

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

For those who were wondering where our Christmas stories might have disappeared to, may we offer this little piece. It's all about despair and doubts, fear of finding love and fear of losing it. Will Bodie and Doyle take the risk? Note: a version of this story has appeared on the Circuit. It varies only in a minor way.

“**BLOODY** typical,” Doyle muttered for the fourteenth time.

Bodie didn't reply, as he hadn't the last eight times. His lips tightened, his hands flexed, carefully, on the steering wheel, his gaze never left the bright splashing of sleet on the windscreen.

“I mean,” Doyle went on, “if I'd known the Cow was going to do *this* to me, I'd've gone to visit our Joan with my parents.”

This referred to with such loathing, was time off. Paid. Over Christmas. That rarest of gifts, and Doyle was moaning about it. Bloody typical, Bodie thought, for the thirteenth time.

Doyle, not giving a damn that it drove Bodie bonkers, tapped his foot on the dashboard, each irritating little thump punctuating the tight complaining of Doyle's voice. “Every year, every bloody year, I end up working, because I'm not married. Every year, without bloody fail, so do I make plans? Of course not.”

Bodie murmured absently, only half paying attention. He was watching the traffic, keeping his eyes open for the treachery of black ice and the stupidity of drinking drivers. He was also, somewhere in the back of his mind, quietly treading a path never yet quite dared.

“Cheryl wanted me to spend Christmas with her in Gloucester. But did I say yes? Not with Cowley breathing down my flipping neck I didn't. Turned down the chance of a cosy holiday for two with a willing—and able—bird, and for what? I ask you...”

But of course, he wasn't asking Bodie anything. In fact, Bodie decided, Doyle was probably barely consciously aware that Bodie was the one doing the driving. Typical, that, as well. They lived in each other's pocket so much that the other person was more of a natural appendage than a separate person, sometimes. Times like now, he thought to himself, content in an odd sort of way. He'd be humming a carol, if he were the musical sort, but instead, there was a small, growing warmth inside him, a Christmassy sort of feeling, something he hadn't felt for years. He glanced sideways, to where his partner was still moaning away, Doyle's face white in the early dark of winter's afternoon, hair a nondescript brown. Give it a few months, though, Bodie knew, and it would have the chestnut sheen back to it—be longer, too, once Doyle didn't have to battle the winter frizzies and the perm had grown out a bit.

Doyle, by now, had got back round to his parents. “Christ on a crutch, Mum and Dad even offered to pay my fare down to see our Joan in Australia. I could've been lying on Bondi Beach, watching birds in bikinis—*topless* birds in half a bloody bikini—and what do I get? Stuck at home, on my own with not a bloody thing to do.”

Bodie's mind was sneaking along that wayward path, but still quietly, tiptoeing past conscious thought, bypassing intellect and creeping towards his mouth.

“I mean, this close to Christmas, Cowley finally

decides to mention that Doctor Bloody Hennessy won't clear us for duty. Residual damage to the lungs my left foot!"

"Yeh," Bodie said mildly, not half as put out by Doyle's whingeing as he had been a moment ago, that treacherous idea infiltrating even his mood, dissolving his own bad temper, "but you've got to admit we did get a lungful of that gas before we got those hostages out."

"And I bet those bloody hostages aren't being kept home from work," Doyle said nastily, kicking the dashboard with controlled viciousness. "Or if they are, I bet they got more bloody notice than we did. Christ, stuck on my own for Christmas..."

Bodie opened his mouth, and words tumbled out before he knew he had thought them. "You could always come and stay with me..."

"You?" Doyle exclaimed, looking askance at his partner. "What the hell'd I want to spend Christmas with you for?"

The wayward thoughts retreated in disarray, routed by Doyle's unsubtle disinclination. Without having to turn his head to see it, Bodie could feel Doyle's scathing stare, could almost hear the sharp tongue honing words to serrated perfection. As if all this were nothing more than a radio play, Bodie tuned it out, focussing on the wish-wipe of the windscreen wipers, the on/off of the passing street lights, the flickering of branches caught by the wind.

"Compared to Cheryl, you fall a bit short, mate," was all Doyle said, but the complete dismissal in his voice stung sharply enough that not even Bodie could pretend that it didn't matter, hurt sharpening his own tongue.

"Is that all any of this means to you?" he snapped, overtaking an L-plated car weaving its way through the murk. "Tits and arse on a beach, getting your leg over with whatever bird you've got on a string this week?"

"And when did you see the light, eh?" Doyle, acid, leaping into the argument with both feet, Bodie the perfect whipping boy. "Had a sudden conversion? Be going in for the haircut in the morning?"

"I'm not pretending I'm a monk, Doyle, I'm just saying that you're the one who's always going on about the meaning of life and all that crap, and the only meaning you're taking from all this is bloody sex."

"Stop the car."

Automatically, Bodie obeyed the order, instincts prickling awake, eyes searching the sheeting rain. "Trouble?" he asked, lips barely moving, hand moving so quickly it blurred in the dimness of the car.

"Serious trouble," Doyle said casually. "You've gone right round the twist."

"You—" Tight-mouthed, Bodie holstered his gun, turned the key viciously in the ignition, swerved the car out into a minute gap in traffic, blaring horns complaining loudly in his wake. "Ever heard of the boy who cried wolf?" he asked quite conversationally, only the perfect impassivity of his expression betraying him.

"Ever heard of the leopard changing its spots?" Doyle asked right back, the dig neither subtle nor particularly friendly, Doyle not the sweetest natured of souls this night.

"All I'm saying," Bodie replied, voice as clenched as his hands on the steering wheel, "is that you're the one who's always telling me there's more to life than sex and what're you doing? Acting like a spoiled brat because you're not going to get your greens. It's Christmas, for Christ's sake, not fucking Valentine's Day."

Raymond Doyle had the most speaking silences of anyone Bodie had ever known.

"All right, all right," Bodie finally said, inching the car along behind a No. 9 bus whose windows were hazed with condensation, the passengers within as unclear to Bodie as Doyle was right now, "so your plans are fucked. Fine. It's right there in the small print—everything's subject to change."

Doyle's expression was sourer than his snide remark. "Apart from our George's infallibility, of course."

"Didn't you know God's immutable? But we all know nothing's written in stone in our job, so what's the point of having a fit and ending up in a right tizz just because surprise, surprise, you're gonna have to change your plans."

A huge puddle had gathered at the kerb, aquaplaning up under their tyres, the water mottled by the light spilling from the big shops crowding that side of the street. Bodie caught a glimpse of Doyle in the reflected light, and the mulish set of that mouth and the mulish tilt of that jaw made Bodie homesick for a time too long dead.

"I really appreciate a good mate," Doyle was saying. "Pity I 'aven't got one, isn't it?"

Had he not been driving, Bodie would have

closed his eyes and then turned and walked away. But he was trapped behind the steering wheel, imprisoned with a cantankerous, cancerous Ray Doyle, so instead of running, he made his face bland, uninterested, unfeeling. Only the slight shiver of the skin round his eyes showed that he was feeling anything, and not even Bodie was willing to look closely enough to find out what, precisely, those emotions were.

“Anyone,” Bodie finally replied, “would think I’d just suggested pulling your toenails out for fun. All I did was say you could come round my place seeing as how you’ve got nothing better on offer.” Something of how he was feeling began creeping into his voice, shades of meaning slithering around, always trying to push something else to the fore so that they wouldn’t be heard or recognised themselves. But Bodie could hear them, every skittering shadow, and he knew, hating himself, that Doyle could hear them too. “I mean,” he began, protecting himself too loudly, too vehemently, his heartiness a beacon for Doyle’s suspicion, “you’re sitting there moaning your head off, whingeing like there’s no tomorrow, and for what? Because I did the unforgivable and was bloody decent.”

“I’m not a fucking charity case, Bodie,” Doyle snapped at him, that foot once more tapping endlessly against the dashboard. “I don’t want your fucking pity.”

“It’s all you’re going to get,” Bodie muttered, and could have died, hearing how feeble the lie sounded, watching it crawl, guttering, between them, a poor dying thing. He said it again, louder, trying to make it true. “Pity’s all you’re going to get from me.”

“Know that for a fact, do you?” Doyle’s voice came through the darkness at him, seductive as the kiss of black velvet against white skin—or the way tight denim cradled a virile groin or cupped a lush arse. “Positive, even?”

Bodie swallowed, and drove past his last chance to take them to Doyle’s place first.

“So you’re inviting me to spend a couple of days, a few nights,” Doyle paused precisely, and moved his leg, just the barest fraction, but far enough that the brief flutters of shop lights flared against the runnels of his jeans, faded blue covering what both men knew Bodie wanted with such bleak desperation. “And you’re offering me nothing but pity. Not a bite to eat, not a drop to drink.” Another pause, when nothing needed to be said,

both of them remembering other nights, and things done in the dark and never, ever spoken of. “Not even a bed to sleep on, is that it, Bodie?”

And Bodie would have sold his soul to the devil if it meant that he and Ray had never done it: had never tasted the illicit, illegal thrill of each other’s bodies. Anything, he would have promised anything if he could wipe the slate clean and have nothing to remember: not the taste of Ray’s mouth nor the touch of his skin, nor Ray looking at him as orgasm plundered him. He would give everything and anything at all if it meant that he had never said those words to Ray, their very sweetness poisonous.

“All right, be like that,” Bodie muttered, swallowing hard, hoarding the misery inside where it wouldn’t become yet another weapon in Ray’s emotional arsenal. “I don’t give a flying fuck what you do.” He should have stopped there, should have left the acrimony hanging smokily in the air between them, but the demon still crowded his back, sharp claws digging ever more deeply into him. Bodie bit the inside of his mouth, signalled carefully before beginning the slow circumnavigation of the roundabout, methodically scanning the innocuous cars around them in the endless habit of CI5 agents who were always targets, always on edge. Always injured. Beside him, Doyle coughed again, right hand restlessly rubbing at hairy chest, a muttered imprecation revealing just how much pain Doyle still suffered.

“Just didn’t want you to be on your own,” Bodie murmured, swearing under his breath at himself when he realised the words had slipped out. Oh, harmless in and of themselves, but still, they harked back to a night best forgotten, when it had all begun to go wrong between them. When he had discovered just how much he meant to Ray Doyle, and knew that it would never be enough.

Doyle said nothing, but slanted a glance over at Bodie, taking in the tightness round Bodie’s mouth and eyes, the knotted tension in otherwise beautiful hands, the way Bodie was concentrating on everything but what was happening in the car.

They were outside Bodie’s flat now, the rain paused, the air and the city still now, the dampness deadening the fading sounds of traffic. Neither man made a move, both of them sitting there with the knowledge festering between them. Bodie preferred not to look at Doyle who was sitting there staring, communicative as the Sphinx. Resisting the

urge to stare back, Bodie turned the engine off, leaving the radio on, tuning it to one of the pirate stations, Lennon's ode to Christmas meshing perfectly with his own state of mind.

Twice this year he'd almost lost Doyle, once because of things he himself had said, and once because of that bloody hostage situation. And now he was sitting here, alone in the dark with the walled-off silence of his partner. The former had been like this too, and keeping silent that night had been beyond Bodie, some perverse need to unburden himself speaking out of turn, ruining everything they'd had.

It was only the barest caress of his eyes, but it was all the touching Bodie dared these days with Doyle. A momentary image, to be gone over and over again until all the details were clear in his mind, not that it helped very much. There wasn't much to be read from Ray's expression, Doyle never one for giving anything away, always making the world pay for every little snippet of the man. Of course, Bodie had always been the exception. Until he'd opened his big mouth that night, and now, he thought, cursing himself for stupidity and incredible pollyanna-ism, he'd gone and opened his big mouth all over again. Come and spend Christmas with me, he mocked himself viciously in the privacy of his own mind, free to be cruel because Doyle would be doing no less. In fact, it was a sign of how much Bodie had mattered that Doyle was sitting there quiet as a church mouse instead of ripping Bodie's throat out with a few well placed and better sharpened words.

Another of Bodie's brief glances, and nothing to add to the picture he held of his partner. The radio was sliding into haze, music fizzling and crackling, Doyle's abrupt movement startling after all the stillness. The quiet was all the more unsettling, for this was not how it had been between them. Everything from endless backbiting to comfortable silences, those they had had, but Bodie had not known this waiting silence since his days in Africa, and those carrion memories were not to be conjured here.

Bodie counted, slowly, in his mind, adding fractions and decimal places as the numbers grew bigger.

"Ten," he said aloud, Doyle tensing at the staccato burst of voice. Proud of the way he kept his hand steady, Bodie put the key back in the ignition.

"We going somewhere?" Doyle asked, eyes and voice and even skin cool, everything about him distanced, removed from the churning emotions burning Bodie.

"Yeh, well, I know I'm a bit dim about all this," Bodie replied, bitterness mouldering on every quoted word, Doyle's own inflection haunting them both, "but even I've got the message. I'll take you back to your own place."

Doyle shifted, the muscles on his face losing some of their tension as if he were about to speak, but then he subsided again, sitting this one out, waiting for Bodie to say the words that were clinging to the tip of his tongue.

"Look," Bodie finally said, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, "I can't help it, all right? And it's nothing you did, so you don't have to worry you're going to start prancing round like Larry Grayson. It's just me..."

The truth of that made him want to weep, acrid tears battling his will, desperate to spill over, Bodie himself more desperate still to bottle it all inside. Blokes didn't cry. Real men didn't cry and beg another man to give him another chance.

A nasty little voice whispered in the back of his mind, a voice he recognised too well as his partner's: yeh, and real men don't tell other blokes they love them, do they?

But he had, hadn't he? Bodie wished the ground would open up and swallow him, but only people in the Bible had that sort of good luck. All he had was sitting here in the dark with the man to whom he had said the unthinkable.

"Christ!" Bodie shouted, for it was either that or be defeated by the bitterest humiliation of tears. "Bugger this for a game! You can sit here all fucking night if you want," he was hurrying over the words, stumbling on them as his fingers fumbled with the keyring, sorting them out as he couldn't sort out his life. "Here," Bodie shoved the car keys into Doyle's cold hand, closing the fingers over the hard metal with a pang of loneliness that came close to bringing him to his knees: he could still see those hands closing over his own hardness, could still feel Ray wrapped around him, pumping him with the surest skill and sweetest pleasure. "You can drive yourself home whenever you're ready," Bodie said, not even caring now that his voice was neither steady nor unmoved. All he was interested in was getting the carrier bag of booze from the back seat and then getting out of that car,

of being far, far away from Doyle's impassive silence. "I'm going upstairs."

He went then, running through the rain to the lobby door, dropping his keys in his feverish haste, not bothering to shut the outside door to keep the elements at bay. All Bodie could think of was what he had said, the horrible moment that night, Ray warm and sated in his arms, their semen cooling on his belly and on his fingers, another knot of tension untangled, another nicely matey mutual wank ending in a surreptitious cuddle.

Bodie was at the front door now, unlatching and unbolting, kicking the door shut behind himself, into the living room, no lights switched on, no music, nothing but the sound of increasing rain and muted hiss of the heating. And then the grating crunch of the seal being twisted apart, the metal cap being unscrewed, the click of bottle against teeth, the gulp and swallow of beckoned oblivion.

It's only me, he had said in the car to Ray, and that was the serest anguish he had ever known. It was 'only him', Doyle untouched by the abyss of love that had swallowed Bodie whole. Only him. Bodie looked around his living room, a place for everything and everything in its place, what little clutter his grandmother's adages hadn't taken care of more than made up for by the knife-creased tidiness of army life. He wanted, suddenly and fiercely, to go on a rampage through this endlessly tidy room, rip the curtains down, toss the cushions off the sofa, leave dishes lying to gather mould and dust. But of course, he didn't do that, wouldn't do that. Vandal rampages were Doyle's domain, not Bodie's. Instead of rioting, Bodie seated himself on the settee, propped his feet on the coffee table beside this morning's folded newspaper, and sat back to begin the serious search for liquid oblivion.

That, and wonder when Doyle's explosion was going to come, clearing the air between them like a summer storm defusing this electric tension that wound them both too tightly. And wonder what he himself would do if the explosion destroyed the poor frayed remnants of their partnership.

Head like thunder, brain like soggy cotton wool, Bodie was in no mood for whoever was ringing his doorbell this bloody early in the morning on Christmas Eve.

"All right, all right, I'm coming, I'm coming," Bodie mumbled round a fur-coated tongue, his cold feet stumbling around on a none too steady floor.

"Keep your shirt on, I'll be there in a minute." If this weren't a CI5 emergency or the end of the world, he was going to flail the idiot standing on his doorstep. Even if it were Ray Doyle come to pick another argument.

It was Ray Doyle, and judging by the glitter in those eyes, Bodie would be lucky if it were just another argument and not the end of the world after all.

"Plannin' on keeping me here on the doorstep all bloody morning, are you?" Doyle started, shoving past the unkempt, shuffling bemusement of his partner. "Thought you were expecting me for Christmas?"

"Thought you'd turned down the invite," Bodie all but snarled, heading for the kitchen and the Disprin, paracetamol or, if he could find them, the white tablets left over from that knife wound he'd had last time.

Doyle's reply was faint, shouted through from the sitting room. "Didn't say one way or the other."

No, he never did, Bodie thought to himself, leaning against the freezing edge of the sink as the tablets stuck themselves half way down, the tap water too cold, making his head ache even more. He went back through to where his partner was prowling, trouble too quick on the uptake to sit still and wait for it to come to him. Bodie allowed himself one look at the compact, self-contained man he worked with, saw instead the dishevelled whore of the bedroom, and the unneeding man he had fallen in love with. "Christ," he said with feeling, "I need a shower." What he really needed was a miracle, and those were in short supply these days. A shower would have to do, and he stood under the water until it ran cold, and even then, he was tempted to stay where he was, the chill of the water a merely physical unpleasantness. Better than anything he could expect from that bundle of blunted energy pacing the living room.

With extreme care, determined to look his best, one poor, pathetic remnant of pride, Bodie dressed himself, slowing his breathing, making himself look cool, calm and collected, everything that he, in fact, wasn't. One last check in the wardrobe mirror, one last adjustment to make sure that his trousers were just right, and then Bodie went in to face Doyle.

His partner was on a short fuse, evidenced by his restlessness and the too quick movements of his hands.

"You shouldn't've gone all out like this," Doyle

said sarcastically, his gesture taking in the spartan room with its complete lack of Christmas decorations and only a handful of cards and the cover of the *Radio Times* to mark the season.

Bodie stood very still, plenty of clear space around him. "Didn't think you'd show up."

"And if I'd said yes? Planning on going out and getting all the frills and fancies between last night and this morning?"

"If you want a fight, Doyle, why don't you just say what you have to say and skip all these pleasantries, eh? Go on," Bodie snapped, circling round his partner, careful to stay beyond the reach of hands that had touched him in passion not a fortnight before and which were now primed to be used as weapons against him. "Say what you have to say, and then you can just bugger off."

Doyle gave him an odd look, a speaking look, but in a language Bodie couldn't understand.

"Well, don't just stand there," Bodie shouted. "For fuck's sake, say something! Get it over and done with, I've had it with you stewing over this."

"Who says I came here for a fight?" Doyle asked him, instantly contrary, walking lightly past Bodie, going to sit on the sofa in the exact spot he'd been in the night the whole thing started, side by side watching a confiscated porno video, each of them glancing at the other, and then, casually, meaning nothing, ribald comments tossed at the screen, egging each other on, daring, double daring like kids, but a very adult game, until each of them was wanking. Separate figures, separate orgasms, but incredibly aware of each other, their solitude all too obviously a temporary thing. Doyle stretched his legs out, propping his feet on the coffee table, making it all look so very casual and so very normal. "Might just've come here to spend Christmas," he said, even his voice mellowing, softening. "Save myself the bother of cooking."

"And pigs'll fly," Bodie muttered, made tenser still by Doyle's uncommon attitude. For all his calculated nonchalance, the other man's mood was unsettled, and unsettling, putting Bodie very much on edge, the unease of a man with his head on the block just waiting for the axe to fall and worrying that the executioner hadn't sharpened the blade first. "But for the sake of peace, we'll pretend that's all you're here for. Fancy some breakfast?" he asked with heavy handed politeness.

"Wouldn't say no," Doyle replied, the subtext of the conversation hovering between them, saying

nothing more as he followed Bodie into the kitchen.

"So you wouldn't say no," Bodie said thoughtfully, binging the frying pan on the cooker, digging in the fridge for all the glories of a good fry-up. "Would that be to bacon for breakfast or..." He didn't finish, his wayward mouth having bugged things up too much already.

Doyle slipped in front of Bodie, automatically taking over the cooking, the heat a guise for the flush in his cheeks, the cooking an excuse for something to do with his hands. "I wouldn't say no to the bacon or..." He stopped, pricked the sausages, dumped them into the pan, cast a very penetrating stare at his partner, "a bit of mutual sex, the way we had been."

"But none of the sappy stuff," Bodie said quite calmly while his heart began to beat with a heavy, throbbing pain. "So you're willing to us going back to wanking each other, but I'll have to keep my mouth shut."

"That's about it," Doyle replied, adding bacon to the pan, opening a tin of beans, Bodie moving with him, fetching the eggs from the cupboard and the loaf from the bread bin: the casual observer would see nothing different from a scene they had played a thousand times, but anyone who knew them would sense something badly amiss, the off-note in the usual harmony of their actions, some threat lingering under the mature discussion.

Bodie got the plates out, and the tomato sauce and Branston pickle for Doyle. Even as he filled the kettle and plugged it in, he looked for all the world as if today were no different from any other morning, his stiffness accounted for by the edge of hangover clouding him.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that he had never been so miserable in his life, and was struggling, damning himself for the unruly words that crowded his mouth. He pressed his lips more firmly shut: he'd got himself into more than enough trouble already. Just keep quiet, just play along, and at least he'd be able to salvage something from this mess. It wouldn't be much, but it would be enough to bandage his pride and give him something to walk away from. Cool, he reminded himself. Got to stay cool. "Fair enough," Bodie said when he had his tongue under control. He shrugged, eminently casual. "And it's not as if it's anything serious, is it?" he went on, engrossing himself in putting milk and sugar into the mugs and tea bags into the pot. "After you fucking up on

that oppo and almost getting yourself killed, I suppose it's only natural I'd be a bit infatuated." Bodie always had been a consummate liar, this morning one of his best performances ever.

Doyle, across the table from him, knife dripping egg yolk, eyes dripping disbelief, simply looked at his partner until Bodie, shamed, looked away. "You're asking a hell of a lot, you know that, don't you?" Doyle asked.

"I'm asking a lot? Christ, Doyle—" Bodie bit off the rest of it, took another tack, one that wouldn't have him spilling his soul all over Doyle's breakfast. "What am I asking you do to, eh? Forget something I said in the heat of the moment, that's all."

But it hadn't been in the heat of the moment, and they both knew that. It had been afterwards, in that dangerous moment before sleep when too many barriers were lowered, when Bodie had edged them beyond the casual sex that was little more than borrowing someone else to give their right hand a rest. With his thoughtless, artless words murmured pressed tight against Doyle's skin, Bodie had pushed them towards love.

"Don't you lie to me," Doyle snapped, temper flaring. "It's more than that and you fucking well know it. And I don't," he threw his cutlery down, was up and away from the table in an instant, "think I can do it."

"Do what? Ignore what I said? Come on, Ray, you do that every day anyway."

"Not that," Doyle said very quietly from the safety of having his back turned to Bodie. "It's you. Looking at me the way you do—Christ, Bodie, I probably knew you were in love with me before you did."

"You bastard! You thought that and you—"

But Doyle wasn't listening to Bodie, his own demons shrieking too loudly to hear anyone else's. "I'm hanging on by the skin of my teeth, mate," Doyle said, talking over Bodie's outrage, an edge of quiet despair silencing Bodie, the other man listening, intently, to the odd tone of his partner. "I'm *this* fucking close," Doyle muttered furiously, "this fucking close, and then you just had to go and say what you said. And now you want me here for Christmas, pretending you never said a dickie bird, and going on as if nothing's fucking changed. And I don't know if I can." A deep breath, shaken, sodden with temper. "But I know I can't just walk away."

What the hell was Doyle talking about? A dark, frightening knowledge was threatening Bodie, something too new and too unpredictable to acknowledge easily. But it was there, hammering at him, punctuated by everything Ray had said and highlighted by everything Ray had not said. Look at him, Bodie told himself, and did. Nothing escaped him, his scrutiny as intense as Doyle's had been the night before.

"Ray," he said softly, and watched as the gentleness of his voice and the implication of his tone cut through the other man with all the subtlety of a machete. "What did you come here to tell me?"

"I..." It wasn't often that Ray Doyle was at a loss for words, but there was nothing he dared say, for the only safety lay in lies and Bodie would know them for what they were and know Doyle, also, for what he was. A coward. A snivelling, craven coward.

Bodie rose to his feet, coming to stand close behind his partner. The knowledge was less frightening now, but his heart was still beating too fast and adrenalin was hurling through him. "Come on, Ray," he cajoled, his hands resting lightly, so lightly, on Doyle's shoulders. "What d'you need to say?"

Nothing; that was what Doyle needed to say. He needed to keep his mouth shut, to not tell Bodie; he'd said too much already, almost enough to fill Bodie's big mouth. "What'd you have to go and say it for?" Doyle shouted suddenly. "Why couldn't you've just kept quiet?"

"Funnily enough, I've been asking myself the same thing," Bodie replied lightly, hiding the confusion of his own emotions. "Wish I hadn't said anything, now."

"Why did you?"

Bodie shrugged, no closer to that answer now than he had been two weeks before. "Fuck knows. Tell you something for nothing though. I was as surprised as you."

"But I wasn't surprised," Doyle told him, turning round at last to face him. "Told you. I already knew."

And then, in that one small moment, Bodie knew it too. Knew what Doyle was so afraid of, knew why Doyle had known Bodie's feelings before Bodie had. Knew why Doyle couldn't let it go, worrying at it like a bad tooth when he should simply walk away.

Strange, how terrifying love could be. Especially

if you were Ray Doyle, prone to romantic flings and declarations, all of them designed to disguise how carefully Doyle guarded himself, how carefully he chose only people who would never, ever last. Witness Anne Holly. Witness any number of women, and one or two men, for that matter.

“Oh, Ray,” Bodie whispered, fingering one single curl. “The poor man’s Elba, and then I come along with my dinghy.”

In spite of himself, Doyle gave a snort of laughter. “That’s one way of putting it, I s’pose,” he said, then stopped, stepped away, folding in on himself as he realised that he had all but admitted it.

“Tell you what,” Bodie said, the words spilling out again before he had time to censor them, “why don’t you pretend I never said what I said, and I’ll pretend you never said what you didn’t just say. How’s that sound?”

Doyle gave him one of his more suspicion-laden stares. “And we go back to the way we were before?”

No-one knew better than Bodie that you can never go back, so he smiled, and nodded, and put on his most matey expression. “By George, I think he’s got it!” he announced, sweeping an imaginary cape in an exaggerated bow. “Yeh, why not? You’ve got to admit,” Bodie went on, bustling round pouring fresh cups of what was admittedly stewed tea, “a friendly wank among mates is better than doing it on your own, or spending a fortune wining and dining someone and then getting nothing but a kiss on the doorstep.”

“Poor soul,” Doyle said, trying to enter into the spirit of the thing, gathering delusion round him like a cloak. “At least mine usually kiss me on the lips. Or the cheek.”

“Ah,” Bodie said lasciviously, hastening his partner out into the living room, “but the question is—which cheek?”

Doyle was still muttering comments on that as he sat himself on the settee, watching with absent curiosity as Bodie rummaged through a video collection the size of which only those with friends in Customs ever acquire. “What’re you looking for this time?” Doyle asked, sprawling comfortably, making sure that he looked as if things really were back to the all-mates-together routine that had existed until a fortnight ago. “Some new treasure fresh from Amsterdam to pique our jaded palates?”

“Nah,” Bodie muttered, untangling the remote cord so that he could park himself on the sofa

beside Doyle. “Thought that, in the spirit of the day, we could go back to an old favourite.”

The screen flickered, the title one that Doyle remembered vividly. They’d watched this the first time, months ago, when they’d masturbated in front of each other, each one showing off just a little, each one staring a lot. The very beginning, and Bodie was offering him the chance to go back, to pretend that this was all simply sex, and nothing, absolutely nothing more. “Yeh, this one’s not bad,” he said casually, barely waiting for Bodie to settle himself before reaching for the other man’s zip.

Bodie spread his legs, giving Ray easier access, reached for Ray himself. With the television covered with the images of strangers having sex, he fondled Ray, groaned in pleasure as Ray caressed him. Waited, patiently, only a few minutes, until Ray was aroused, and ardent, and pressing against him.

And then Bodie did it. He leaned forward, pulled Ray tightly against him, and then kissed him.

For a moment, the world stopped, and destruction threatened from green eyes wild with fear and fury. And then Bodie kissed him again, denying the lies they had so recently planted between them, silently promising Ray that this time, this was someone worth risking pain for. This was someone it was better to love and perhaps lose than to abandon as nothing but meaningless sex. Tenderly, his own fears neither small nor quiet, Bodie kissed Ray again, demanding that the other man be at least as brave as he.

Doyle pulled away, looked steadily at Bodie, looked away, trying to find some way out that wouldn’t leave him and his life utterly empty.

“All or nothing?” Doyle whispered, everything in abeyance until he had the answer.

“Got it in one,” Bodie replied, nuzzling along the sensitive edge of Ray’s neck, kissing and laving the skin there. “We’ve never done anything by halves, so why start now?”

There were a million reasons why they should start now, as far as Ray was concerned, but the main one was the vulnerability, the panicking risk of needing someone as much as he could need Bodie.

“Come on, Ray,” Bodie whispered, hugging Doyle all the closer, their bodies meshing together perfectly, their clothing an irritation he was intent

on removing. "There's nothing to be scared of. Well, nothing much, anyroads. You already trust me with everything else, why not give this a try?"

Trust. Never an easy thing to do. But as Bodie said, they already trusted each other with their lives anyway. Why not trust each other with living as well?

"Just for a while?" Doyle asked, helping Bodie get rid of their clothes, knowing that neither one of them could say no at this point if Cowley himself walked in.

"Absolutely," Bodie told him, filling his hands

with Doyle's warm nakedness, fingers arrowing in towards the tight hole that he didn't dare—not quite yet—to touch. "Trial run, same's the way Cowley partnered us in the first place."

And look how well that had turned out.

"Just a trial?" Doyle demanded, staring tautly at Bodie.

Bodie met Doyle's eyes, saw the real question hiding behind the false demand for transience.

"Just a trial," Bodie replied, very softly, his finger stroking gently across delicate flesh. "For as long as you want..."

for Snow White