

ROOM SERVICE

Room Service is a classic example of M. Fae's 'cozy' pieces where almost the entire story takes place in one confined space. Here, as part of their jobs, Bodie and Doyle are forced to spend long hours in each other's company. With their partnership recovering from a disastrous last mission, this new assignment could be interminable. Instead, an unexpected catalyst sparks an interesting reaction...

DANTE'S Inferno had nothing on this place.

Bodie looked around himself once more, checking to make sure the room really was as bad as first glance had implied, and then groaned, dismayed. "You really should've kept your stupid fucking mouth shut."

"Yeh?" Doyle inquired, making a point of giving all his attention to exploring the cracked and stained sink, so ancient the draining board was the same slightly slimy wood his gran had had in her old place. "Course, if you had any balls, you'd've stuck up for yourself and then I wouldn't've had to say anything in the first place, would I?"

Bodie gave him an old-fashioned look, cheesed off with Doyle landing the blame on him again: there had been enough of that since he'd bungled the Craine job. "And if you had any brains above your belt buckle you'd know you don't answer back when the boss is giving you a bollocksing for fucking up on the job—"

"He was over the top—"

"He had nothing on you, mate! Christ, half London heard you start on me, so what gives you the right—"

"What gives me the right? Christ, that's rich! In case you'd forgotten, that was my back you forgot about out there, *mate*."

Bodie looked away, the truth worse than anything Cowley—or even Doyle—had hurled at him. "Look, I'm sorry." He raised his hand, forestalling

the words blistering the tip of Doyle's tongue. "Yeh, I know, saying sorry's about as much good as kissing it better."

Doyle gave him a look, started unpacking the food they'd brought to see them through. "So," he finally said, his calmness enough to make Bodie wonder when the storm was going to come, "what the fuck were you thinking about when we went in there then?"

Bodie made a great to-do about sorting through the pile of bags he had hauled up the stairs, taking his time to organise the piles, going through quite a production. "I dunno," he finally admitted very quietly. "Thought I heard something, let myself get distracted..."

"Christ on a crutch," Doyle hissed between clenched teeth, aware that even this early in the game, they had to be careful. "You let your mind wander—"

"All right, all right, all right, that's enough, you hear me, Doyle?"

Slowly, eyes narrowing dangerously, Doyle turned to look at the partner who had almost got him killed not forty-eight hours before. "Are you trying to tell me," he said so mildly it would unnerve anyone other than Bodie, "that you can almost get me killed, and I'm not allowed to utter a mutter about it?"

"What I'm saying," and Bodie had to stop, rein his temper in, tension thinning his lips and engorging his veins, pulse throbbing, trip, trip, trip in his

temple. "All I'm saying is I didn't mean to fuck up like that. I thought I heard something, was sure I'd heard something—"

Doyle didn't, quite, sneer.

"Don't even think about saying it," Bodie whispered, his own self-anger putting him on a short fuse before Doyle and Cowley had even started in on him. "But I tell you what, I'll say something to you, give you something to think about to keep you busy in that fucking glass tower of yours."

A shrug met that comment, tacit agreement that even Doyle had fallen down on the job once or twice in his life, tacit permission for Bodie to state his case, offer some defence for the indefensible.

"Right, now I thought I heard someone moving behind you."

"All right," Doyle said, still not so sympathetic that he could drop the acidic sarcasm, "we'll play make-believe for a bit."

Bodie let that slide past him unhindered: too vivid in his memory was Doyle, *that* close to being killed, *that* close to his head being blown off. "So suppose I did hear something: what would you and Cowley've done if I'd just ignored it, eh? And what about the other times me hearing something has kept your skin in one piece, eh, Ray?"

"Yeh," Doyle said tiredly, running his hand through his hair, the lifted curls revealing the strong, broad forehead and the lines of worry gouged there. "I know, I know. It's just—"

"Just what?" Bodie demanded, biting his tongue to stop himself from saying anything else. Keep cool, that was his credo, and he'd sounded suspiciously close to begging for his own taste.

"Well what the fuck d'you think it is?" Doyle would have shouted if they hadn't needed to keep such a low profile. "You're always there, always keeping me safe and yesterday—"

"I let you down."

"Yeh. You let me down." He looked up suddenly, and the honesty in his eyes was too much for either man to endure. "And I'm not used to not depending on you."

"You can still trust me, Ray," Bodie told him quietly, and this time, he couldn't care less about keeping cool; didn't care that the begging was raw in his voice. "Yeh, I made a mistake, but Christ, not even I'm perfect. It was just the once, that's all. I promise you, Ray, never again..."

Unexpectedly, Doyle smiled at him. "Unless you

hear something behind me again, eh?"

"Well, next time I'll make sure I'm right first, all right?"

For several moments, Doyle simply stood there, staring at Bodie, going over the whole thing yet again, kicking and punching the incident until he could fit it into the sort of perspective that would allow the partnership to continue. "Fair enough," he eventually said, noting the sigh of relief from Bodie, seeing clearly the weight he'd taken from his partner's shoulders. "I suppose you're hungry already?" he added, easing them back into the familiar rituals of their friendship, rites to bury the doubt that had soured between them.

"Hearing you talk, people'd think I wasn't possessed of a tiny, delicate appetite."

"Tiny and delicate is your brain, mate. I'd describe your appetite as birdlike—you eat three times your weight every day."

"Rubbish!" Bodie retorted, jumping in with both feet, grabbing at the familiar patterns of Doyle's acceptance with the greed of a starved child.

Their badinage over the appetites of birds, feathered, soon slid smoothly into the discussion of the appetites of birds, fancied, the flurry of words a canopy to hide any underlying disquietudes.

The observation equipment was set up, camera on tripod at the window, field glasses to hand on what, by the looks of the motheaten and mottled cushion, had once been a cosy window seat. A camp table was against the right hand wall, the tape recorder on top, the brown of the twin tape spools glinting dimly in the uncertain light. Sensitive microphones, tested but not yet needed, lay safely in their padded cases, and the notepads with their small pencils attached were placed neatly alongside their RTs. The myriad other, tiny details were taken care of, the work divided easily and without any need for discussion, the two working as smoothly together as they always did.

"So that's it, then," Bodie decided, standing in the middle of the tiny room, arms akimbo, his head almost touching the bare bulb that hung down from the chipped plaster medallion in the center of the ceiling.

"Yeh, that's it," Doyle agreed, coming up behind Bodie and grabbing him by the shoulders, turning him towards Bodie's now neatly-separated-but-still-sitting-on-the-floor piles of provisions and supplies just inside the front door. "If you're planning on eating nothing and lying on the bare

floor, which I'm not, even if you are, you bloody toerag, so come on. Get on with it."

"Do we have to?" Bodie moaned, although it sounded nothing more than his usual complaining, unrevealing of the tiredness hollowing his bones after the rollercoaster ride of yesterday and today. "All right, so we have to put the sleeping bags out, but the rest of it can wait till tomorrow, can't it? And anyway, what's the point of dragging all that out of the bags when we're just going to have to put it all back again when we leave?"

"Because," Doyle told him, unmoved, "as of tomorrow morning, we're going to make Anne Frank and her lot sound like a herd of bloody elephants, remember?"

And Bodie groaned: he remembered. Cowley's revenge for Doyle protecting his partner so vociferously, not to mention so rudely. Stuck in the attic flat—room, really—to 'observe' the bloke who lived downstairs, a bloke suspected of being a member of the IRA cell responsible for a bomb left in a café, with only a lucky malfunction stopping the device from going off in the middle of a Saturday afternoon's weary shoppers. Moving in the night before MacGuire came back from his holiday—genuine or otherwise—in America, unable to betray themselves by so much as a sound or their bird would fly the coop.

"Come on, Bodie, just cause you look like something out of C&A you don't have to stand there like a bloody shop dummy."

"I'll have you know I was thinking," Bodie said in his most superior voice, "not that I would expect a scruff like you to know that."

"Just put the stuff out," Doyle told him, shoving a perilously stretched carrier bag into Bodie's arms. "You can bung that lot in the kitchen."

"Yes, sahib."

Doyle unrolled the thick mats that would muffle their footsteps, laying one from the window and the equipment to the less than salubrious mattress abandoned in the middle of the dusty floor, another mat leading into the scullery, two more to take them into the bathroom.

"Don't know what you did that for," Bodie said. "Won't be taking any baths while our chum's at home."

"You can piss in a bottle if you want to, but I'm not, and I'm bugged if I'll let you use the sink."

"Ooh, ducky," Bodie camped, pinching Doyle's derrière and skipping out of reach quickly, "I

didn't know you were that sort of girl."

"Shut up, Bodie," Doyle said, laughing as he shoved his partner back into the other room. "And you can sort the curtains for that."

"Oh, you're too, too kind," Bodie muttered, going, nonetheless, to 'sort' the curtains, thumbtacking net panels up to hide them enough that they could look out the window without being immediately seen, pulling the extant curtains, old-fashioned and heavy with dust, closed until there was just enough room for the camera lens to peer through. Another couple of minutes fiddling and everything was as it should be. Behind him, he could hear Doyle moving around and the slither of nylon as sleeping bags were spread and the rasp of a zip as Doyle's new hold-all was opened.

"Here," Doyle called, and Bodie turned round in time to be catch one of the things Doyle had tossed at him.

"Slippers?" Bodie said, bemused. "Oh, you shouldn't have, Ray. But as you did, where's my pipe then?"

"Up your arse with your brains," Doyle replied sweetly. "Cowley's idea, thought it would stop you clumping round here like a cart horse."

"Be supplying us with cardies and deaf aids next."

"As long as it's not marital aids, you've got nothing to worry about, sweetie." Doyle got to his feet, had a look round the pathetic room. "Right, suppose that's about it."

"And since you've been such a good boy, Christopher Robin, I shall take you out for tea," Bodie told him, bundling him into a jacket, trying to get him out the door before common sense and Cowley's threats stopped him.

"Don't be stupid, Bodie. We're supposed to be lying low, not traipsing off round Leytonstone."

"Oh, come on, Ray," Bodie wheedled. "Christ knows how long we'll be stuck in here. It's our last night of freedom—"

"And after the strip Cowley tore off me—"

"How's he going to know? Anyway, all he said was we had to be in place before MacGuire came back tomorrow, and his flight's not even due in till nearly seven. So where's the harm in us going out for one drink, eh?"

"One drink?" Doyle asked suspiciously.

"Just one. Not even a pint, just a half. Go on, be daring."

"Yeh, but if anyone sees us—"

"We'll be less suspicious than we were hauling all this stuff upstairs."

Doyle, actually chastened, if not by his boss' recent fury, then certainly by his own near miss, still hesitated.

"It's the only chance we'll have of a drink for my birthday," Bodie added, playing the ace kept up his sleeve for just such occasions.

"Thought your birthday was in November?"

"Who told you that? Nah, my birthday's on Thursday, and we'll still be in here unless there's a miracle. So what do you say? It'll only be for half an hour. One measly little drink..."

Several drinks and a really good Indian meal later, they finally made it back to the single, rather chilly room.

"Shh!"

"Teach your sister to suck eggs," Bodie muttered, the esses more sibilant than real sobriety would require.

"Grandmother, Bodie," Doyle told him, steering him more or less successfully through the door and onto bare, creaking floorboards.

Bodie frowned, puzzled over something for a few minutes, then muttered: "Nah, I'm not a grandmother. Might be a daddy, mind you..."

"Oh yeh?" Doyle asked quickly, intrigued, immediately digging now that Bodie's bastions were a bit washed out by too much liquid cheer. "So there're a few little Bodies running around, are there?"

"Prob'bly. Mebbe. Dunno, really. Oh, this room's spinnin'. Put the light on, Ray, go on, be a pal..."

"Don't be daft, Bodie, this place is supposed to be empty. Come on, round this way, into the loo with you. We can put a light on in there. Watch it, watch it," as Bodie tripped over the edge of one of the mats, his lack of balance proving catching, Doyle stumbling noisily before he managed to hold them both up.

"Shhh-shhh!" Bodie hissed, then giggled, too loudly, hushing himself immediately. "Better shh, or Mr. Cowley won't love us anymore. But you'n'me, we'll still love each other. Love each other f'rever an' ever," he announced in a theatrical whisper, archer than any proscenium.

"Yeh, Bodie, whatever you say, Bodie," Doyle told him, well-used to Bodie's brand of drunken affection.

"Better'n brother, tha's you," Bodie told him,

trying to ruffle his hair and succeeding in clouting him round the ear instead.

"Pack that in! An' stand up, will you? I'm trying to find the light..."

"'s an old, old, old house," Bodie sang to some tune only he knew, "so mebbe the lightswitch's on the inside. My old house was like that. My old house 'ad a toilet out the back, till the council put one inside. Didn't like goin' out at night, 'ad a chamber pot under the bed." He snickered, clinging onto the door jamb while Doyle fumbled in the dark for the switch. "Peepee pot, tha's wha' we called it, me an' me mam. You'd've liked 'er, me mam."

"Bet I would. Oh, here it is. Stupid bloody place to put a switch, hanging from a bloody string like that. Right, there's your light on."

Bodie stood there in the low wattage light, swaying slightly with the swaying of the bulb, steadying only when Doyle reached out and took a good grip of him again. "Don't think that was a good idea, Ray," he whispered in the soft voice of the very, very drunk, the one they used usually immediately prior to either passing out, throwing up, or both.

"You'll feel better when you've had a wash. An' if you don't, tough cheddar, mate—you asked for it," Doyle told him harshly, even though he was quite gentle as he helped Bodie over to the sink, making sure his partner was well able to take care of himself before leaving him to it.

Eventually, the clanging pipes and splashings of water ceased, and the small sounds of the city drew in again, cosy to the ears of someone who had lived his life in the confines of cement and tarmac, with sparrows and pigeons for wildlife. Then, drowning it out, Bodie's stumblings and mumblings, feet shuffling, clothes falling, the clunk of a belt buckle hitting the floor, the clatter of coins tumbling from a pocket. Just as well MacGuire was on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic, Doyle thought to himself, but didn't bother to mention: Bodie was too far gone to make much sense of anything approaching common sense, which meant he was probably ripe for a private little inquisition.

A foot, bare, high-arched, toenails neatly cut, all the details far clearer and far nearer than Doyle would have liked, Bodie trampling on his pillow in his search for bed.

"Where's it gone?"

"Your bed's on the floor, Bodie. The sleeping bag."

Bodie shuffled about a bit, his big toe coming perilously close to Doyle's left eye.

"Here," Doyle said, pushing Bodie in the right direction, "beside me."

"Oh. Right, thanks."

Much huffing and puffing, pushing and pulling, muttering and groaning, and Bodie was finally in his sleeping bag. His head touched the pillow, and then he was sitting up again, so quickly Doyle's head spun in sympathy.

"Oi!" This accompanied by a very sharp jab to Doyle's nearest shoulder. "You 'aven't had a wash yet, 'ave you, you mucky pig?"

"Not yet," Doyle told him patiently, knowing it was a waste of time to point out that Bodie had only just got out of the bathroom and that Doyle himself wasn't even actually inside his own sleeping bag yet, just lying there in lieu of any other available furniture. "I'll go now, shall I?" he asked, the sarcasm completely wasted.

"Should bloodywell think so. 'm not going to bed with someone who 'asn't even brushed his teeth yet." A pause, not entirely due to Doyle getting to his feet. "But I'm not goin' to bed with you, not like that, just like that." Another sodden giggle, and Doyle groaned, fairly sure of what was coming next. Sure enough, Bodie did it. "Just like that," he said in what, even sober, he imagined was a brilliant impersonation of Tommy Cooper, "just like that."

Sad thing was, he was better drunk than sober. "That's terrific," Doyle told him, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, why don't you just lie there quietly for a minute till you fall asleep? Shh!" he whispered, trying to stave off the next stage, the one where Bodie started singing—badly—at the top of his lungs. "That's right, you just lie there—"

"'m not goin' to sleep," Bodie murmured, ending on a huge yawn.

"Then you just lie there till I come back, all right?" Chance'd be a fine thing, Doyle thought as he hurried through the nightly ablutions and used the toilet. Typical: Bodie mentioning his mother *and* the possibility that he might be a father, and then being too drunk to go into details. Insane to argue with Bodie when he was this tipsy, and by the time he finished having the wash Bodie insisted on, that worthy was going to be snoring soundly.

"Tha' you?" came the sleepy question as

Doyle tiptoed across the floor.

"No, it's Princess bloody Anne," Doyle told him, crawling into his sleeping bag, trying to shove Bodie over onto his side of the mattress. "I'm surprised you're still awake."

"Told you I wasn't goin' to sleep by myself. Lonely, like tha'." Already, the slurring was fading, proof, had anyone been bothered by such details, that quite a bit of Bodie's drunkenness was nothing more than tipsiness, nothing more than an excuse to relax the usual constrictions that so minimised male friendship.

Staring up at a ceiling he couldn't see in the faint light creeping in through the gap in the curtains, Doyle lay very still beside Bodie, his voice soothing and welcoming. "Lonely because you miss your mum, or lonely because you miss the kids you might have?"

Slurred by sleepiness and booze, Bodie was hard to make out. "Just don' like being in the dark by myself."

Not something Doyle had ever expected to hear Bodie say, not in a million years. "Don't much like it myself," he said, keeping his voice low.

"Always hated it. Mam used to leave a light on for me till I fell asleep an' then my Da would put it out when he came home from the late shift."

"So your Da wasn't good to you?" Doyle asked, carefully unravelling the tangled skein of lies Bodie had woven for years, with his tall tales and changing names and faces and places.

"Da? Oh, he was brilliant, was my Da. Best in the whole street. Took me to the park, an' the Boys Brigade."

Unseen by Bodie's usually sharp eyes, Doyle frowned. "So your Mam and Da were good to you?"

"Mmm. Sunday's were best, 'specially when Da'd had a bit of overtime. Always had a roast then, an' all the trimmings."

"If it was all so great, what'd you leave home for then?"

"Got bored. An' it wasn't as if I was goin' to get anywhere in school, was it? Be the same as my Da: leave school early, go to work in the factory or the docks, getting up early or working mad shifts, scrimping an' scraping..."

It was so wonderfully normal Doyle could have laughed. "I always thought you ran away to sea to escape a cruel and vicious family."

"You're mad, absolutely bonkers, you. Nah, I

just did what half the blokes my age did. Ran off to see the world an' make my fortune." A muffled snort, Bodie laughing into the silky softness of his sleeping bag. "An' look where it got me. Lyin' on the floor in a squat an' come the morning, I won't even be able to go to the bog in MacGuire's home."

"Join the Navy, travel to interesting lands, meet interesting people—"

"An' kill 'em. I'm good at killing," Bodie said easily, steadily, making no more of it than someone else might make of being a good driver or a good cook. "Nice an' clean, never let them suffer."

Doyle wasn't quite sure what to say to that, didn't know what Bodie needed to hear to keep him talking like this. "You're a decent bloke."

A rough hand chucked under Doyle's chin, clumsy in its affection. "Thanks. 's quite a compliment, coming from you, innit? But it's true. Not that I don't want them suffering from the goodness of my heart, mind you," Bodie said very seriously, so seriously that Doyle knew he had to be lying, covering up another soft spot. There was a longish pause, until Doyle thought Bodie must have fallen asleep and put paid to any more interesting little revelations. "Don't want any of 'em coming back to haunt me, you see. 've never liked ghosts, don't want any hanging round me..."

"If they did, I'd get rid of them for you."

A giggle, colouring Bodie's words. "Can just picture you in your cassock swinging your censer and incense."

"Makes me sound as if I should be earning a living down Soho."

"You'd make a fortune if you did. Have a queue outside the Hussar right round the Square..."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment," Doyle said, amused.

"You do that. Was meant as one."

Somewhere, not too far away, there was a dog barking suddenly, then the shallower, blunter sound of a human voice, and the dog was quiet, the entire street silent. Quiet as that other night spent in such similar circumstances, preparing for the Parsali conference or announcement or whatever it had been. All he really remembered was lying there talking to Bodie, the intimacy of it, the loneliness and the fear going away as long as he could hear Bodie's strong voice attuned to him. Lying here in the dark, talking like this, was even more precious than that night had been, sweeter somehow, like champagne. There was the barest breath of air

coming through the window, old putty loosened by weather, the outside coming inside far enough to stir the curtains, shadows moving briefly, gracefully, along the wall. "Bodie..."

"Mhmm?"

"You said something earlier..."

"Mmm?"

"About being a father..."

The warmth of the dark was gone, replaced by all the cold nights of frightened children. Absurd, Doyle told himself, he was a grown man, and it was Bodie who didn't like the dark. But of course, it wasn't the dark that was unnerving: it was Bodie lying so still and quiet and cold beside him, as communicative as a corpse.

"Sorry," Doyle said, not wanting to get into an argument, not tonight, and not when they were going to be essentially imprisoned with each other for god knew how long. "Didn't mean to pry."

"No, no, don't worry, it's not you. It's just..." A swallow, audible in the night-time's peace. "Forgot I even said that to you. Yeh, there might be a Bodie or two running around out there. Might even be one up in Liverpool. Wouldn't be surprised if there was one or two in Africa."

"Bit young to start, weren't you?"

"Didn't leave home till I was almost fifteen, an' who thinks about condoms when it's your first time, eh?" A chuckle, reminiscing, fond memories stirred. "Had one in my back pocket, but I didn't even remember it until after I'd done it. Too anxious to get it in her—"

"Too anxious to know what it'd feel like, shit scared you'd come before you could even get in her..." Smiling, his own memories stirring, girls he hadn't thought of in years, the old embarrassment of being young warming him with affection for the boy he'd been.

"Then worrying yourself sick in case you'd caught anything..."

"Spending hours in the loo trying to see if it looked different now that you'd done 'it'..."

"You too? I thought I was the only one that did that."

Doyle shrugged, the nylon sleeping bag susurrating against him. "Think we all did that. Just not something you usually admit to though, is it?"

"Like wondering if you've broken it the first time stuff actually comes out of it?"

A surprised laugh, Doyle turning onto his side

so that he was facing Bodie, invisible but for the gleam of tooth caught in a glimmer of light, or the faint sheen of skin. "I even went and asked my dad about it."

"What'd he say?"

"Told me to talk to Father Henderson!" Then quickly, before Bodie could say anything else, before Bodie could get them farther away from the subject: "But you haven't any proof one way or the other, about those little Bodies you've left behind..."

So close together, each could feel the other, knew as one shrugged and the other lay perfectly, uncommonly motionless. "It's the usual: you get in, get off and get out and leave the worrying to her. I was too young then, too young and too desperate and too—scared, really. Got slagged something awful by the other blokes when I came down with a dose, I can tell you." Aware of the tension in his partner, he hurried on, trying to erase that slate. "But I'd do it different now."

"Oh, getting into the kinky stuff, are we?"

"No such thing as kinky," Bodie said through a yawn. "'s all natural, 's all just people doin' what they like..."

And on which intriguing confession, Bodie fell soundly asleep.

"Bodie?" Doyle whispered. "Bodie!" A little fiercer, with a dunt from his elbow as emphasis. "Trust you," he muttered, tugging Bodie's sleeping bag up high enough to cover the pale skin of his shoulder. "Getting into the really interesting bits, and then you flake out on me. Bastard," he said affectionately, settling himself down, soothing himself into the warmth of his own snug sleeping bag.

All the distant, familiar noises surrounded him, comforting to a man city born and bred, and from beside him, Bodie's breathing souged against Doyle's ears, and against his back there was the easeful pressure of Bodie's solid weight, diluting the last fright of Bodie not being there, of Bodie letting him down. Slowly, in no hurry to give up the tangible sense of complete security and the soft strength of being safe, Doyle slid into sleep.

To be woken, the first cluster of sparrows raucous outside the window, the first blood-orange of the sky crawling across the floor.

Bodie writhed, trapped by the narrowness of his sleeping bag, legs trying to thrash, confined instead, arms tangling in padded fabric, mouth open,

teeth drawn back in a grimace, head flailing, small moans, wordless horrors rising from his throat. Taking shape, forming almost recognisable sounds, the whimperings ululating and painfilled.

Lying beside him, there was nothing to be done: it was madness and an invitation to a black eye to wake Bodie from a nightmare. Doyle watched, and waited, biting his lip in his frustration. Almost, he reached out; almost, he banished the nightmare, but common sense governed him, and he rolled onto his stomach, pummeling his pillow to keep his hands from invading Bodie.

A surge, high-tide cresting, then ebbing movements, finally still, but only for the barest second. "Ray?" Small as a child, bitter as a broken man.

"'s all right, I'm still here."

"Saw you," Bodie whispered.

"'s all right, I told you, everything's okay..."

"No, no, it's not, I saw you. The bastard got you and I looked up and it was everywhere, all over me, in my eyes and in my mouth, could even taste it. Blood and bone and brains, covering me and I couldn't get out—"

"It's all right," Doyle said fiercely, grabbing hold of Bodie, hands slithering on the nylon: furious motion, fabric hauled out of the way, cold hands clutching hot skin, touching, life to life, taking away the sting of death. "I'm still here, was only a dream. And it didn't happen, and it won't happen. Told you before, when we go, we're going together."

"But yesterday, I almost..."

"A miss is as good as a mile, and don't you forget that, Bodie." Softer now, gentling him, taming the nightmare. "Told you, I'm still here. Can't get rid of my ugly mug that easy, can you?"

Bodie stared up at him, saw him shadowed by the encroaching light, saw the darkness with so little brightness to change the dream. The air was tinged with red, Doyle's hair darkly colourless in this low light, all of it too unreal, too like the dream. Hands still trembling, he stretched up one hand, touched hair, dry; ran fingertips over the contours of bone, still whole. Touched, finally, the face, tracing the unbroken planes, following the curves and concavities, dappling over the stubble of beard, finding and remembering the old, damaged cheekbone that was never quite as warm as the rest of Doyle's face.

"Still here," he murmured, finally reassured, "not dead. Didn't kill you..."

For an absurd moment, Doyle thought Bodie, made mellow by earlier booze and later relief from the nightmare, was going to kiss him: would have hugged him if either one of them had been anything but English. Instead, Bodie stared at him, inchoate longing in his eyes, the simple need for comfort and reassurance.

“Oh, sod this for a game,” Doyle muttered, casting King and Country into the rank past where it belonged. He drew Bodie close, innocent as a baby, held him tight against his chest, the edge of the zip digging into him. Concentrating on making Bodie feel better, he didn’t bother with the discomfort of the zip, rather was glad of it, for it meant that there was something between him and Bodie: one thing to hug his best friend, different, somehow, to clasp a half-naked man to his own bare chest.

“Thanks,” Bodie mumbled in his ear, relinquishing his own hold on Doyle, pulling back, separating them far enough that embarrassment danced in gleefully.

“Yeh, well, don’t mention it,” Doyle said automatically, wishing immediately that he’d said ‘any time’ instead. “Suppose we’d better start now if we want a wash and breakfast before our friend MacGuire gets home. I’ll go first.” Trying not to look as if he was running away, Doyle headed, rather quickly, for the bathroom, leaving Bodie to lie in the dawning, thinking, one hand absently stroking his left nipple, where the faint impression of smooth chest hair still lingered.

By the time Doyle was washed and shaved, the camp stove was hissing under the kettle and Weetabix were in bowls awaiting the luxury of the last fresh milk for who knew how many days.

“Wrap yourself round that,” Bodie said casually, apparently unfazed by their recent Continental display. “I’ll grab a quick bath—there’s still a good hour before he could get home.”

“I’ll see to the tea,” Doyle mumbled, awkward, made more so by incomprehension. It wasn’t as if he’d done anything to be embarrassed about, was it? Still, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Bodie, sturdy, pale, unconcernedly naked, padded into the bathroom.

Later, Customs, traffic and holiday delays obviously all having played their part, MacGuire finally arrived downstairs, the descent from the taxi meticulously observed, the presence of feminine companionship dutifully reported in before

MacGuire and company made their way indoors and thus imposed a rule of silence on the two men holed in above them.

The rest of the day established their pattern: one on, one off duty, one crouched at the window, ear phones on his head like some bizarre science-fiction hair-do; the other lounging on the ‘bed’, dozing or reading as the mood took him, Bodie working his way through his book of cryptic crossword puzzles, Doyle sketching in his notebook. The silence was comforting, on the whole, but the waiting, the inactivity, commingled to form the too-familiar churn of tension and enervation. This, rather than revenge for Bodie’s mistake and Doyle’s slack mouth, was why Cowley had exiled these two to this place: by now, the urge to move would be unbearable in less-experienced agents, or even in less self-controlled men. There would be the crackle of tension, the snapping temper that couldn’t be expressed, growing until there was the real risk of someone slipping up and being heard by their mark downstairs. But Bodie and Doyle had been through this all before, had proved that their uncommon rapport survived even this, bringing them through all this unscathed, the dangers of secret obbo duty different from action, for it wasn’t the physical integrity that was pressured, but the intangible, the unmeasurable that made a partnership work.

The squeaking floorboards marked long before MacGuire took up residence downstairs, Doyle crossed the room silently, debunking Bodie from his shift, resettling into the routine as they had done on more of this type of job than either one of them ever wanted to count. Still, as they moved in silent partnership, Bodie looked at Doyle sharply, the other man’s reactions just slightly off, the set of the mouth too mulish for this soon into an operation like this. Later, if MacGuire and his friend went out, they’d sort this out, nip whatever problem it was in the bud.

A flurry of motion, and Bodie was at the window beside Doyle, stifling a groan of frustration as MacGuire kissed his girlfriend goodbye and waved her off in a taxi: one down, one to go, but that didn’t help them at all. Bodie rolled his eyes in mimed disgust, and Doyle fumed silently, fidgeting edgily.

Definitely need to sort Doyle out later, Bodie told himself, concerned by the bad-tempered way he had been shrugged off when all he’d tried to do

was pat Doyle consolingly on the arm.

Later wasn't any better: the girlfriend came home laden with Marks & Spencer's carrier bags, and the headphones told them that the pair downstairs were having a cozy evening at home, while Bodie and Doyle were stuck with sandwiches from the last of their prepared food trove, a packet of biscuits drunk with fizzy drinks and nothing to listen to but the distorted bass and wail of music drifting up through the floorboards.

Getting late, and it was Doyle's turn on the headphones again, Bodie snuggling into the pleasantness of his sleeping bag, eyes drifting shut over his book. Glancing over to mouth a goodnight to his partner, he was struck by the expression on Doyle's face.

What? he mimed, his expression questioning.

Doyle shrugged: *nothing*.

Bodie left it for a minute, then looked back, Doyle's face even more interesting. *What?* he demanded, knowing that his partner could read him perfectly well.

Doyle shrugged, made a face: *nothing much*.

Bodie gave him an incredulous stare.

Reluctantly, Doyle told him, arm and hand gesture more than expressive.

So that was it, Bodie thought to himself, trying not to laugh. They were going at it like rabbits downstairs, and Doyle was having to listen to it. A quick, very rude glance at his partner's infamous trousers, and sure enough, Bodie noticed with sympathy, the poor bugger was getting all worked up about it. Well, that was something Bodie had no intention of intruding on at all, so with one last knowing, wickedly teasing look, he turned his back to Doyle with every intention of going to sleep.

Easier said than done, when he knew there were two people bonking their brains out downstairs, and poor Doyle was sitting over there, balls tying themselves in knots. Against all his better judgment, Bodie felt the beginnings of arousal: time for a quick visit to the loo, then, while those downstairs were too preoccupied to do anything that might require Bodie's immediate attention. Silently, he made off for the bathroom, as innocently as if he were going in for a last leak before bed.

Watching Bodie beat a hasty retreat, Doyle gave him a sour look: he knew what Bodie was up to, rotten bastard. Leaving him here like this, the only celibate in a world of sighs and moans and everyone else having a lovely time. Shortly, Bodie

emerged from the bathroom, and Doyle looked, pointedly and mockingly, at his watch. Bodie just grinned and slid back into his sleeping bag, an expression of relaxed smugness on his face. He blew a cheeky kiss at Doyle, and then, his own tensions happily relieved, he dropped off to sleep.

Doyle wasn't dropping off anything, stuck there listening to MacGuire who had more stamina than most men even pretended to. It wasn't even as if he could have a quiet wank. Get caught pulling his pud like that and he'd never live it down. Cursing the world in general and MacGuire, the job, Cowley, and Bodie in particular, Doyle sat in the dark, alone, listening.

The next day, well into the afternoon, MacGuire and girlfriend having gone out together, the pall of silence lifted from Bodie and Doyle. "Right," Bodie said, watching the two figures depart down the street, "that's them off then."

Doyle was already reporting into his RT, face so cheerful anyone would think he had a terminal illness.

That done, Doyle clattered into the kitchen, muttering under his breath, heating tinned food up, making as much noise as one man and a few cans possibly could.

"See you're your usual charming self," Bodie said, making Doyle jump.

"Christ, you trying to give me a heart attack?" Doyle snapped, uncomfortably aware of just how near Bodie was standing. The body heat so close to his back was doing funny things to him, his breath too shallow, his heart thumping uncomfortably as Bodie leaned in over his shoulder to see what Doyle was up to, long arms reaching round to poke at the various things going into the tin ration cans. Nothing that hadn't happened a million times before, but then, Doyle had never been so sexually frustrated before, had he? He used that as bastion against the unnerving stirring of his sex as he stood there, to all intents and purposes, wrapped in Bodie's arms. "Gerroff," he muttered, disgruntled, not daring to actually shrug Bodie off, for if he moved so much as an inch, he'd be touching his partner, his back plastered to Bodie's front, and that mere thought released a frightening flood of heat in him. "I said get off me," he snarled, stirring furiously at the tinned stew, splashing himself and the camp stove with brown gravy and fragments of carrot.

“God, you’ve really got your knickers in a twist,” Bodie said, not unkindly. “Come on, let me see to this and you can pop into the bathroom.”

Ridiculous to feel embarrassed, absurd to feel the blush staining his cheeks, but Doyle couldn’t help himself—couldn’t understand himself, either. He and Bodie had always been, able to talk—well perhaps not always truthfully, exaggeration being a favourite game of theirs—but at least they had always been open about matters sexual. Reacting like a teenager caught with his dad’s *Playboy* was pathetic.

“Go on!” Bodie cajoled, half-laughing, taking Doyle by the shoulders and shoving him in the general direction of the bathroom. “And don’t forget to lock the door and clean up behind yourself, you mucky bugger,” said teasingly, Bodie sanguine about these things, years at sea and in the Services reducing all of it to nothing more routine than eating or sleeping.

“I’m fine,” Doyle said stubbornly, completely ignoring the discomfort and tension in his own body. “Just ‘cause you’ve got a dirty mind—”

“Look, Ray,” Bodie said, a bit put out by Doyle’s odd behaviour, “you’re being stupid. No, shut up and hear me out. You’re wound so tight you’re a risk to both of us, mate, and we both know what the problem is.”

A nod towards the tight crotch of Doyle’s jeans stopped Doyle from claiming ignorance. He was being stupid, he knew, behaving like some blushing virgin, especially since it was only Bodie, and just think of some of the things that had gone on during some of their double dates, and the conversations after.

Bodie was still talking at him, nagging him like a mother going on about washing behind his ears. “You’re going to end up hurting, and then who bears the brunt, eh? Me, that’s who, you biting my head off every two minutes. And it’s not healthy bottling it up like that—for that matter, it’s not as if it’s any different from what I did last night either, is it?”

“Nah, you’re right,” Doyle said, a bit hang-dog. “Daft to be embarrassed, innit?”

“Outright stupid, if you ask me. So take five minutes and sort yourself out, all right?”

“Five minutes?” Doyle demanded, nose in air, the joke covering the embarrassment he simply could not shake off. “Long enough for the under-privileged like you, I suppose, but us real men need a bit longer than *five* minutes.”

“Right,” Bodie smiled indulgently although he was a bit put out by Doyle’s peculiar reaction to him, “you take an hour or two, mate, and don’t you worry your head about the job, I’ll do it for you.”

Doyle looked down at his fly, grinned up at Bodie, unaware of the odd expression in his eyes. “I can do it myself, thanks all the same, flower.”

“Get on with you, or MacGuire’ll be back before you’re done.”

Doyle nipped into the toilet, snibbing the door securely behind him: he wouldn’t put it past Bodie to come in, and he didn’t trust the bugger with a camera around. Closing the lid of the toilet, the porcelain chipped, cold and a real passion-killer, Doyle pulled his trousers down and his t-shirt up. His cock was hot in his hand, balls craving attention, erection sudden and too quick for real pleasure, the need burning him. His foreskin was already withdrawn, his exposed glans moist and almost too sensitive. Doyle spat on his hand, wishing for some gliding oil or a hot, wet body to sink into. Or a mouth: he loved being sucked. There were times he’d rather lie back and be sucked than bother with intercourse.

He stretched his legs out in front of himself, let his mind wander to the women he’d known, the few who had been really good at giving head, reliving their caresses, his hand blurring on his cock. Too rough, making him wince, hand too dry for the sensitivity of his overwrought cock. Wetting his palm again, trying to slow down, letting his imagination run full rein. There had been that time when he’d been undercover on the Drug Squad, that bloke who’d offered to suck him for just one small white-powder packet. Letting him do it, there in the rancid squat, done worse to maintain his cover, letting that wide mouth suck him in, wet, strong throat, dark hair bobbing back and forth, back and forth, like his hand now, like Bodie’s dark hair—

He snapped the thought in two, threw it away, denied it had ever existed. His cock throbbed, begging him for attention, and he stroked it, thumb dallying at the slit, the way that man’s tongue had...Bodie’s tongue would feel like that, Bodie’s mouth larger than a woman’s, able to take all of him inside, sucking on him—

He tried to stop thinking about it, the irrational worry that his partner, not ten feet away, would know what he was thinking, would know what he was doing.

But Bodie did know what he was doing, had sat here last night doing the same thing, Bodie's arse warming the same wooden seat, Bodie's hand racing in the same rhythm, Bodie's cock straining, erupting—

He came, to the images of his partner, and to the sounds of new voices in the other room, strangers' voices familiarising themselves into Graves and Mitchell as the dissolution of orgasm left him.

Fingers fumbling, he managed to put his clothes back together, wished he could do the same for his self-control. Leaving the sanctuary of the bathroom, having to face Bodie's twinkling, knowing eyes, Doyle was fit to be tied. "Why don't you just hang a sign out the window announcing we're here," he snapped at the two younger agents. "Just because you were only activated two months ago, there's no need for you to behave like stupid schoolboys on a spree. Making enough noise to raise the dead..."

"And a good morning to you," Bodie said, his cheerfulness a warning Doyle didn't even hear. "The lads've come to pick up the film of MacGuire's little friend and best of all, they've brought us some decent grub."

"Well, isn't that just fan-fucking-tastic," Doyle grumbled, too mortified to meet Bodie's eyes, too off-balance to stop glancing at Bodie's mouth, his groin, his hands.

"Yeh, it is, actually," Bodie said coldly. "They even brought us fresh bread, milk and today's papers. You can pay them, right?"

"Why should I?"

"Because, Raymondo my sweet," Bodie said nastily, "you are being a right sod to these two and a foul-tempered little shit and none of us have to put up with it. Give the lads their money, Ray."

Ungraciously, still not looking at Bodie, Doyle snatched his jacket from where he'd dumped it on top of his sports bag, dug in the pockets until he found his wallet, grabbed a couple of notes, stuffed them into an outstretched hand. He walked away, gluing the field-glasses to his eyes, ignoring the rest of the room and the people in it. Behind him, he could hear Bodie chatting pleasantly to their two fellow agents, no doubt smoothing the feathers Doyle had ruffled. Doyle couldn't care less, not right now. All he could think of was what he'd done in that bathroom, what he'd been thinking about while Bodie was out here, innocent for once, talking to what amounted to complete strangers.

The sound of a door closing, the tiny whisper of Bodie's stocking-soled feet crossing the floor.

"Bit over the top there, weren't you?" Bodie inquired, far more mildly than anyone else would have expected.

Doyle didn't trust his voice to speak normally to Bodie. Bodie, whom he'd imagined on his knees, sucking him...

"Not like you to be embarrassed over a thing like that."

No? Doyle thought incredulously. Oh, yeh, I fantasise about my partner every day of the week.

"Just because I knew what you were doing in there—"

"No, you fucking don't!" Doyle broke in, the words bursting from him before he could stop them.

"Get off it, Ray, there are only so many variations a bloke can do."

A deep breath didn't calm him, but it steadied him a little, gave him a second to clutch his self-control: Bodie didn't know, Bodie couldn't know. A friendly elbow in his ribs, a bag of chips redolent of vinegar and pickled onion stuck into his hand.

"So what were you up to in there, then?" Bodie asked round a too-hot chip.

"Thought you said you knew what I was up to?" Doyle asked unpleasantly, nervous about Bodie prying, more nervous about Bodie finding out. He still couldn't believe it himself—to think he'd done that, thinking about Bodie...

"You were the one that said I didn't. Go on, tell us—" Another friendly nudge, Bodie's good humour very evident, his carnal curiosity, never quiescent, fully roused. "Kinky stuff, was it?"

"Last night you said there wasn't such an animal."

"Can't be that," Bodie responded, filching one of Doyle's pickled onions. "I'd've seen if you'd brought your menagerie in with you." Took a look at Doyle's expression, his own softening in sympathy. "I said a lot of things last night, and some of them were even true."

"Were they?" Cold, unyielding, everything about him screaming 'go away'.

But Bodie was his partner, and Bodie was the man who had let him down not too long ago. "Told you, there's nothing kinky under the sun. Doesn't matter what you did, it's all all right with me. Anyway, Ray my old china, anything you've done, I've already done—twice."

"Listen to you, Don bloody Juan and Casanova all rolled into one."

"Ah, the benefits of natural charm, good looks and—"

"And a modest disposition, yeh, I know, I know," Doyle muttered, relaxing in spite of himself. "Look, I just don't like people coming in like that when I'm..."

"When you're wanking your little heart out," Bodie said into Doyle's discreet silence. "Down to the short strokes when you heard them, were you?"

"Has anyone ever told you what a nosy bugger you are?"

"Thousands, Doyle, and all of them better than you." He made it light, friendly, even while he was wondering why the hell his partner was lying through his teeth to him.

"Change the record," Doyle said, balling his chip papers up, using that as an excuse to walk away from Bodie, throwing the rubbish into the bin under the sink. "Did the Boys Wonder have anything for us from Cowley?"

"Only his best wishes and fondest regards—and a warning to stay put, keep our noses clean and our heads down. Our beloved Führer is threatening to have our guts for garters if MacGuire catches so much as a whiff of us."

"Back to the grindstone then," Doyle said, relieved to be able to retreat into work and best of all, into Bodie's enforced silence. "I'll take the first watch. Never know when our chum downstairs'll come home."

"Fair enough." Bodie went over to the bed readily enough, picking up pen and crosswords, engrossing himself immediately. But his mind wasn't on the words in front of him; rather, it was on a far more complicated cipher: his partner, Ray Doyle.

Time crawled along somewhere between a snail and a watched pot and still, MacGuire didn't so much as have a suspicious phone call. Boredom and discouragement set in, festering along nicely beside Doyle's tense hostility and Bodie's silent watching.

Night time again, several days later and many, many hours into this, the crosswords finished, the books discarded, the card-games palling. This day's only excitement had been MacGuire and Sylvia having a rip-roaring argument, followed by a making-up the likes of which even Bodie admitted

made him envious. Bodie listened to the sighs and the groans, the sensitive bugs planted by the bedside picking up even the small sounds of mouths moving on flesh and the slide of skin on skin. All of it was having the predictable effect on him, his body responding as readily as his imagination. A movement from the bed caught his attention: Doyle, restless again, still fretting over whatever it was that had upset him so the other day. It had been listening to MacGuire's athletics that had started Doyle off the first time, Bodie reminded himself, mind going nineteen to the dozen, coming up with nothing so laid-out as a plan, but a vague, amorphous intention, the need to sort all this out.

It was, genuinely, Doyle's turn, not that Bodie would usually give up listening to a floor show like this. He attracted his partner's attention, tapped his watch as a reminder, waited while Doyle gathered himself and came over to take his place.

Not letting on, Bodie mutely handed over the headphones, missing nothing as Doyle had his first earful of what was going on downstairs: didn't miss the eyes widening in surprise, certainly didn't miss the involuntary, guilt-edged glance at Bodie's groin. Now there was something worth thinking about...

Silent as ever, Bodie lay on top of his sleeping bag, arms folded behind his head, his body carefully positioned so that he could keep a surreptitious eye on Doyle whilst looking as if he were simply dozing.

Perched on the camp stool, Doyle listened, wide-eyed, the sounds thumping through him, a steady pulse of desire. His mind automatically provided the pictures to go with the sounds and his body supplied the empathetic sensations. Every minute noise struck a cord in him, until his body was singing with suppressed desire, cock hard inside his trousers, making him wish he hadn't forgotten to pack enough underwear. Under cover of his lashes, he sneaked a look at Bodie, saw him apparently asleep, knew he had to be lying there thinking about what he'd heard over the headphones. Uncomfortable, Doyle shifted, his cock rubbing sweetly against his inner seam, a tiny groan escaping him. Panicked, he looked up, but Bodie gave no sign of having heard. Just as well, really, Doyle thought, unable to concentrate on anything but the evocative sounds lush in his ears and the aching response of his body.

He closed his eyes, helpless, forcing his hands

not to rub his nipples, refusing his body's pleading to touch it. Knowing it was impossible, he swore he could hear Bodie's breathing, could hear the tiny sounds the man made as he changed position on the make-shift bed. Remembered standing in the scullery, Bodie so close behind him, reaching round him. Heard MacGuire talking, saying dirty words, telling his girlfriend how good she was, how talented, what her mouth was doing to him—couldn't keep the image out of his head, Bodie doing that for him, Bodie giving him that, keeping Doyle safe within his mouth, binding them closer together.

His cock pulsed, strangled by too-tight trousers, irritated by the harshness of double-stitched seams, the head weeping. Probably be a stain there, he thought disjointedly, aware of the incipient humiliation of that if Bodie were to see it. Aware, immediately, crystalline memory of double-dates, of how dark Bodie's eyes were when he was aroused, hand down his date's blouse, heavy lidded eyes meeting Doyle's in shared pleasure. Wanted that for himself, Bodie's hands on him, Bodie's body hot and hard and aching for him the way he himself was—

Christ, he thought, scared half out his wits, what the fuck was wrong? Sitting here, hard as a rock, thinking about his partner, thinking about a man. He wasn't supposed to think about blokes that way, had given it up when he was fourteen, didn't go in for that sort of thing...

Oh no? his cock asked him, twitching, the heavy beat of his pulse measuring his desire.

Oh, yes, he admitted to himself, stifling a groan, holding the misery within. Oh, god, yes...

And startled, opened his eyes as a hand touched his jeans, the zip parting as if by magic, his cock lifted out and freed by delicate, sensitive strength, a wet mouth engulfing him immediately and wholly, the pleasure burning his nerves with a sweet, sweet fire. He stared down, transfixed as he watched Bodie transfixed upon his cock, the generous mouth stretched wide, the black hair gleaming, the head moving exactly as he had imagined it, but better, oh, so much better than any gossamer imaginings. Moved by the tenderness of Bodie's mouth on him, he threaded his fingers through the short hair, caress becoming clutching, great handfuls of hair as Bodie brought him closer and closer, sucking him deep and hard, until Doyle thought he couldn't contain it, a scream of purest pleasure lodging in his throat.

Fist stuffed into his mouth, teeth sharp on his knuckles, the taste of blood metallic and bitter on his tongue, he stifled his cries, on the verge of weeping or murder when Bodie withdrew from him, a mere hand taking the place of that incredible mouth. But then Bodie's fist was moving, and Doyle's fist was moved from his mouth, Bodie's tongue filling him, the taste of his own pre-cum mingling with the taste of his own blood and Bodie's mouth. The tongue in his mouth fucked him, the fist fucked his cock, Bodie all around him, suffocating him with lust, encompassing him as he dissolved into orgasm, collapsing into arms strong enough to hold him up.

Arms strong enough to take one of Doyle's limp hands and shove it, roughly, against Bodie's own groin, soft fabric dethroned by the hard thrust of cock and the coarse prickle of pubic hair. Bodie was still on his knees beside Doyle, kissing him, awash in the pleasure of sex, pushing himself into Doyle's hand, his own fist wrapped around Doyle's fingers, holding them tightly enough for his cock's pleasure. "Oh, that's it," he murmured, the headphones slipped back far enough that he could pour words into Doyle's ear, plunge his tongue in there. He kissed Doyle hungrily, sucking on his tongue as he had sucked on his cock, his own hardness gripped exquisitely, his own orgasm chasing him into Doyle's arms. He came, shuddering, semen spilling over Doyle's hand, splashing onto his jeans, Bodie's words spilling into Doyle's mouth as the last tremors shivered through him.

Spent, Bodie rested where he was for a minute, then pulled himself together. He grinned as he tucked Doyle away tidily, kissed him lightly at the side of the mouth as he tugged the headphones back into position. Patted him on the thigh in farewell, and then wandered, silent-footed, back to bed, one giant yawn escaping him before he smiled so sweetly at Doyle and then, all of a sudden, fell asleep, as quickly and as surely as a light going out.

In the dark, Doyle listened to MacGuire and Sylvia settling down for the night, sleepy murmurs muting into silence, everything shutting down for the night.

The headphones were pulled off, put aside. Time for him to get some sleep, Bodie's turn to be up early so that one of them would be on duty long before MacGuire was up and about. Time for him to get into his sleeping bag beside Bodie. To sleep beside the man he'd just had sex

with. To lie there, to lie with a man...

He ran his palm down the leg of his jeans, where Bodie's semen had wet him, felt it drying, one patch still damp. Lifted his hand to his mouth, licked his palm, couldn't decide if he were relieved or disappointed that all he could taste was fabric and the remnants of chips and pickled onions. Sat there, his back to the window, his eyes fixed wide and shocked, on the man who had sucked his cock. The man whose cum had flowed into his palm. The man he had kissed.

He was still sitting there, thinking, when the sun rose, and MacGuire made a fatal phone call.

Clearing up, no need now to be silent, but Doyle wasn't speaking to Bodie, wasn't looking at him. Was flinching away every time Bodie came within spitting distance. Flickering glances, desperate glances, at the door, and the outside world. Escape, Bodie knew. The chance to run away from what had happened in this room in the dark conspiracy of night.

"Ray," he said to his partner's resolutely turned back. "Ray, you have to listen to me."

"Who died and made you Cowley?" Doyle muttered, a toss-up whether he were more ashamed of his behaviour last night or his cowardice this morning. But he was entitled, wasn't he? he told himself. Wasn't every day a bloke finds himself having sex with his best friend...

"Ray, what're you getting yourself so worked up about?"

That did it. Doyle whirled round, off-balanced to find just how close Bodie was. "What am I getting so worked up about? You sucked my cock last night," he whispered fiercely, even now keeping his voice down about such a thing, lest anyone hear them. "And I had my fucking hand on you, letting you come all over me..."

The disgust in that voice hurt, more than Bodie had thought it would. "Let's not forget the vile and perverse kissing while you're listing all the horrible things I did last night."

"Don't," was all Doyle said, hearing the anger, seeing the pain.

"Don't what? Argue? Or even imagine for a second that you'd ever let me do that to you again? And don't bother getting on your fucking pedestal, Mr. High-and-Mighty bloody Doyle. In case you'd forgotten, you enjoyed it too!"

"You think I don't know that? You think that's

not what I'm so fucking worried about?"

The truth, heavy footed, landed between them.

It was Bodie's turn to look away, discomfited, needing a second to recapture some semblance of composure. "Are you telling me you'd never done it with a bloke before?" he asked, only half surprised by Doyle's evident shock, now that he'd started to put two and two together.

"Course I've never done it with a bloke before." Paused, remembering the way Bodie's mouth had been on him, the skill, the ease with which he'd been swallowed all the way into Bodie's throat. "But you've done it a few times, haven't you?"

"One or two." Looked up, couldn't help himself, hell-bent sense of humour kicking up the traces at this absurd situation. "One or two dozen, give or take."

"And did you...take?" Doyle asked delicately, needing to know, no time yet to think about why he needed to know so much.

"When I've felt like it and when I've been able to trust the bloke with my arse."

Nothing said, one, two minutes passing.

"I'd trust you with my arse," Bodie said very quietly, giving more to this man than he'd ever given to anyone before, including Marikka. "Trust you with everything else already."

"Yeh. I know you do." Unrevealing, uncommunicative, the voice flat, the eyes blank as Doyle's mind thought.

"It was only sex, Ray," Bodie said, wishing he could still ruffle the thick hair or give him a playful punch, but he no longer had that liberty, wasn't sure when he would again. "I thought you'd done it all before, thought you were getting antsy because you were randy and there was a warm body nearby..."

"You're my partner." Not quite a statement, not quite a question.

"Sometimes makes it better—both the sex and the partnership. Look, I didn't know, thought it was just a bit of harmless fun..."

"Suppose it was, if you're used to fucking blokes. And yeh, I know, you thought I was. But Christ, Bodie—" Breaking off, the voice shaken, the hand shaking as Doyle rubbed at gritty eyes.

"If I'd known..."

"If you'd known," Doyle said bleakly, "I'd still've wanted you to do it."

"It doesn't have to be a problem."

"Doesn't it?" Doyle gave a bark of laughter, an

ugly sound, all his occasional beauty fled under the frown of confusion and the tension of chaos. “Easy enough for you to say. But I’m well past 30, Bodie, I should’ve known by now. And to have it just come up out of nowhere and hit me like that—”

“It’ll be all right,” Bodie told him quietly, almost repeating the words Doyle had said the night Bodie had come so close to kissing him, the night he’d held off simply because he hadn’t been sure that Doyle wanted to get that involved with him.

“Because you’ve got me? Because you’ve had me?”

So much bitterness, so much self-doubt, echoes for Bodie of his own teen years, when he hadn’t known who he was, only that he was different, too different for his family to ever know. “It’ll be all right in the end.”

“And I suppose that’s an invitation, is it—or a proposal?”

“I wasn’t talking about sex, Doyle.”

“Yeh, well, I can’t stop thinking about it. What we did...”

“What we did,” Bodie took a deep breath, discovering depths of feeling he had, obviously, kept very carefully hidden from himself, a bitter secret all his own, “doesn’t ever have to happen again.” The pain blossomed somewhere deep inside him, and he could have laughed at himself for being so self-sacrificing, especially for someone who wouldn’t exactly appreciate his feelings. “We can even pretend it never happened in the first place.”

“Can we?” Doyle shot back, startling Bodie. “Maybe you can just lump me in with your few dozen other blokes, but me—” He shook his head, finally met Bodie’s eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be able to forget it at all.”

“Then,” Bodie said slowly, thinking this through as he went along, trying to gauge Ray’s reactions, the underlying emotions, “we can see how it goes, you know, take it one day at a time...”

“Like fucking alcoholics.”

“Well, I could get addicted to you...” Leaving it open like that, an offer if Doyle wanted it, a joke if it were too much too soon.

“Some people say addiction’s a sickness.”

“Some people say the world’s flat, so who’re you going to listen to?”

There were footsteps clattering up the stairs, at least three people by the sound of it.

For a second, Bodie and Doyle simply looked at

each other. “Best finish this lot,” Doyle said, moving away both from Bodie and the issue of what they’d done the night before.

If he let Doyle slip through his fingers like that, then they’d never get this set to rights, and Bodie wasn’t going to allow this to become a problem between them; was willing to give Doyle up if it were for the best, but he’d be damned if he were going to lose all this promise just for lack of time and an overdose of awkwardness. One hand, large on Doyle’s upper arm, the muscle under his palm spasming, either from nerves or from Doyle trying not to pull away, sparing Bodie’s feelings perhaps. “Come round my place tonight,” he said hurriedly. “Come round and we’ll sort this out.”

“What is there to sort?” Doyle asked distantly, obviously listening to the conversation wafting up from one landing down.

“You, for one. Me, for another.”

“Us, for a third?”

“Maybe. If we’re lucky.”

“If we’re lucky?” Abruptly, Doyle gave Bodie every ounce of his attention, the intensity of his eyes disconcerting. “Yeh, suppose that’s how you’d look at it, if you were used to this whole thing...”

Bodie didn’t say a word, standing there, holding his breath, crossing his fingers and praying to any passing divinity that Doyle should prove willing to at least try, or even think about it.

“Lucky?” Doyle said pensively, expression and voice both sharpening, demanding, throwing the words quickly before the approaching voices got to them. “D’you think you’d be lucky if we did this?”

“Yes.” Unequivocal, no doubts allowed, the down-side something to be dealt with later, when there was a later.

“Yes...”

“Hello, Rapunzel,” McCabe said as he came in through the door, “you ready to be rescued by your knight in shining armour?”

“Yeh, so where is he?” Doyle retorted, fed up with McCabe’s jokes about his hair, far more put-out than he ought to be by the intrusion of the outside world.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” this from Murphy, strolling in, as calm as ever.

“Keep your sex life to yourself,” Bodie said, “and you lot can finish this lot, seeing as how we were working our fingers to the bone—”

“Thought you didn’t want to talk about sex?”

Murphy shot back, already stacking the electronics equipment.

"You two can stand here yakking all day if you want," Doyle said before anyone else could put his tuppenceworth in. "I'm off home for a bath."

"Yeh, thought it ponged a bit in here."

"You try using the bath without making any noise and without MacGuire coming back when the water's making a racket going down the drain. Anyway, I'm off. You plebs can do the cleaning up here."

Making himself busy in the kitchenette, Bodie didn't look up, couldn't trust himself not to give himself away, not when there were three of Cowley's finest watching him watch Ray Doyle leave, quite possibly taking their partnership with him. He could kick himself for giving in to impulse and doing Ray last night—wanted to kick himself even harder for not realising how fond he was of his partner, and how terribly easy it would be to love him, given half a chance.

"Who's going to give me the keys to their car then?" Doyle demanded, playing the usual game, everyone knowing that standard procedure would have had one of the other agents drive a car over for them.

"Suppose it'll have to be me sacrificing my all for my country again," Lucas said from the window, digging into his pockets. "Here, catch!"

"Ta," Doyle said, his own keys slapping into his hand. "Cowley say anything about expecting us back at HQ?"

"Not till the day after tomorrow," Murphy told him. "Jammy sods."

"That's what you think—we're due a week off at least. Still, at least it's something."

Bodie was aware of Doyle looking at him, could feel the steady gaze upon him. Stupid to let himself wallow like this, Bodie told himself, pulling himself up by metaphoric bootstraps. Doyle just needed

time, so even if he did do his ostrich impersonation for a while, they'd sort it out eventually, wouldn't they? And downright unfair to pull a weeping willow routine on Doyle, who was going through a few discoveries of his own. "Right," he said bracingly, a shade too brightly, "so I'll see you Wednesday, shall I?"

"Unless Cowley gives us the time off we're due, I should think so."

"Right," he said, and then didn't really know what else to say. Knew what he wanted to say, knew that he couldn't say any of that with the other agents here. Patience, then, was a virtue he was about to acquire. "Wednesday."

"Yeh," Doyle said, heading for the door. "Here, Bodie..."

"Yeh?" Too quick, he chastised himself, too bloody keen by half, don't put him off—

"Don't you need a lift home?"

The smile that spread across Bodie's face was positively beatific. "Funny you should mention that," he said, "but I could do with a lift."

"Well, come on then, I'm not hanging round here with this lot waiting for you."

"Running all the way, sir," he replied, pleased that he had just the right touch of sarcasm, the very right edge of complaint.

"Did you remember my bag?" Doyle demanded as they started down the stairs, everything about the conversation as normal as it had ever been between them.

"And your stuff from the bathroom and the pencils you left by the window."

Opening the car door, Doyle stopped, looked at Bodie with that same speculation, that same uncertainty he'd shown upstairs, and all the tension and doubts were back between them. "Don't know how I'd manage without you."

And climbing into the car beside his partner, Bodie hoped to hell that was true.