He wasn’t surprised, which was hardly unexpected, considering he was well aware of his feelings for Bodie, and simply went through this every time he got drunk and disorderly. In fact, sometimes he got so drunk and so disorderly, he’d even been known to chance his arm with Bodie. Chance his other bits with Bodie, too, for that matter. Now, he wondered quite quietly, when was the last time he’d tried it on with Bodie? He pondered this as best he could, while he tried to fish the spilled slice of lemon from the general vicinity of his curls.

The drawback of getting drunk enough to drop all inhibitions was that the memory tended to go as well. “Oi, Bodie,” he shouted, thumping rather dangerously on the underside of the table, “when was the last time I tried to get up your bum?”

Bodie, obviously quite carried away with his novel rendition of ‘Westering Home’ and even more novel wording of what had once been a perfectly clean and decent song, didn’t hear Doyle. The ubiquitous Murphy, however, was a horse of an entirely different colour.

“My birthday party,” he said, sprawling on the floor beside Doyle.

“Tis not your birthday party,” Doyle retorted, sharp as a marshmallow. “It’s a Christmas party. And a New Year’s party.” He frowned again, something he did even more often drunk than sober. “Suppose you could argue it’s Jesus’ birthday though. Your middle name Jesus or something?”

Murphy gazed into green eyes that were about as clear and steady as pond scum. “Joseph.”

“No, not Joseph, you great wally, *Jesus*,” Doyle repeated with the infinite patience of the truly sozzled.

“No it’s not Jesus, it’s Joseph,” Murphy slurred right back, not quite sure why Doyle was arguing with him about what his middle name was. “What’s yours?”

Doyle’s grin was beatific. “Mine’s a gin and tonic, thanks,” he said, delighted that Murphy was back to making sense again. “And make it

a double while you’re at it.” He contemplated his sodden shirt front and added, slowly, as an afterthought to Murphy’s confused and retreating back, “And a new glass. This one’s got a hole in it.”

Afloat on the sweet anticipation of a nice new drink—where had the other one gone?, he wondered, looking around vaguely, then decided to blame that Murphy. He’d said something about a drink, probably stolen it, the bastard—Doyle’s wandering eyes found something to focus on. Bodie. Doyle grinned again, gazing in hazy adoration at the display going on above him, glowering when it dawned on him that Bodie was clambering down from the now decidedly shaky table. “Oi,” he said again, then decided not to bother, squirming out from under the table to regain the view that had been so inconsiderately taken from him. A few sinuous squiggles of his hips on the floor, and he was grinning happily again, flat on his back, head between Bodie’s widely planted feet, Bodie’s genitals on Northern display in glorious splendour.

Some song was winding to an end, and that made Doyle suddenly, profoundly, sad. Wasn’t right to have a party without a good knees-up. As his knees weren’t capable of getting him up anywhere, he settled instead for a good singsong.

“Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,” he began, a drunken bacchanal instantly joining him, mangling the words into dum-de-dums as lyrics were forgotten or tongues simply gave up the ghost.

The carpet was tickling his ear, so he gave himself a good scratch, and as his hand swung back in the general direction of his side, he chuckled again. It was tempting. Too, too tempting. But he shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t. Not in front of everyone. But everyone knew he liked Bodie, didn’t they? Cept Bodie of course, but Bodie wasn’t meant to know. He wasn’t sure *why* Bodie wasn’t supposed to know, but it made sense, he thought, bemused. But everyone knew he liked Bodie, and it was all right to let Bodie know when they were drunk, wasn’t that the rule?

But still, something in him said he really, really shouldn’t.

So of course, he really, really did. He reached his hand up, and his fingertips began tapping

Bodie's dangling balls in time with Doyle's singing.

"Jingle Balls, jingle balls, jingle all the way," he bellowed, blissfully unaware of the guffawing reaction all around him and Bodie's spectacularly shocked face. "Oh what fun it is to ride a big-pricked Bodie-ay, hey! Jingle balls, jingle balls..."

Bodie was looking at him. "You look dead weird upside down like that," Doyle said, more or less coherently.

"Am not upside down. Balls are supposed to be under the cock, not the other way around, so will you stop bashing me like that?"

"Aaah," Doyle lisped, despite the lack of esses, "don't you like it? Rather have me bonk you?"

It was a measure of how many measures of alcohol they had both imbibed that Bodie was perfectly content to stand there in front of all his colleagues with Doyle between his legs and Doyle's hand up his kilt. "Bonk?" he said, thinking about it.

"Yeh," and Doyle filled the room with his infamous laugh, "you know, *bonk*. It means," he winked conspiratorially and whispered loud enough to wake the dead, "fucking. D'you fancy a nice fuck then, Bodie?" And as Bodie appeared to hesitate, Doyle grabbed him by the cock and squeezed. Nicely.

"Not here."

Now this was extremely puzzling to Doyle. As far as he was concerned, a man needed it to be 'here'—i.e. his prick, because if his prick wasn't here, then he'd lost it, hadn't he, and then how would he be able to fuck a bloke. But, and his mind was slowly spiralling off, it'd be different if Bodie meant he didn't want it here—and he simply had to fondle the prick in question, a happy grin sliding over his face—then maybe it was because Bodie wanted it *there*. And his grin grew even lewder as his fingers fumbled between Bodie's buttocks. He was chuckling happily to himself: Bodie always *did* come up with good ideas, didn't he? "Fair enough, I'll fuck you instead. Course, I really fancied you fucking me, but if you don't want *it* here, well, that's okay by me." He stopped again, then erupted in hysterics. "That's good, innit? Okay *bi* me."

He was still laughing when Bodie had pulled

him to his feet and started leading them—both men, not just Doyle's feet—towards one of the numerous bedrooms.

"You bi?" Doyle asked as he fumbled up the stairs behind an equally wobbly Bodie. In fact, if that lurid yellow tartan didn't stop wiggling soon, he was liable to add to its colour scheme in a somewhat projectile manner. Bravely, he closed his eyes against the nausea of Buchanan tartan and sank to his knees, one hand on the hem of Bodie's kilt to keep him going in the right direction. Funnily enough, it was easier now that he had his eyes shut—the inner red haze was so much less distracting than the wavering walls and strobing stairs.

It took him to the top of the stairs to realise that Bodie hadn't answered his question. Then it took him to the bedroom to remember what the question had been. "You bi?" he asked again, eyes open now and quite happy to take in the sight of Susan and Stewart having it off in the middle of the huge bed.

"What?" Bodie asked, obviously more distracted by the display going on than Doyle was.

"You bi?" Doyle shouted, poking Bodie in the chest for emphasis.

"Come on, you, there's no room in there, we'll try the bedroom up the hall."

Squiffy, Doyle followed on behind, peripherally aware that it was supposed to be him doing the leading, although he wasn't quite sure why. Just as he wasn't quite sure why it was so important that he get an answer out of Bodie. Struggling to get his shirt buttons undone in the welcomingly empty bedroom, he asked again. "Are you bi, Bodie?"

"By what?" Bodie asked back, his own shirt shed, the kilt still well and truly buckled into place.

"Bish...bizzesh...bisszhule."

"You what?" as Bodie began to get rid of the one sock that was all that remained of the footwear Doyle had arrived at the party in.

"Bizhale..."

Doyle's trousers were going the way of his sock, and his underwear was following rapidly, making it even more difficult for Doyle to concentrate on both the question and getting his tongue around such difficult consonants. "D'you like fucking men?"

"Like fucking you," Bodie muttered, in the

near vicinity of Doyle's left nipple.

"Tha's mice. I mean," he stopped, gathered his last sober wit, "that's nice. Tha' you like fucking me." Giggling, he tried again. "Fuckin' me. I like you fuckin' me too. Wazz goin' t'tell you, Bodie. Like you." He made a wildly expansive gesture with both arms, almost knocking both of them over, until Bodie grabbed him and pulled them safely down onto the bed.

"So you like me, do you?" Bodie whispered in a suspiciously soft voice, one Doyle would have noticed had he been an ounce less drunk.

"Lotsh. Lots an' lots an' lots an' lots. Bestest friend I've ever 'ad in my whole life. In fact," Doyle wagged a finger in Bodie's face, intent with the serious honesty of the sublimely drunk, "sh'mtimes, I even fink—think—I love you. Better'n me mum or anyone."

"Do you, Ray?" Bodie said quietly, fingertips caressing Doyle's hair, a grin quirking his mouth as he pulled the lost lemon slice out of its nest and got rid of it.

"Mmhm," Doyle mumbled into Bodie's bare shoulder, licking at the satin skin. "An' then I fink—sink—*think* you're in love with me. Head over heels, always touchin' me up, always ready for a good fuck at a party. Bodie an' Doyle's gettin' married! But tha's sstupid, innit? Mean, mates don' fall in love wiz matezz, do they? An' blokes don' fall in love with otter—" a pause for another sodden giggle, "wi-with *other* blokes, so can't 'ave been fallin' in love, can I? 'As to be somefing else, right? Anyway's I like you. Really, Bodiemate. Really," an enormous yawn, showing the only filling Doyle had in his entire mouth, "really," a suckling kiss on the side of Bodie's neck, "really like you, best of anyone..."

Doyle woke, leaden eyed and leaden limbed, to the blasting sound of a song that was both ironically appropriate—considering what his bruised brain insisted on telling him he had tried to get up to the night before—and appallingly loud. If his head hadn't been threatening to fall off, he'd have yelled at the top of his lungs, but as it was, he satisfied himself with a virulent sibillance hissed into Bodie's collarbone.

"Who the fucking hell is playing the Buzzcocks at this time of the morning?"

"Susan, I should think," Bodie replied, much

to Doyle's surprise, for he had assumed himself to be the only person alive in the entire world—apart, of course, from the sadistic bastard who was playing punk right in the middle of his hangover. "Anyroad," Bodie was going on, blessedly keeping his voice relatively quiet over the thump of bass and the scream of singing, "it's not morning, it's afternoon."

"What?" Doyle sat bolt upright, quickly, then lay down again, very, very slowly and with infinite care. "Oh Christ," he groaned, "who put the boot in?"

"You, sunshine," Bodie said with head-bursting cheerfulness. "And it wasn't the boot, it was g&t's till they were coming out your ears." The laughter thrummed in Bodie's chest, shivering against Doyle's ear. "Well, at least until you had lemons in your hair."

Lemons in his hair? Shite, it wasn't some terrible alcohol induced nightmare, he really had been that drunk.

Again. It was, he unhappily admitted, getting to be a bit of a habit. How many times was that recently? He tried to count, but that made the veins in his temples pound like a bass drum, and the music downstairs had moved on with unbelievable venom to the Sex Pistols. Someone, somewhere, had a sick sense of humour when it came to the appropriate songs to play after a typical CI5 party/orgy. Not to mention a vicious streak a mile wide.

"You know," Doyle whispered in an oasis of silence, "you're right, it has to be Susan. One of these days," he vowed, "I'm going to find a way to make her suffer hangovers like the rest of us. Then maybe she wouldn't be so keen to torture the dying like this."

"Have to get her drunk for that, Ray, and that's a frightening thought. I mean to say, can you imagine our Susan any less inhibited than she already is?"

Doyle found the strength to laugh after all. "She'd nab Cowley in the corridors and have him swinging from the chandeliers."

"No need to be disgusting, Doyle. Here, let me up a minute."

Reluctantly, Doyle slid to the side, and only the loss of the physical contact made him realise just how pleasantly intimate he and Bodie had been. Had they? he wondered. He couldn't remember last night, and he never asked the next

morning, the subject strictly taboo and *verboten*. Flustered, he busied himself with sorting the pillows out and grimacing at the clock for showing such a dreadfully late hour. Almost half his leave gone now, and nothing to show for it but a hangover and the hope that he had fucked Bodie. And to go with that, the hope that he'd done no such thing. One of these days, Bodie was going to pin him for this, was going to put him up against the nearest wall and demand an accounting. And Doyle had no idea what the hell he would say. It all depended, he supposed, on whether or not Bodie was going to rip his face off for it or ask him to get married and go live in a rose-covered cottage. He snorted at that—the image of him and Bodie living together like two maiden aunts in a cottage with rug in front of the fire and horse brasses over the mantelpiece made him laugh. Or would have, if his head hadn't made so little progress down the road of recovery.

“Here.”

“Oi, Bodie, watch what you're doing. And what the fuck is *that*?”

“*That* is the old Bodie family cure for everything that ails you. Get yourself round the outside of that, mate, and you'll be right as rain in no time.”

Doyle took a very cautious sniff and turned his away. “Strewth, Bodie, what's in it? It smells foul. And look at it!”

“Nothing in there that shouldn't be. Two eggs, dash of Worcestershire sauce, orange juice, two Askits. So drink it up before it separates out, Ray. If you think it's bad now, you try it then.”

“Is this going to kill me?” Doyle asked, pain-narrowed eyes fixed on Bodie.

“Don't be a prat, just drink the fucking drink, will you? Go on, hold your nose and get it down you.”

Propped up on one elbow, Doyle stared at Bodie in suspicion as he forced the vile concoction down, stomach heaving ominously as the first taste of it registered on his brain. By the time the last drop had been swallowed, he wasn't sure how long it would stay down. “God, Bodie, that's *awful*. And I think I'm going to be—”

“No you're not. Here, lie down, let your stomach settle. Have a bit of this bread, that'll help.”

Doyle merely glared.

“All right, all right, so don't have a bit of bread. But don't blame me when you're sick. If you don't want to help yourself, if you want to make your life miserable and mine besides, fine, go right ahead...”

And somewhere in the middle of the affectionate diatribe, Doyle found himself with a mouthful of bread soaking up the sourness of the night's over-indulgence and himself lying flat on his back.

Just like the night before.

Jingle Balls? He winced, trying to remember what else he'd done. Unexpectedly, because they were usually very careful to be distant with each other after one of their nights, he felt Bodie's hand on his forehead, stroking his hair back, the movement a soothing rhythm.

“You poor bastard,” Bodie said and Doyle couldn't quite fathom why Bodie's ebullience had faded into this serious expression. “Is it really that bad? Go on, Ray, tell me. Is it really so awful that the only way you can bring yourself to do it is to get yourself plastered and then walk around like the living dead the next day?”

“You what?” Doyle asked as intelligently as possible, given that his head was spinning and his stomach heaving, although at least his arms and legs belonged to him again and the Army Special Manœuvres had gone back to Salisbury Plain where they belonged.

“You and me,” Bodie said, obviously thinking he was explaining himself more clearly.

Doyle considered saying ‘you what?’ again, but it hardly seemed worth the effort. He could feel the effects of his hangover slowly recede and another bite of the bread helped, sopping up more of the acrid aftermath. Instead of speaking, he gave Bodie one of his patented looks, the one that Bodie still hadn't discovered meant that Doyle was completely at sea. The hand strayed from his forehead to smooth a line across his broken cheek.

“Listen, Ray,” Bodie was saying, his voice far soberer than anything else in the house that day, “I appreciate what you've done for me. Christ knows, it's been wonderful, but all the same...”

Doyle was still somewhere at sea, but at least now it was the English Channel instead of the Atlantic. There was, he thought, as the Askits burned through his system and began working magic on his headache, some glimmer as to

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what the hell Bodie was talking about. Fake it, he thought, give him a bit of the pop-psychology crap and he'll let on what the hell he's going on about. "You're my partner, Bodie, and I owe you—and you'd do the same for me. Anycase," he swallowed, discovering that he really wasn't half as hungover as his waking moments had claimed, and that Bodie's magic potion was sweeping it out ever more quickly, "You're a life saver," he went on, talking about the hangover and the cure, "and I asked for it anyway."

Bodie smiled ruefully. "Christ, you really would blame yourself for gunpowder if you got the chance, wouldn't you?"

Eh? What the fuck was Bodie going on about? Christ, maybe Bodie had had even more than Doyle himself had and was still completely pissed.

"Don't be a wally, Bodie," he said, covering himself with a suitably flexible phrase. Let Bodie take that whatever way he wanted: at least it gave Doyle breathing space before he had to actually say something pertinent to this peculiar conversation.

"No, I mean it, Ray. You'd blame yourself for me, just because we're friends."

Now why the fucking hell was Bodie—Jesus Christ, *Bodie!*—blushing? Flummoxed, Doyle concentrated on eating his bread and letting the hangover disappear under Bodie's magic cure.

"Means a lot to me, you know," Bodie all but whispered, so that Doyle barely caught the words, the music downstairs having started up again. In amongst the bellowing 'Hit me with your rhythm stick'—trust Susan to come up with *that*—he heard Bodie mutter on, something about how important it all was to him, how precious...

Precious? Bodie saying he was precious? Now this he *had* to hear. "Hang on a tick, okay?" he said, scrambling out the bed, half way to the door before it dawned on him that he was stark staring naked and once he shut that door, he was going to have to walk back to the bed again. Naked. In front of Bodie. Naked and sober and under Bodie's watchful eye, he was going to have to cross a bedroom that was suddenly the size of Wembley, and then get into bed beside Bodie. Needless to say, he took an inordinately long time to shut the bedroom door, the music fading away to a thrumping mutter vibrating

against the floor. Of course, it occurred to him that he could stay where he was, or casually drape himself across the bedroom chair, but he'd be blue in seconds if he did that. Plus, he didn't think he had either the brass neck or the balls to sit nonchalantly naked in front of Bodie, who was beautiful from top to toe. Not an ugly or unappealing inch on his body, which was enough to intimidate Doyle into shrivelling up to nothing.

Course, there were always his clothes... Which rather begged the question of where the hell his clothes *were*. Going on past nights, they could be anywhere from here to under the Christmas tree. Or that time his underpants had ended up in Cowley's top drawer...

"Ray? You all right?"

"Yeh, course. Just trying to work out what Susan's playing now."

"Oh. How's the hangover?"

Such formal politeness! They weren't even like this when they'd had a dust-up, which meant... They had, they must've. Fucked, that is. Last night, he thought to himself. I must've done it to him again last night. So...what the fuck was Bodie going on about a minute ago? Curiosity, if nothing else at this point, aroused, Doyle walked quickly back to the bed, appallingly self-conscious of the narrowness of his hips, of the knobiness of his knees, of the hairiness of his thighs. He always felt so ugly in daylight, especially when he was with someone as beautiful as Bodie. All of which conspired to make him walk across that room looking to the rest of the world as if he owned the Universe and expected the entire human race to pay homage to his glory. Brass neck, his mother had called it. Putting a good face on it, he called it himself, unable to stop himself from touching his battered cheek.

"Christ, your feet are fucking freezing!"

"What d'you expect? It's cold out there."

"Yeh, I know. I went down to the kitchen to get your remedy, didn't I?"

"Oh, yeh. Well, thanks."

"Don't overwhelm me with your gratitude, Doyle."

"Pardon me! If you wait until the banks're open, I'll pay you for your trouble."

"Oh, that's nice. Do something for a mate and he—" Bodie stopped mid-sentence, lying down,

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turning away from the blossoming argument and Doyle took a deep breath, determined that they weren't going to end up having a row just because they were both obviously feeling as insecure as hell. "I'm not going to start, not this time, Ray. It's not worth it, so let's just give it a rest, all right? You've done your bit, more than anyone'd ever expect at that, so let's just call it even stevens."

He was going on about it again, whatever 'it' was. "Bodie..."

"No, I mean it, Ray. Just leave it out."

He would, honest he would. If he knew what 'it' was that he was to leave out. "Bodie—"

"Just give it a by, Ray."

Give it a by. Give it a bi? Oh Christ, he'd said that last night, hadn't he? But if Bodie wanted him to pack in the sex stuff, then why the hell was the dozy bastard making it sound as if he, Doyle, was the hero and Bodie the parasite?

"This...you and me you were talking about..."

The embarrassment flooding from Bodie was almost tangible, but if Doyle had reached out, he would have actually been able to feel Bodie's pain: the long back muscles were bunched and knotted, a patent reflection of the inner suffering.

"Are you talking about the sex thing, Bodie?" Doyle asked, surprising himself with the gentleness of his voice, and his calmness. He'd always thought that any talking that would be done about the sex thing would be explosive, an enormous argument with Bodie hurling accusations and hurtful epithets like fairy at him. Anything, really, but this peculiarly tender scene, with him playing Randolph Scott to Bodie's Heathcliffe.

Bodie, by now, wasn't talking at all.

"C'mon, Bodie, don't come the deb with me. Since when has there ever been something we can't talk about?"

"How about since the day we met?"

Doyle decided that perhaps he just might have preferred Bodie doing his petulant deb routine. At least that way, he wouldn't have heard that one comment rip all his fond delusions away. So much for their famous rapport, and for their much-valued honesty, and for their much-envied friendship. From the first day? Christ...

"What is it you can't talk to me about?" he

heard himself ask, still in that oddly gentle voice, his hand stroking soothing circles on Bodie's shoulder.

"Same thing you can't talk to me about."

"Oh, that's a big help, that is, Bodie." Sarcastic as hell, but his hand neither slowed nor stilled, keeping up the endless caress.

"Now who's doing the deb routine? Get off it, Doyle, you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. The 'sex thing' as you so coyly put it."

"Oh. That. Well, suppose I do owe you an apology for that..."

A huge sigh, heavy enough to interrupt the glide of Doyle's fingers. "Look, you tried, you honestly tried. I mean, you even say all the right words when you're pickled. And it's not as if it's your fault or anything, is it? You can't help it if the thought of fucking me and loving me's so disgusting you have to get drunk to do it."

And that landed like the proverbial lead balloon, whack, right in the middle of Doyle's thick head. "You...you mean..."

"Yeh, yeh, I mean it. I've known for a long time, but it was nice being able to pretend. You know, when it was happening, and in the morning till you really woke up and realised what was going on..."

Until his brain was in gear? Dead bloody right—that was when it usually dawned on him that he was cuddling up to his wonderfully indulgent partner and that Bodie would end up thumping him one if he didn't stop before Bodie realised that the sexual feelings were still there. But Bodie thought—

"I'll give you credit where it's due, Ray, you did a good job of covering up how sick it must've made you feel, but once I was sober, it was hard to pretend that someone wants you when they have to get so drunk they need help standing up before they can bring themselves to touch you. But you did try, so don't you go using this as an excuse for going all guilty on me." Bodie's movements were clumsy, distracted, as he struggled to disentangle himself from both the emotions of the moment and the blankets. "I don't want your fucking pity, I just want you to let this go as if it'd never happened."

Doyle actually found it in him to feel intense gratitude for Macklin—recovering almost instantly from hangovers was one of the really welcome perks of Macklin's obsessive fitness

training. “C’mon, Bodie, it’s not that bad. And this’s been going on for ages, why’d you pick today to put paid to it?”

There was a long silence and utter stillness from Bodie, the blankets clustered round his hips, a once-discarded shirt clenched in his hands.

Doyle sighed, impatience rising. “Sitting there like the bloody Sphinx isn’t going to get us anywhere, is it? Why’re you suddenly getting so fucking moral on me, eh?”

“You watch who you’re calling moral, mate!” But the quip was flat, unfunny, undermined by the misery in the voice.

“So if it’s not an attack of ethics, what the bloody hell is it?”

A shrug.

“Oh, that’s helpful, that’s really going to give me deep and meaningful insight into what’s going on in that thick skull of yours.”

“Look, Ray, I’ve told you, just let it rest. You’ve done your share, you’ve done your Thousandth Man bit, so why don’t you just be grateful that you don’t have to actually do anything so disgusting as touch me.”

Perhaps he wasn’t going to be able to get away with putting it all on Bodie’s plate after all. He might, Doyle conceded with a wry smile, have to actually make a clean breast of it himself. “Bodie... No, you get back here right now, pal!” He was on his feet, nakedness forgotten, hand clenched in the crumpled wool of Bodie’s drooping kilt.

“So I can make an even bigger fool of myself? Oh, I can hardly wait.”

“You can wait for this, you stupid bugger. Will you turn round and look at me, Bodie?” Mulish obstinance, averted face and that tell-tale tension in the pallor of the nape. “Look at me, Bodie,” Doyle said in his best ‘shut up, Bodie’ voice. Bodie, the very picture of reluctance, looked, albeit over his shoulder and with an expression that was wary in the extreme.

“What?” Bodie said, making it quite clear that he didn’t want to hear any of this, that this staying was done out of friendship and other, deeper things he didn’t care to confess to.

Doyle felt the old commitment flourish between them and bolstered by the courage from that, he let go of Bodie, stepping back, running his hands through his hair. He looked sideways

at Bodie for a second, saw the way Bodie was standing there, willing to take whatever was coming, typical Bodie loyalty, but the rarest kind, given only to Doyle himself and Cowley. Loyalty Doyle was well aware he took for granted, took as his due—and knew he’d keep right on doing that, given his nature and given Bodie’s. But he wasn’t a complete prick when it came to relationships: he had stopped being a giver mainly because he’d learned that there was no-one he could trust enough to be that vulnerable with. Apart, it seemed, from Bodie...

“What did I do to deserve someone like you?” he asked, hastening on when he saw the telling glitter of anger in Bodie’s eyes. “That was meant to be a compliment, Bodie. You know, what did I do in a former life to be landed with someone like you...”

So much for compliments of the metaphysical sort.

“Bodie, you walk out that door and I’ll come after you and break both your legs and make you listen to Barry Manilow, d’you hear me?”

“Oh, that’s nice, that is. I’ve got a choice, have I? Either take my lumps now or get them later? Well, for you information, Doyle, I’m not into masochism, so you can take your sadistic little games and shove them! I’m not—”

“Getting the right idea at all. Bodie, I meant that you’re someone I’m lucky to have. That Valentine’sy enough for you?”

It was Bodie’s turn to say the brilliant and incisive: “You what?”

“I think,” Doyle said, climbing back under the covers, “you’d better sit down for this one, mate.”

That disquieting comment had Bodie perched, uneasy, on the very edge of the bed, staring at Doyle in a commingling of distrust and wary interest. “What’ve you been up to, Ray?”

“Let’s put it this way, mate, if Cowley knew what complete fucking morons we’d been about this, he’d give us the sack so quick our heads would spin.”

Doyle winced inwardly as he saw Bodie’s quick mind begin to put two and two together and come up with let’s hang Ray. “It wasn’t so much that I had to get drunk to bring myself to touch you, Bodie,” the condemned man said heartily. “It was more that I had to get drunk to have enough balls to try it on...”

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Bodie spluttered. Literally, sat there on the edge of the bed and spluttered, words spraying around inside his mind and not one of them coming out of his mouth coherently. Any other day of the week, Doyle would have thoroughly enjoyed the sight, but then, he wasn't quite entirely sure what Bodie was going to do next.

"See, I didn't know you fancied me. I mean, if I'd've known that, if you hadn't been such a wally and kept your mouth shut about it..."

Judging by the look in Bodie's eyes, that worthy was not about to take the blame this time. Metaphorically speaking, Doyle ducked, waiting for the explosion.

"You trying to tell me that you like sleeping with me?"

No explosion? Well, Doyle was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Why else would I have had it off with you every chance I got?"

"But you didn't. You only did it when you got completely plastered."

"Which *I* thought was every chance I got. I only did it when I had a good enough excuse that you wouldn't remove my head from my shoulders. Remember that first time we did it? When you wouldn't talk about it the next day..."

"When *I* wouldn't talk about it? You were the one who—"

"Me? You were the one who suddenly went running off to town to see his girlfriend! You went so butch on me you looked like a fucking gorilla."

"Gorilla? All I was doing was covering myself from your snide fucking comments..."

They stopped and looked at each other, both of them running through the infamous morning after the even more infamous night before. "Christ, Bodie, how could we have been so stupid?"

Bodie shrugged again. "Don't know about you, but I was too scared to think about anything apart from making sure you didn't blow your top and shoot me."

"And that's what I thought you'd do to me 'cos I was the one that started it."

"You never started it. I did."

"Oh, yeh? And how d'you work that out, Einstein?"

"I was the one who suggested booking a room at the pub that night in the first place."

"But I was the one who fiddled it so the

landlord gave us a double bed."

"No, I was the one that did that. Cost me a tenner."

"The bastard! He got a fiver out of me as well!"

"A fiver? It was only worth a fiver to you?" But the humour was there, along with a glittering glow in the blue eyes that made Doyle begin to hope that maybe everything was going to be wonderful after all.

Doyle grinned at him, salacious and seductive. "Ah, but that was before I'd had you, wasn't it?"

"Give more than that now, would you?"

Doyle pulled the covers back, inviting Bodie in, responding to the cautious welcome in the other man's voice. "Course I'd give more now. What with inflation an' all, I'd give, oh, a good £5.75 for you now."

"I'd give everything for you, Ray."

Doyle sat there and stared, flabbergasted. But then, he thought to himself, he should expect stuff like that from a man whose little black book was actually a notebook of self-penned poems. "Small wonder you didn't get it when I paid you that compliment, Bodie. Everything?"

"Well," Bodie drew back a bit, edging a bit of humour in, "cept my pin-up of our George, of course."

"Oh, yeh, of course. Wouldn't want you to give the old man up. But," and now it was Doyle, pushing in closer, eliminating humour, going for the jugular, "it really means that much to you? And no I'm not talking about your stupid fucking picture of Cowley. You and me, Bodie, is it that important to you?"

The honesty in Bodie's gaze shook Doyle. "It was important enough for me to give up the sex to keep the friendship and all the other stuff."

"Such as me respecting you in the morning?"

A tense little smile. "Something like that."

Doyle shook his head, hand going out to touch Bodie's chilled skin, to pull the other man down into his own heat. "What'd I ever do to deserve you, eh?"

"D'you think you could manage to come up with something a bit more flattering?"

"Such as?" Doyle asked him, wrapping his arms around Bodie, luxuriating in holding this man when they were both stone cold sober, with none of the befuddlement and blurring of booze.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe something along

the lines of how I'm the most gorgeous, wonderful man you've ever met, best lover, most handsome—"

"Modest to a fault..." But he declined to banter, opening his mouth instead to Bodie's kisses, falling back onto the pillows, Bodie coming to lie, wonderfully heavy, on top of him. Sharp thrust of hip pressing against the heated warmth of wool, a hint of matching hardness against his own cock. He knew, somewhere, where his mind wasn't obsessed with the delight of making love with Bodie, that he was going to regret not taking this time slowly. It was, to all extents and purposes, the first time, for they'd always had the bastions of booze between them before, they'd always been able to hide behind lies of their own making. But today, there was nothing between them but honesty and love. And Bodie's bloody kilt, which was severely hampering Doyle's efforts to get to know Bodie much, much better.

His inarticulate mutterings into Bodie's mouth must have made sense of some sort, for Bodie then demonstrated at least one of the reasons why Scotsmen wear kilts: easy access. A quick movement of one hand, and the kilt was up out of the way, Bodie's heat exposed to Doyle's, hands flowing over flesh, cock kissing cock. It wasn't going to take long, not with the way sensation was flooding him, making him soar on the passion of Bodie's caresses. Hands frantic to fill themselves with Bodie's flesh, mouth devouring Bodie's, he arched his back, rubbing his cock hard and sweet against Bodie's.

"Oh, no you don't," Bodie whispered to him, turning them until it was Bodie lying on his back, Doyle coiled over him. "You passed out on me last night before we got to the good bits. And I've been lying here waiting an hour for you to wake up, thinking about what I wanted to do with you, when I could get you drunk again. But seeing as how you fancy me sober as well..." A tender kiss, a flicker of tongue, a lick of desire jolting through Doyle's cock. "I want you to fuck me."

"I think," Doyle said, hands busy rampaging over Bodie's cock and nipples, "I could just about manage that."

There was a fine balance threading through them: they had done this before, so they knew each other, and Doyle knew that Bodie had the

experience to take him inside easily, but there was a shimmering excitement, for this was fresh and new, sober and in the daylight, wide-eyed and gazing at each other, all truth and passion revealed.

And as Bodie began to get on to his knees, Doyle stopped him, thinking about making it special and meaningful, thinking about letting Bodie see his face as he sank into Bodie's arse and made love to him.

"Next time, Ray. Like it best from behind..." Bodie muttered, rolling over, getting up on his knees, rump in the air, head pillowed on arms. Voice marginally muffled, he was saying, deep and low and sexy, "Go on, Ray, do it. Want you inside me, love, go on..."

Experienced Bodie undoubtedly was, but they'd still need something. Doyle caressed Bodie's buttocks, then knelt, his tongue rimming delicate flesh, then pressing inside, fucking Bodie with his tongue, making his mate wet enough to take him. He spat on his hand, rubbed his cock, his own precum helping to slick him smooth and satiny. He fisted his hand in the ruffled, pushed-up kilt, steadying himself and then his cock was teasing at the wet hole, and Bodie was spreading, opening to take him in. Bodie thrust up at him, and then he was inside, surrounded by Bodie, encapsulated by him, enveloped by heat. Ray wrapped his arms around Bodie's broad chest, his arms rubbing against Bodie's nipples, his face rubbing against the side of Bodie's neck, coarse wool against his belly, sweat-damp skin against his chest.

"I love you," he whispered, needing to say it, knowing that Bodie needed to hear it without the deceptiveness of booze. "Love you so fucking much..."

It didn't last long, Doyle thrusting fast and hard, Bodie pushing back to get him in deeper. He grabbed Bodie's cock to pump him, his flesh squeezing Bodie's flesh just as Bodie's flesh was squeezing tight around his cock. Convulsive pleasure, and he was there, orgasming in streams inside Bodie, Bodie's words streaming inside him. Love, so much love...

And then he was on his back again, with Bodie above him, devouring kisses consuming his mouth, his hand grabbed and wrapped around Bodie's cock, Bodie fucking his fist and his mouth, and then, finally, stillness, and hot

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slickness on his hand, droplets on his belly, and Bodie’s lush sigh in his mouth.

He knew he had fallen asleep—he always did—but as he fumbled his way up through the layers of slumber, there was something different. Something, something... He checked, running through the sensations, establishing where he was. In bed, after sex, with Bodie. Considering they’d been at a party, nothing weird in that. But there was still something strange... And then he realised. There was no lingering fuzziness of alcohol, no pounding reminder that he’d been drunk the night before and had got Bodie so well-oiled his partner had let him...

Oh. Bodie. And the conversation, and the sex, and the everything...

“You awake down there?” he heard.

Strange, to feel almost shy with Bodie of all

people. But then Bodie was kissing him, gently, softly tracing his deformed cheek with tip of tongue, making him feel wanted, and beautiful, and loved.

Downstairs, very faintly, he could hear that the party was in full swing again, but upstairs, dusk was seeping into their room, and Bodie’s heat was seeping inside his bones.

“D’you want to go down there and join the rest of them?” Bodie asked, a long, deep kiss insuring that Doyle would want nothing of the sort.

“Nah. Rather stay up here. Don’t need a drink for what we have in mind, do we?”

And his filthy chuckled drowned out the even filthier chorus of ‘Rudolf the red-pricked reindeer’ coming from downstairs.

