

Oh, bloody hell!” Bodie’s nose wrinkled with disgust as he squinted through the windscreen of the silver Capri. Light refracted off shiny paint-work as the car cruised to a halt at the end of three stationary lanes of traffic. The stray burst of sunlight broke for an instant the grey gloom of the lowering sky. “I told you that we should’ve—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Doyle interrupted, suppressing a groan. “And I told you that I couldn’t set off any earlier, because I promised Stuart—”

“That weasel!”

“...promised Stuart I’d introduce him to my grass,” Doyle continued, inserting a note of condescending patience into his voice. Okay, maybe this wasn’t the best way of dealing with William Andrew Philip Bodie when in full pissed-off mode but Doyle’s patience—never large to begin with—was just about exhausted. “Seeing as Eddie had info that might be useful in the Marburg case that Stuart’s working on. Nothing important, of course.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bodie’s voice was grudging. “But why did the daft sod insist on this morning? The Friday before the Bank holiday. Jesus Christ, any idiot could’ve predicted that traffic would be bad pretty much everywhere. Let alone on the bleedin’ M1!”

“Probably did it just to fuck up your day.”

Bodie shot him an irritated glance, but his mouth was twitching with suppressed amusement. Doyle grinned at him and for an instant Bodie’s glower lifted and a smile hovered at the corners of his mouth, but a moment later it faded, together with the fleeting sunshine. Grey, all around was grey. Better that than Bodie’s temper unleashed, though.

Doyle sighed. It looked like today Bodie was determined to take offence at the smallest things. Yeah, maybe it would’ve been better to have started the drive up north along Britain’s busiest road earlier, beat the usual Friday weekend traffic, worsened by the fact that it was the May Bank Holiday weekend. So, when Stuart asked him for an introduction to his snout he’d suggested that they better make it really early, seeing as the Cow had ordered him and Bodie up north.

And he’d explained to Bodie why he was late, when faced with a black-browed scowl at his turning up as Bodie had so charmingly put it, ‘at eight fucking thirty in the morning—just in time for rush-hour’. His snout Eddie had got stuck on the tube, signal failure at Kentish Town he’d said. It really wasn’t Doyle’s fault that they were delayed in setting off.

Nor was it his fault that there were road-works on the North Circ, just before the Uxbridge Roundabout, so that it took them half an hour longer than usual, even accounting for the volume

CAIRAWANS  
BY MANDRAGORA

of rush hour traffic, to get to the M1. Then there'd been the accident at Junction 10, by Luton, and that had delayed them another forty minutes. And all the time Bodie's already black mood had got blacker and blacker, descending from shades of dark indigo to deepest ebony. Doyle glanced at the blanched knuckles of Bodie's hands, gripping tight to the steering wheel and winced. That had got to hurt.

"Pass us that bag in the back, would you, Doyle."

Doyle turned around. A white paper bag sat in solitary splendour on the ochre and orange pattern that crisscrossed the backseat of the car. He grunted as he twisted round, finally undoing the seatbelt to grab the bag. There was a familiar rustle as he looked inside. "Christ, Bodie! What did you do? Knock off a sweet shop? We're only going as far as Yorkshire, you know, not the North Pole." Doyle looked at the assortment of chocolate bars with amused disbelief. He counted a Marathon, a Kit-Kat, a chunky Aero—minted flavour, a dark chocolate Bounty, a large bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk, ditto a bar of Bourneville, a smaller bar of Galaxy, a Crunchie, a Toffee Crisp and two Curlywurlys. He held one up. "Two of these, mate. Must really like them."

Bodie glanced over and shrugged. "Always liked June Whitfield." Doyle frowned at Bodie in puzzlement. Bodie must have felt his stare because he said, "*Terry and June*."

A second later Doyle remembered that Terry Scott advertised Curlywurlys and shook his head. "I wonder about you sometimes. Terry Scott's not really married to her, you know."

"He is on the telly."

"Anyway, I didn't think she fit your criteria. She's got to be over fifty."

Bodie's gaze slanted sideways. "Dunno, she's in her forties isn't she? And she's definitely still breathing."

"Ah, but does she come across? And I

thought you were a bit pickier than that. You seriously telling me that you fancy her?"

"Always liked the motherly type, myself."

"Really? That explains why you went for Angie, then," Doyle said, referring to Bodie's latest girlfriend, who was anything but motherly and was a right little scrubber. Sexy, though.

Bodie grimaced. "Like you wouldn't've, if you got the chance."

Doyle shook his head. "Not my type, mate. Like them with a bit more class than that."

"How remiss of me, I forgot you like to spend time at Daddy's place in the country at the weekend." Bodie's voice echoed with the faux upper class accent he could assume at will. It was more convincing than Doyle's best attempt, even though he was better at accents generally, better at blending in, at going undercover. Bodie could only do two accents, scouser (and after all he'd been brought up in Liverpool so bloody well ought to be able to do that one) and posh. Not much of a repertoire, that.

"There's nothing wrong with a bit of creature comfort," Doyle said absently, not paying much attention to what he was actually saying as he placed the bag onto his lap, where Bodie could easily reach it.

"Yeah, you've got that one down pat. Go for the birds with money, don't you? God knows we won't get rich in this game." There was a note of bitterness in Bodie's voice that shocked Doyle but, even as he opened his mouth, not certain what he was going to say, with a savage twist of the dial Bodie turned the radio up full blast.

Doyle winced as his eardrums were assaulted by the sound of Soft Cell, Marc Almond singing about his *Tainted Love*. A hit from a couple of years back; in the summer of '81 the record had been everywhere, at number one for weeks—months—on end. It wasn't that bad a song, just a bit too loud at present. Swiftly, he leant forward and turned

down the volume.

“Oi! I was listening to that.”

“Going deaf are you?” Doyle retorted smartly. “They could hear it in John o’ Groats, you’d got it turned up so loud.”

Bodie said nothing in response, merely sniffing in disapproval but mercifully he left the volume control alone. He reached over and picked up the Toffee Crisp from the bag in Doyle’s lap, muttered, “Help yourself,” then disposed of the chocolate bar in a few, voluminously swift bites. Ignoring Doyle’s disapproving look, he subsequently ate half the Bounty, offering the other to Doyle who refused it with a wordless shake of his head. Bodie ate the rest.

Doyle threw the paper bag into the back seat, then leaned his head against the backrest of the chair and tried to sleep as the car crawled forward, stuck in the queue of traffic, the pop music from the radio echoing tinnily in his head. But he was unable to relax, not with the object of his latest worry sitting right next to him.

What the fuck was wrong with Bodie?

He’d been in a bad mood all morning, his temper lasting far longer than normal for Bodie—when being typically Bodie. But Bodie wasn’t behaving typically.

Doyle felt a faint sense of outrage—he was the unpredictable one, not Bodie. Doyle prided himself on being able to forecast with a fair degree of accuracy exactly how his partner would react in any given situation. He’d only been wrong once, when Bodie had gone off on a particularly stupid frolic of his own and decided to kill the biker, King Billy. If Doyle thought about it (although he tried not to) he could’ve kicked himself for being so oblivious there. He ought to have worked out what was going on in Bodie’s thick head. That he hadn’t was a failure on his part—and Doyle disliked failure intensely. He wasn’t going to fail again.

Except that he was. Because something was wrong and he hadn’t the foggiest idea what it was.

He was disturbed from his reverie as Bodie yelped in protest. “God no!” There was a note of horror in his partner’s voice that made Doyle grin involuntarily.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“Simon bleeding Bates and ‘Our Tune’ is what’s the matter.”

Doyle listened to the voice emanating from the speakers in the car, hearing the unctuous tones of the Radio 1 DJ rabbiting on about Lorraine and her tragic dumping for another woman by ‘our Gary’, her boyfriend of fifteen years ago. He glanced at his watch, yep, it was eleven o’clock, time for ‘Our Tune’ all right. Not that he listened to it but he’d had a girlfriend, Mandy, who was a regular devotee. Doyle shared Bodie’s abhorrence of this particular radio feature. “So switch to another station,” he suggested. Jesus, he wondered where Bodie’s brains were on occasion.

Bodie grimaced and shook his head. “Can’t,” he said succinctly. “Dial’s broken.” He exhaled heavily. “I wanted to listen to the test-match this afternoon on Radio 3, too.”

“Maybe we’ll be there by then.”

“With this traffic,” Bodie snorted. “Not bloody likely.” He reached over and turned the radio off with a decisive snap. “You didn’t want to listen to that did you?” he asked belatedly.

“Bit late now if I did, isn’t it?”

“For Christ’s sake, Doyle, you can always switch it back on, you know. Must you be so fucking self righteous all the time?”

Doyle gritted his teeth, telling himself that he was not going to rise to the bait. He wasn’t. He swallowed his temper and said nothing, contenting himself with glaring at Bodie’s profile as his partner stared steadfastly ahead. He knew that Bodie could feel the glare, but his partner didn’t crumble and glance at him.

Par for the course nowadays. Bodie seemed to spend all too much of his time ignoring Doyle recently. He had thought for a while that Bodie was merely wrapped up in something else, off in his own little world.

Some new bird, maybe—one that he didn't want to compete with Doyle over—had grabbed his attention. If so, she would soon go the way of all the rest and he might as well let the lad enjoy his infatuation while it lasted.

But there wasn't a new girl. Bodie was still seeing Angie; Doyle knew he was as they'd double dated last night. Not one of their better efforts, he reflected ruefully. In fact, fucking (or not-so-fucking, seeing as he hadn't got any) disaster might be a better description. Angie and Jane, his date, hadn't exactly got along like a house on fire. Jane had taken one look at Angie's tight, black skirt, her shiny, purple, plunging-cleaved blouse and seamed black stockings, faked a smile and sat down as far from the other woman as she could get. Angie noticed, of course and deliberately set out to annoy Jane, rubbing up against Bodie, twining herself around him and acting like a skinny, inky-haired cat in heat.

Doyle had tried to catch Bodie's eye, exchange a commiserating 'Women! What can you do with 'em' look, maybe suggest an early split before the evening was totally ruined. But Bodie ignored him, lapping up Angie's attentions, even bloody well encouraging her. That wasn't like Bodie, who usually made some effort to follow the social niceties, at least when in company. He and Angie'd gone so far that Doyle had thought about selling tickets, when he wasn't worrying how Jane would take it if they were chucked out of the pub.

The evening ended with Jane leaving, worse, leaving without telling Doyle that she was going. She said she was going to the loo but never came back. It took him a good half-hour to clock to that one, thinking that there was probably a queue for the ladies. Women moaned about that all the time. When he finally realised that she'd done a bunk, Bodie wasn't exactly full of sympathy, commenting merely, "Well, Ray, me old son, you know what they say. Win some, lose some. Course, I only know about winning, meself."

Angie giggled indistinctly, mouth

engaged in making a five-course banquet out of nibbling Bodie's ear. Doyle got up, in no mood to be made fun of, not by his stupid git of a partner or his slapper of a girlfriend. "I'm off," he announced.

Bodie didn't look up from excavating Angie's tonsils, didn't even wave or acknowledge Doyle's leaving in any way. He simply ignored him.

Doyle had intended to have words with Master Bodie about his behaviour last night this morning, let him know in no uncertain terms that it wasn't something Doyle intended to tolerate. He knew that there were times when Bodie bent over backwards to accommodate him, keep him sweet. The secret tinge of satisfaction Doyle had at that wasn't something he was particularly proud of.

But that satisfaction was largely missing nowadays. Now it was him doing the accommodating and he didn't like it. Not at all. Faced with Bodie's temper this morning, he had decided that prudence was the better part of valour and declined to raise the subject.

Shit!

Bodie had once accused him of having a yellow streak down his back. When had that turned into reality? Since when had Ray Doyle backed off, from anything or anyone?

Since his partner had turned into someone more cantankerous than Alf Garnett was when. Talk about touchy. And he'd been so for...well, a while, really. So, how long was it, exactly?

Doyle shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the seatbelt edge digging sharply into the side of his neck. But all his wriggling about could not halt the uneasy realisation that Bodie had been seriously off form for weeks at least, maybe longer. Damn it, he ought to know since when. But he didn't. Okay, he'd had other things on his mind, but Bodie was his partner, for Christ's sake. The man he depended on to watch his back. Some fucking copper he was.

Doyle inhaled sharply as he finally realised what he had somehow managed to

miss, obscured by Bodie's bad temper and his own self-preoccupation. Somehow, somewhere, sometime, so gradually that he couldn't pinpoint the exact moment, Bodie had withdrawn from him. He was all surface congeniality, showing Doyle a shiny, smooth exterior; a black beetle's carapace, reflecting Doyle back at himself, giving nothing away.

Doyle blinked hard as it hit him that he had never seen Bodie behave quite like this before. Not even in the early, competitive days of their partnership before they had learned to communicate merely by a look, a motion, a raised eyebrow.

Ostensibly it was all still there; on the surface the partnership was rock-solid. There had been no dip in their efficiency rating, 4.5 and 3.7 were as good as ever, Cowley's best. But Doyle knew that something was off, last night and this morning had finally brought it home to him. He just wasn't sure what. Or what to do about it.

He worried at his lower lip, then straightened in his seat again, trying to get comfortable. Bodie glanced across at him. "What's the matter, Raymond? Jane leave a few bruises last night did she? No, I forgot, Jane buggered off and left you all on your own. Has to be frustration, then. Don't have that problem myself, of course. But then, some of us scored last night."

Doyle eyed his partner with acute dislike. "Fuck you!"

"No thanks, darlin', leave that to Angie, eh."

Doyle closed his eyes for a moment, fighting for calm. It wouldn't do him any good to rise to the bait, especially as that was obviously what Bodie wanted. Well, Bodie could just go fuck himself! Bugger the stupid bastard anyway. He was spending far too much time worrying about this. Why should he worry what the fuck Bodie—

He glanced at his partner, noting the movement of powerful thighs and Bodie's capable hand changing gear, sliding smoothly

into fifth.

—thought anyway? It wasn't as if they lived in one another's fucking pockets. Not really. Fuck!

Fucking Bodie.

Bodie fucking.

That was a sight all right, all heavy cream skin poured over smooth muscle. He'd seen Bodie in action a few times, when they'd double dated and ended up at either his place or Bodie's. So he knew how Bodie turned his whole attention onto his girl, concentrated on her, must make her feel really good, special, Doyle reckoned. Bodie had all the talk down pat too, could lay on the charm thick, coax the birds right out of the trees when he wanted to, could Master Bodie. No wonder the girls fell for it.

Wish he'd turn a little of that charm Doyle's way, no matter that he knew it was false, fake, designed to get Bodie precisely what he wanted, which was into the girl's knickers in the shortest possible time. But it would make a nice change from the moody bastard who was sitting beside him.

Oh, fuck him.

Doyle shifted his attention to the road, searching for distraction, noting and sorting with his trained eyes the differing types of traffic.

The Capri was moving much faster now, the queue that they had been stuck in having melted away, leaving no clue as to why it had formed in the first place. It could be something as innocuous as some old dear pootling along at forty miles an hour, or just a hill in the road, which some under-powered cars couldn't cope with and had to slow down when they hit it. The knock-on effect was a traffic jam several miles long back down the motorway.

Doyle took in the high concentration of lorries, probably all trying to get back home for the long weekend and travelling salesmen, recognisable by their suit jackets which hung ubiquitously from a hook on the inside of the car, so as not to crease them. Then there were

the families, off on holiday from the looks of it. Often there were roof-racks on the car with suitcases strapped precariously on top. If he looked closely he could see the kids squabbling in the back, while their parents did their utmost to ignore the noise in the front. Sometimes the mother—who almost invariably was in the front passenger seat while the man of the house drove—would attempt to placate her noisy offspring with offerings of colouring books, or sweets.

It made Doyle glad that he hadn't got a family, that he could spend the rest of his miserable, selfish life playing cowboys. He bit down hard on that thought. He was not going there, not again. Not now.

Glancing around, he noted something that puzzled him. "Lot of caravans on the road," he mused, not really noticing that he had spoken aloud until Bodie snorted.

"It's the Bank Holiday. What else did you expect? It's prime caravan season, Mr and Mrs Average and their two point four kids off for the annual two weeks holiday."

"Bit early for that, isn't it? It's May, not August and don't the schools go back on Tuesday?"

"Dunno." Bodie shot a quick, unreadable glance at him from indigo eyes. "You're the one who's seeing a schoolteacher, not me."

"Emma? But we split up weeks ago," Doyle protested.

Another of those unreadable glances. "Did you? Must've forgotten to mention it, then."

Doyle blinked. Maybe he had forgotten at that. It wouldn't be surprising, given circumstances of late. "So, you ever been on one, a caravanning holiday, I mean?" he asked, not sure why he was persisting in making conversation but all his instincts insisted that they needed to sort out whatever the problem was—and fast. He was nothing if not persistent, Bodie having on more than one occasion unflatteringly compared his tenacity to that of a ferret down a rabbit hole. This was an ideal

opportunity to have it out—whatever 'it' was—with Bodie. Start with something innocuous and go on from there, a proven interrogation technique.

This time Bodie's gaze was tinged with a hint of amusement. "Can you really see me *volunteering* to spend time in one of those little metal boxes. It's bad enough on stake-out."

Doyle grinned at him. Bodie had a point. Doyle knew full well that Bodie had a taste for luxury, which normally he freely admitted to despite that nasty crack earlier about Doyle going for women with money. Like Bodie didn't? Because it would be the height of hypocrisy—and whatever his faults that was one that Bodie had never been guilty of—to suggest otherwise. "Maybe not now," Doyle said, conceding the point, "but what about when you were little?"

A second later and Doyle was cursing as Bodie's face closed in, then smoothed out, a familiar blank look crossing his features. Stupid! He knew Bodie didn't like talking about his childhood, knew it, so why had he brought the subject up? Him and his big mouth. "I always wanted to go on one, stay in a caravan, when I was young," he said quickly, striving for just the right reminiscing tone of voice.

There was a moment's silence, then Bodie spoke. "But you never did?"

"No. Mam and Dad never fancied the idea. We went to a holiday let in Llangrannog every year instead." He made certain that he gave Llangrannog its proper pronunciation, rolling the 'c' sound of the double 'l' at the back of his throat in approved Welsh fashion.

"So where's that, then?" Bodie asked, deadpan.

Doyle shot him a mock-annoyed glare. "Wales, you berk. North Wales, near Cardigan."

"Oh. Never would have guessed from the name."

"Yeah, yeah. So me Welsh could do with some work. It's a beautiful place, though,

Llangrannog. Has two of the best beaches I've ever seen, all silvery sand, and some great rock pools. When the tide went out there were always lots of great things left behind, starfish, seahorses, masses of seaweed. The second beach you could walk round when the tide was out, but had to go over the cliffs—we used to call it 'going over the top'—when the tide was in. We nearly got trapped there, on the second beach, a few times when the tide was really high, had to make a run for it to the cliff."

"You really liked it there." Bodie's voice was low.

"Yeah." Doyle shook himself a little, self-conscious in his enthusiasm. "Well, we went there every year as I said, so got to know it really well. The locals all knew us as well, used to give me and Nige free sweets and crisps. I'll take you there some time, if you like," he offered impulsively. A moment later, when there was no response from the other side of the car he was cursing himself. Stupid. Again.

"Yeah. Okay. Thanks, Ray."

"Oh. Good. Well, how about next time we've both got a few days off? That is, if I'm—" Doyle bit off what he had been about to say hastily and continued, barely missing a beat, "I'll see if I can get us into The Ship—that's the village pub. Serves great beer, or so Dad used to say." Doyle was aware that he was chattering to cover his surprise. Bodie had not only said yes, but he hadn't bitten his head off. Progress.

"Sounds good to me." With that, silence descended, warm and familiar, then Bodie spoke again. "Blackpool."

"Eh?"

"We went to Blackpool once, all of us."

Doyle suppressed the immediate impulse to ask just who 'all of us' was and contented himself with a questioning look.

"Stayed in a boarding house, looked at the Illuminations, went on the rides, you know the type of thing."

"I've never been to Blackpool." Doyle spoke absently, still trying to come to terms

with Bodie actually volunteering (probably true) information about his mysterious past.

"Haven't missed much. Although the Illuminations are nice, they go on for over a mile, you know."

"Must be why they call it the Golden Mile."

"Yeah, okay. Twat!"

"Takes one to know one."

Bodie gave Doyle a mildly admonishing look as he glanced into the wing mirror, indicated and caused the car to pull over into the middle lane and then into the outside lane. "Petrol," he said, as the Capri turned off the motorway into a service station, slowing smartly as it careered round a corner.

"How about stopping for a cuppa?" Doyle asked. "Could do with a slash, too."

Bodie scowled, well-defined mahogany brows drawing together in thought. "I dunno, we're running late as it is."

"Oh, c'mon, Bodie, I'm parched."

"Okay. I'm a bit dry meself," Bodie admitted, steering the Capri into the car park.

Inside, the service station had the usual plastic ambience, scuffed and faintly shabby. There was a shop to the left of the entrance selling an assortment of newspapers, magazines, overpriced tapes, snacks and chocolate. Ahead was the so-called 'restaurant', which in reality was a self-service café. It smelt of chips, bacon and fried eggs.

"You want tea?" Bodie asked.

"You buying?" Doyle raised an eyebrow interrogatively.

"Might as well. I'll be queuing up at the Post Office for me pension by the time you volunteer."

Doyle ignored this blatant—and untrue—slur on his generosity. "Ta. Think I'll have a coffee, though. I'm off to the bog."

"D'you want a sticky bun? Scone?"

Doyle pondered for a moment, then shook his head. "No thanks. And you'd be better off not having one, either, after all that chocolate."

Bodie favoured him with a narrow-eyed

stare. “Who do you think you are? My mother?”

“Nope. I’m the bloke you have to keep up with when we’re chasing some nice friendly axe murderer.” He smirked at Bodie, whose scowl intensified, knowing full well, Doyle reckoned, that he was having trouble keeping up with him since he’d put on a few pounds recently.

The thought struck him as he was washing his hands in the gents. That couldn’t be what was wrong with Bodie, could it? Worry about his weight and general fitness? No, not Bodie. He wasn’t the type to worry about a few extra pounds, not when he knew that a good session with Macklin would shift them readily enough, not to mention being secure about his looks. God knows Bodie never had any problem pulling the birds. And he was certainly fit enough. Doyle might be a bit faster but Bodie was only marginally behind him.

But, the fact that he had gained weight recently might be a symptom, even if not the cause. When Bodie was unhappy, he ate. Doyle set his jaw and decided that enough was enough. He was going to find out what was wrong with the stupid git if it killed him—and if he pissed Bodie off enough it just might.

He found Bodie sitting at a table by the window in the café. There was no sign of a sticky bun Doyle noted approvingly as he slid into the blue plastic chair opposite his partner. He wrinkled his nose at the table, which was covered in scratched Formica and had been inadequately cleaned, traces of HP sauce still lingering, smeared on the surface. The whole place was in desperate need of a refit; it was dingy even by service station standards, the walls faded to an indeterminate beige, highlighted with a nasty brown skirting board.

He glanced about, automatically cataloguing entrances and exits. The place was fairly full for that indeterminate time between morning coffee and lunch, with a mixed clientele ranging from noisy families to salesmen sitting studying ‘*The Sun*’ in solitary

splendour, together with a couple of overalled lorry drivers and a group of eight bikers, encased in brightly coloured leather and lounging, legs spread, in a corner. Nothing that looked particularly threatening.

He sipped his coffee and scrunched up his face as the almost-scalding liquid hit his taste-buds. “God, that’s terrible.”

Bodie shook his head. “Best service station coffee, that. Vintage.”

“*Chateau horrible*,” Doyle agreed, as he took another sip, shuddered and downed the coffee swiftly, yelping a little as the hot liquid scorched his tongue. Bodie made no attempt to rush his own coffee, sitting placidly sipping at the fluid. “How can you?” Doyle enquired, watching in appalled fascination.

Bodie shrugged. “Army nosh. You can get used to anything.”

“I knew there was a reason why the army didn’t appeal. Even the police canteen grub is better than this.”

Bodie grinned at him. “Actually, usually the army food isn’t that bad, there’d be a mutiny otherwise. It’s better than the crap that PC Plod gets, anyway.”

Doyle raised his eyes to heaven, beseeching patience. It was an old squabble between them, comfortable like an old slipper worn through much use. “You’re just saying that ’cos—” he began, but what he was going to say was drowned out by a noisy scrape of chair and then a ringing crash as the chair tumbled backwards onto the floor.

Doyle leapt to his feet, subliminally aware that opposite him Bodie had done the same, swiftly scanning the room for the source of the noise. There, where the bikers were. One of them, a great hulking man, the strip lighting reflecting off short, dark hair and greasily white skin, was on his feet, fists clenched, towering over one of the restaurant staff, who was bleating that he didn’t want any aggro.

As one, both CI5 agents moved smoothly towards the bikers, ready to take charge of the situation and defuse the tension before it got



ugly. Doyle was aware of the familiar adrenaline rush, blood pulsing fast through his veins, heart hammering, the response automatic and uncalled. His focus narrowed and sharpened, cool eyes instinctively assessing the situation.

It was unlikely the bikers were armed with anything more lethal than a switchblade, deadly close up, but no match for his and Bodie's guns, doubtful though it was that they'd have to draw them. They could take the bikers, he reckoned, easy. With the ease of long practice he let nothing of his thoughts show on his face. Bodie, too, looked calm and unperturbed but Doyle knew that his partner was no more immune to the throbbing excitement than he was. A quick glance at each other and they were ready, splitting up wordlessly in order to smoothly approach the area from opposite, intersecting directions. One, two, three—

A small figure exploded into the room.

—they stopped, stilled in mid-step.

"Pete," the figure screeched. "You stop right there, Peter Morris. Don't. You. Dare." A short, skinny woman, hair bleached to an improbable shade of flaxen yellow, stood at the entrance to the restaurant. She wore tight jeans and a black leather jacket and a motorcycle helmet emblazoned with leaping scarlet flames dangled negligently from her hand. A moment later and she was mincing across the floor, stiletto boot-heels clicking on the tiles. Doyle's gaze followed her as she approached the frozen tableau in the corner. The biker—Pete—shifted a little uncomfortably as the woman fixed him with a basilisk's stare, from slitted blackberry eyes. "What the bleedin' hell do you think you're doing?" Her voice was high and childlike, but there was nothing childish about her sharp, terrier's face.

Pete cringed visibly. "He were rude, Linda," he mumbled in a Yorkshire accented baritone.

"Rude. I'll give you rude, you big oaf."

The woman turned to the restaurant employee. "He's ever so sorry. 'e didn't hurt you did he, love?"

"Er, n—no," the man stammered, obviously shaken.

"That's all right then." With that, Linda turned beady eyes on the remaining bikers. "And what were you lot doing?" she demanded. "Letting him bully this poor man like that. Men!" she sniffed.

Doyle's eyes met Bodie's. They were brimming with mirth and Bodie was biting the inside of his cheek in an attempt to prevent laughter escaping.

"But Linda," one of the bikers whined, "Pete's right. He was rude."

"That's no excuse for violence," Linda snapped. "What did yer mum say?"

The biker shrank back in his seat as a crimson flush made its way up neck to forehead.

"Come on, we're leaving." Linda's voice was imperious, that of an empress expecting to be immediately obeyed.

"But I haven't finished me tea," another biker made the mistake of protesting. Her glare impaled him and he wilted, like a weed blighted by frost. "Right," he mumbled. "I'll just get me things then, shall I?"

A moment later and the strange procession wended its way out of the restaurant; eight leather-clad men following one small woman, rather like a pack of St Bernards meekly pursuing a poodle.

Doyle managed to control himself until there was no sign of them, then he made the mistake of looking at Bodie again. Both men exploded into laughter, the pent-up adrenaline finding its release. "Did you see their faces," Doyle gasped.

"Did you see hers!"

"Stop it," Doyle groaned, ribs aching.

"Cowley should take her on—she'd terrorise the whole fucking underworld into submission."

Doyle laughed harder, making his way

back to his seat on unsteady legs and sinking down, still chuckling. But no sooner had he seated himself than Bodie was draining the last dregs of his coffee and saying, "Ready to hit the road?"

Doyle shrugged and followed his partner silently back to the car. They saw the bikers at the other end of the car park and could hear Linda's voice cutting through the air sharper than a switchblade through flesh. Bodie turned and grinned companionably back at Doyle, who raised a twitching eyebrow in response.

"Wonder if they could market it," Bodie commented as he started the car and drove to the adjacent BP petrol station.

"What?"

"Whatever it is that Linda's on. Could be Britain's secret weapon."

"Yeah, would put the wind right up the Russians." As he spoke, Doyle caught Bodie's eye and they were off, two grown men giggling like a couple of third form schoolgirls. "Stop it," Doyle said again, severely, control almost restored. "It's not like it was *that* funny."

"Not if you're Pete, anyway."

Bodie missed Doyle's admonishing look, as he got out of the car to fill up on four star. Several minutes later and they were back on the motorway.

The atmosphere in the car was the most relaxed it had been all morning as Bodie drove swiftly north, changing lanes on the outside with a fine disregard for the Highway Code. Doyle pondered his options for a while, loath to disturb the present feeling of ease between Bodie and him. But as the car sped smoothly along the motorway he told himself severely not to be such a sodding coward, thinking of his previous thoughts regarding his yellow streak. Now was a good time to tackle Bodie. Nothing heavy, he'd be subtle, sound him out first for a bit maybe.

"So, you wanna tell me what's wrong?" he blurted out. Fuck! He was a trained interrogator, for God's sake.

"Eh?"

"You've been a bit...distant lately. Anything you want to tell me?"

"What the hell are you on about, Doyle?" Bodie's voice wasn't hostile—not yet, anyway—but it was tinged with impatience.

"You, me. Us," Doyle said, gesturing vaguely about him.

"That's really eloquent, that is. Should stand for Parliament, mate, win 'em over with your speeches."

"Sod off," Doyle said automatically. He stopped and sighed, ran a hand impatiently through his hair. "Look, there's something wrong, you know there is. After what happened last time... You never said— Going off on a frolic of your own. Well, it's just not on, Bodie. C'mon, talk to me."

He gazed earnestly at Bodie's ivory-skinned profile as his partner stared steadfastly ahead. "I don't know what bee you've got in your bonnet this time but there's nothing wrong with me. Dunno where you get your ideas from sometimes."

Doyle groaned inwardly. So it was going to be silence, was it? That was when Bodie was most difficult to handle, not when he lost his temper and behaved like a bear with a sore head, nor when he did his bull in a china shop impersonation, showing a real talent for tactlessness. Doyle was well used to both modes of behaviour, knew how to deal with them deftly and with the minimum of fuss. But when Bodie clammed up tighter than a Scotsman's sporran on his stag night, then there was trouble. When something was important to Bodie he wouldn't talk about it. Like now.

Shit!

"I've noticed lately that you've been a bit... Recently... It's like I said, you've been distant. Lately." Doyle winced at the lame sound of his own voice and was unable to make himself resent even a little bit the look of derision Bodie threw his way.

"Your imagination working overtime again, is it? You can be a sensitive little flower

sometimes, petal, you know that?” Doyle bristled automatically at the patronising tone, not to mention the words and opened his mouth to blast his partner with a few well-chosen comments but Bodie was continuing. “Maybe you ought to think about whether there’s something wrong with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Doyle snarled.

“Look at what you’ve just said. Making vague comments about there bein’ something wrong with me, but you can’t tell me what. Doesn’t sound right to me. Look, Ray, if the stress is getting to you or something, there’s no shame in asking for some time off. Happens to the best of us, mate.”

“The best of us being you, I suppose?”

Bodie ignored the note of intense sarcasm to beam beatifically, while simultaneously and unsuccessfully attempting to look suitably modest. “If the cap fits...”

“No cap’s big enough to fit a head that big,” Doyle shot back, but his heart wasn’t in it. “And there’s nothing wrong with me. It’s you, I tell you.”

“Name me one thing—one thing, Doyle—that I am, or am not doing that’s different from normal.”

“Your temper for a start. I never know where I stand with you nowadays. One minute you’re fine, the next you’re biting my head off.”

“You really take the fucking biscuit, you know that?” Bodie’s stare was incredulity itself. “I’ve been biting your head off. What about you?”

“We’re not talking about me.” Doyle was vaguely proud of how unruffled his voice sounded. “I’ll admit I’ve got a bit of a temper at times—”

He ignored the muttered, “At times!” from Bodie.

“—but it’s not like you to be so mardy all the time.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Jesus, you could make a drama out of a—a teapot.” Doyle blinked at the less than coherent simile but Bodie was

continuing on. “Just because I’ve been a bit testy lately you make out that the whole bleeding world is coming to an end. You know, you’re the worst bloody drama queen in CI5, could give Liz Taylor a run for her money.” Doyle opened his mouth in protest but Bodie didn’t give him the opportunity to speak, the words tumbling out like bullets from a machine gun. “So no one else is allowed to have moods, are they? Just Raymond bloody Doyle. What a fucking ego! You’ve got more front than Jeffrey Archer.”

“Bodie...” Doyle injected a distinct warning note into his voice.

Bodie ignored him. “You make Maggie Thatcher look like Mother fucking Theresa.”

“Bodie!” Doyle’s shout echoed through the confines of the car. “This is exactly what I mean. Since when did you go off like this, without provocation either!” He softened his voice. “That’s my job, mate, not yours.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Bodie said, hands white knuckled around the steering wheel. “It’s that overactive imagination of yours working overtime again.”

“Pull the other one—it’s got bells on!” Doyle worked hard to try and keep the annoyance out of his voice. “I know you, Bodie. I know when something’s wrong and I’m tellin’ you—”

“Change the record will you, Doyle. You’re getting boring.”

There was a definite ‘back-off’ note in Bodie’s voice, one that Doyle hadn’t heard often and seldom directed at him. You’d have to be really brave or really stupid to keep going when Bodie sounded the warning bell like that and Doyle had never thought of himself as stupid.

He paused for a moment, considering his options. If he persisted in his questioning he’d probably get nowhere judging from the blinding lack of success he’d had so far. He’d also risk making Bodie really angry, much worse than the overreaction he’d demonstrated to date. Or, he could shut up—for now.

Raise it again later when Bodie'd calmed down a bit.

He shrugged, "Okay." Outwardly he was calm, seemingly resigned to his partner's bad mood, but inside he was chilled, even a little queasy.

Bodie was lying to him. Not just telling him to leave it alone as he had done in the past, but actually denying that there was a problem. Worse, he was warning Doyle off in a tone that definitely meant business. Even Doyle thought twice before crossing Bodie in those circumstances. He rubbed his hands together, trying to warm his suddenly cold body. He was actually scared, he acknowledged, not of Bodie but of the yawning gap that had suddenly opened beneath his feet.

Trust, it was a matter of trust. Trusting your partner to watch your back, anticipate your moves in a controlled and deadly dance. If successful they stayed alive. Fail, and the price was death.

He'd never had a partner he trusted like Bodie, never worked with someone who knew him so well. And he'd thought he knew Bodie. Oh, perhaps not all the details, not every last item of his probably sordid past. But he knew all the important things. That Bodie would always back him up, would never leave him on his own in a sticky situation. He'd been able to count on that, absolutely.

Bodie had never lied to him before, not really, not about anything that mattered. He told some whopping great porkies when trying to outdo Doyle in the picking-up birds stakes, true enough. But that was just a game, childish fun. This was something big, something important, something that struck at the heart of their partnership; a threat that Doyle couldn't begin to deal with until Bodie at least acknowledged it. If he couldn't even do that...

Doyle could feel that sense of trust eroding away, slowly, like water dripping from a tap.

"It's just—" he began, then bit down heavily on the rest of the sentence. Now was

not the time.

"What?"

"Nothing." Doyle swallowed and gazed out of the window, ignoring the prickle at the back of his throat as he told himself that this wasn't over, not at all. He was just waiting to pick his moment, not fuck up like last time.

He saw tidily enclosed verdant fields dotted with freshly shorn sheep passing by in an amorphous blur, subtle shades arrayed untidily as on an artist's palette. Sporadically there was a flash of blinding yellow, rapeseed virulently bright in the fleeting sunlight. It was a cosily familiar sight to Doyle, millennia of cultivation forming a patchwork quilt of faded-emerald grass, sprouting seeded corn and wheat and the occasional farm house, accompanied by long-shanked pig sheds and looming corrugated iron-roofed barns, sides open to the weather.

Every now and then there were hints of urban colonisation. Signs that indicated 'North' and counted down the miles to Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds, later solidifying into conglomerations of long, grey warehouses. Surrounding them was the yawning black tarmac of the accompanying car parks and the spider track of roads fading away into the distance. It was on the face of it utterly civilised, safe, the land thoroughly tamed. The only predator still existing was man.

Inside the car there was silence. Bodie drove deftly, paying little heed to the speed limit. Eventually Doyle felt his eyes closing, lulled into slumber by the smooth motion of the car as it travelled along the even surface of the motorway. He fell into an uneasy, broken doze, dimly aware of the uncomfortable angle of his head and the seatbelt digging into his shoulder.

He woke when he felt the car begin to slow down, the sound of the indicator clicking loudly in his ears. "We here?" he asked, a bit muzzy still, grimacing as he sat up after pulling the seatbelt edge away from his neck.

Bodie shook his head. "Just getting off the

motorway. But it's not that much further now, just a few miles along the A57 and then off." He frowned as he spoke. "Hello, what's this?"

Ahead there was what appeared to be a queue of caravans, lining up to get off the slip road. Doyle counted at least twelve, of various shapes and sizes, gleaming dully in the diffuse sunlight that was trying to break through the patchy cloud cover that was swirling in swoops and vales across the horizon. Seizing on what he hoped was the offer of an olive branch he spoke, "Told you there's a lot of caravans around."

"Yeah," Bodie returned absently. "The question is, why are they all getting off here? I thought they'd be on their way further up north, or would've got off in the Peak District. Can't think of any reason why they'd be all getting off the motorway near Sheffield."

Doyle shrugged. "Me neither. Unless there's a show on or something."

"Could be." As he spoke, Bodie was easing the Capri forward onto the roundabout, slowly following the wallowing caravan trail in its wake down the A57. "Great," Bodie moaned. "It'll take ages if we have to follow this lot all the way." An instant later and Bodie was manoeuvring the car around the two caravans immediately ahead, overtaking on a hairpin bend with what Doyle considered was utter recklessness, even for Bodie.

"Bodie! You pillock! Where are we gonna go? Okay, you've got past these two, so there's only about another hundred and two ahead."

Bodie glared at him. "Can't stand being stuck behind a fucking caravan. They're a menace on the roads, shouldn't be allowed. Slow, bloody useless traffic hold-ups. I tell you, they've got the right idea in the Channel Islands, don't allow caravans there at all."

"How'd you know that?" Doyle asked, interested in the source of his partner's sudden knowledge of the caravanning universe.

There was a moment's silence. "Er..." Amazingly, there was the faintest hint of pink on Bodie's high cheekbones, warming the ivory

skin.

"C'mon, Bodie," Doyle coaxed, sensing a rare moment of weakness.

Still silence.

"No." Doyle made no attempt to hide his delight, a wide grin spreading irresistibly across his features. "You had one, didn't you?"

Bodie shrugged, carefully unconcerned. "Yeah, okay. We tried to take a caravan to Jersey once, but they wouldn't allow us on the ferry. Dad went spare."

"Hmm, I'm just picturing it. Little Billy Bodie. A boy and his caravan."

"Knock it off, would you." Bodie made no attempt to hide his irritation.

Doyle tried to swallow his smile, not willing to chance Bodie's currently uncertain temper, but still imagining a younger Bodie camping out in the caravan. He'd been a tough little kid, he'd bet, all smart mouth and knobbly knees. "So do they still have it? Your parents. The caravan, I mean."

"Dunno." Bodie's mouth clamped shut.

Recognising the warning sign Doyle glanced about, searching for a change of subject.

They were travelling through the countryside still, but it was much closer to the car now that they were on the A road as it twisted and turned, taking them through grassy fields sprinkled with blue-daubed sheep and cows—Friesians, unless Doyle missed in his guess. The road was edged with a wall built of the slatted, grey limestone common to the area, ringed on top with stones rounded with weather. He spotted a riding school to the left, jumps standing idle in the field while several horses cropped lazily at the grass in the adjacent field. It was an absolutely ordinary scene, pretty enough in a bucolic sort of way, but lacking the stormy beauty of the adjacent Peak District, or the wild majesty of the heather-clad Yorkshire moors, just a few miles away.

His gaze was caught by a flash of sunlight, reflecting off metal ahead and to the right.

Squinting, feeling his eyes stinging with sun-dazzled tears, he touched Bodie lightly on the arm and wordlessly pointed to a field. There, gleaming in effulgent splendour, stood row upon row of neatly parked caravans.

Bodie's face was a picture. "My God! It's a—"

"—caravan convention!" Doyle finished for him. He grinned at Bodie, who rolled his eyes with patent disgust.

"A bloody caravan convention. In the middle of nowhere."

"That's probably why they chose it. Gives them an ideal opportunity to swap septic tank tips."

"Discuss the best route to Bridlington."

"Whether they should go for that new four berth, now that they've got little Johnny on the way."

Bodie's lips pursed, face redolent with suspicion. "You seem to know an awful lot about it for someone who's never been caravanning."

Doyle shrugged. "Mary Johnson."

"Eh?"

"She was one of my girlfriends, back in the fourth form. Her father had one, was obsessed by them, used to talk about them all the time."

"Serious was it?"

"What?"

"You and Mary Johnson. Girl like that, with all those prospects, some day to be the owner of a top of the range carav—Ow!" Bodie took his hand momentarily off the steering wheel to rub reproachfully at his arm. Doyle ignored the theatrics. He hadn't hit Bodie *that* hard.

"You should know better than that, mate."

"Yeah. Don't take any relationship seriously, do you?" Bodie's sneer was impossible to miss.

Doyle blinked once, twice, three times. Words twisted on his tongue. "I don't know what the *fuck* your problem is. If I've done something that you think is out of order, then

you can fucking well *tell* me, all right! You won't fucking *talk* to me when I ask you what's wrong but've been dropping nasty little insinuations all day, and I. Have had. Enough!" The echoes from his shout reverberated throughout the car, lingering as Doyle shut his mouth with an audible snap.

Bodie had paled, Doyle was satisfied to see, although there was no outward change in his expression. "You haven't *done* anything, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. You've been like acting like a total tosser for weeks now. And I'm sick to the back teeth of it."

"I've been acting up." Bodie gave a short, humourless laugh. "That's rich, coming from you."

Doyle's fist clenched tight as he fought to control his temper. For an instant he thought about laying one on Bodie, right on the end of his tip-tilted nose, or maybe split that crooked eyebrow of his and watch as bright blood trickled down the pale skin. He bit down hard on that thought, not wanting to go where that led. He'd only ever hit Bodie in earnest once. That was enough. Not to mention that hitting someone who was driving was way beyond stupid.

He took several deep, deliberate breaths as Bodie's words repeated themselves in his head. 'You haven't done anything.' 'I've been acting up?' What the hell was Bodie on about? He hadn't done anything that could possibly piss Bodie off recently. Had he? Doyle thought swiftly but absolutely nothing came to mind. Nothing. But something had got to Bodie—and got to him really badly judging from his recent behaviour.

What the fuck was it? What?

Great! Fucking marvellous. He had enough on his plate right now, had more than enough of his own problems, without having to worry about some imagined insult that his prat of a partner had taken exception to.

He forced himself to speak slowly, striving for calm reason. He wasn't entirely

successful.

“Look. I really *don’t* know what the problem is, okay. And now’s not exactly an ideal time to sort it. But you and me are gonna have a long talk when this op’s over. Okay?” When there was silence he repeated again, the word distinctly edged with temper, “Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Jesus, Doyle. What d’you want. Blood?”

Doyle contented himself with a fierce scowl but said nothing further. They passed the entrance to the caravan filled field, which was headed with a loopily hand-printed sign welcoming all visitors to the Anston Caravan Convention 1983. Bodie let out an audible sigh of relief when the traffic blocking his way uniformly turned off the road and down the dirt track cutting across the lush grass. He gunned the Capri sharply, speeding up to eighty in a few, adrenaline filled seconds. Doyle grimaced but kept his mouth shut until he noticed a road forking to the right. “Weren’t we meant to turn there?”

Muttering obscenities under his breath, Bodie glanced in the mirror and with a squeal of protesting brakes spun the car around in a perfect handbrake turn. Doyle pressed his lips together firmly. He wasn’t going to say anything.

The country lane was narrow, twisting and turning between high, limestone walls. It was bordered by a deep ditch and overlooked by branches hanging from the trees—sweetly green-leaved elms and cypresses—that lined each side. Bodie took each corner fast, sliding the car expertly round the turn. Doyle had to admire the casual competence with which Bodie handled the wheel but then his partner was almost as good a driver as he thought he was. The road gradually widened as the walls fell away, affording a view of a brook running swiftly to the east, willows standing sentry along its banks as their branches wept gracefully into the water.

As they rounded a sharp bend, Doyle caught the glimpse of metalwork ahead, as a

large off-white box-shape tilted crazily to one side. The car slowed and Doyle realised that what he saw was a caravan stuck in a deep ditch to the side of the road. Both its right-side wheels were mired in the mud, as was the blue-metal Cortina towing the caravan. To the side and on the grass verge was set up a folding table, complete with a couple of chairs. The table was spread with a lace edged tablecloth, atop which was a large Thermos flask, three cups and a couple of packets of biscuits. Calmly sipping at a cup of tea a middle aged woman sat in one of the chairs, her grey-shot, brown permed curls slightly in disarray from the breeze, thickly flowered print dress topped with a hand-knitted turquoise cardigan bright against the muted green of the countryside.

Bodie wound down his window as he brought the car to a halt. “Everything all right?” he asked, raising his voice slightly to be heard through the open window.

“Yes, thank you, dear,” was the placid reply.

“You certain? It looks like you’ve had a bit of an accident there. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Thank you for asking, that’s very sweet of you, dear, but it’s all taken care of. My husband’s gone off with the farmer to get his tractor to pull us out of the ditch.”

“Going to the caravan convention down the road?” Doyle asked, more for something to say than out of any burning desire to know the answer.

“That’s right.” The woman stopped and frowned. “It’s such a pity that this happened when we were so near to it, too.” She cast a dubious look inside the caravan. From where he sat Doyle could make out a chaotic interior, books, board games and clothing were scattered around, having obviously fallen from cupboards gaping wide in disarray showing crockery and glassware neatly clipped inside. “Mustn’t grumble,” she went on resolutely, looking up at the streaky-grey sky, “at least

the weather's fine. Quite warm for the time of year."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" responded Bodie, gallantly making small talk, favouring her with that charming smile which was an automatic reflex when confronted with a woman, any woman. She smiled back at Bodie, obviously enjoying the attention from the handsome young man at the wheel of the fast car.

At her smile a strange, formless pain twisted and turned within Doyle, coiling inside his stomach in serpentine folds. The woman was so very, very British, sitting there calmly sipping tea in the aftermath of an accident, whilst her mobile holiday home was totally wrecked beside her, ruining the chance of a grand entrance to the convention. Looking at the neatly set table Doyle deduced that she was probably the house-proud type and the wreckage of her previously immaculately arranged caravan was causing her considerable distress. Yet she was resolutely making polite small talk with strangers, grateful for their offer of assistance and looking on the bright side of things, commenting that at least the weather was fine. Which it was, in that it wasn't raining.

He swallowed heavily, ridiculously affected by her, the epitome of what he was fighting to keep safe. 'Terry & June', lower middle class ordinariness personified, that in response to calamity sat placidly drinking tea whilst her husband was away seeking help, totally unconcerned about the possibility of danger. For what was there to fear? She was in the middle of the English countryside, on her way to that most mundane of activities, a caravan convention. Safe, ordinary, boring.

Doyle would die to keep it so.

Keep her safe. And not just her but the rest of them too, all of them going about their everyday business, the lorry drivers and salesmen on the motorway, the squabbling families, the bikers too, essentially harmless, all mouth and trousers. Keep them all safe from the likes of the man he and Bodie were on their way to meet today.

They were the reason why he stayed with CI5, year in and year out. Despite the danger, the boredom interspersed with fast, frantic, adrenaline-scrambled action, the awful ambiguities of the job, he did it to safeguard her and people like her. He willingly dirtied his hands so they didn't have to. So what if he might be addicted to the danger, revelled in it, loved it, lived for it, might even sometimes end up playing cowboys?

His focus had become blurred, distorted by the weight of losing so many colleagues, some of them also friends, young men and women dying ugly, messy deaths whilst still in their prime. He had become disillusioned at the waste of it all, forgetting the underlying rationale, coming to believe that maybe June Cooke had been right and it was all a useless, bloody game.

But it wasn't. What he did—what CI5 did—was important. All of it.

He breathed a sigh of relief, decision made, feeling something inside him that had been knotted and tangled into a hard unyielding lump since Cookie's death start to unravel and dissolve.

"Would either of you like a cup of tea?"

Doyle blinked at the sound of the woman's voice. Bodie raised an eyebrow at him in question and he shook his head minutely.

"Ta very much for the offer, but we must be going, so long as you're sure you'll be okay..." Bodie's voice trailed off delicately into what was almost a question.

The women smiled at him politely. "No, no, you go on. This is a lovely spot to wait for my husband."

Bodie smiled back. "Okay. Goodbye then." With that he wound up the car window and shifted the car into gear. "Nice woman," he commented as he steered the car round yet another corner.

"For a caravan owner," Doyle agreed,



watching Bodie out of the corner of his eye to see if he'd rise to the bait. Bodie merely grunted in reply and Doyle contented himself with a small smile.

He felt free, light as helium, at last unburdened of the weight that had been dragging him down for so long.

Okay, whatever was wrong with Bodie still needed to be dealt with but now Doyle was confident that he was up to the job. He'd get to the bottom of the matter, sort it out—after all it couldn't be *that* bad and he'd just been overreacting (possibly not for the first time, if he was honest) to Bodie's generally bad mood. Christ, it wasn't as if Bodie hadn't been in a temper before but it'd never been anything serious, except for the once. Likely it was nothing this time as well and they'd soon be back on track again.

For the first time in what felt like far too long Doyle was actually looking forward to the rest of the day.

Neither man spoke for a while as Bodie drove the car down the twisting country lane and into a small village called Oldcotes. He pulled over at a whitewashed pub called the Pig and Whistle, which was free-standing on the high street and outside of which was a hand chalked sign stating, 'Food', and looked enquiringly at Doyle. "Lunch?"

"Have we got time?"

Bodie shrugged. "There's no way we're gonna get back to London before evening in any event. And I'm starving."

"Oh yeah, I can see that," Doyle said dryly, eyes raking his partner's sturdy frame. "You look like you're about to pass out from hunger."

Bodie beamed at him. "Exactly."

"And it's not like you had any breakfast ...or ate all that chocolate." Doyle was busy unfastening his seatbelt and climbing out of the car as he spoke.

"That's what I like about you, Raymond," Bodie said, falling into step beside Doyle as they walked towards the pub entrance, "Your

warm and understanding nature."

"Also the fact that I'm hungry," Doyle agreed as he looked round for a free table inside the smoky atmosphere of the pub.

Later, relaxed after a pint and a ploughman's, Doyle decided to tackle his partner again. But slowly this time, invite Bodie to confide in him by sharing a confidence himself. "I've been thinking," he began carefully. Anyone less attuned to Bodie than he was would have missed the way the other man's body stiffened minutely.

"Dangerous, that," Bodie said, not looking up from mopping up the last dregs of gravy on the meagre remains of his plate of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding with all the trimmings.

"For some of us," Doyle agreed amiably, grinning at Bodie's glare.

"So, deep thoughts were they?" Bodie's voice was casual, apparently unconcerned but Doyle knew better.

"Y'could say that." He paused and took a deep breath. "Cookie's death... It really shook me up, you know."

"Yeah." Bodie glanced aside as he spoke.

"Since then, what with what June said, when I went to tell her... You know."

Bodie's gaze snapped back to his. "I don't know what she said. You never told me."

"I didn't?" Doyle frowned slightly. "Maybe I didn't at that. Thought I had," he murmured. "Oh, it wasn't anything but what you'd expect, I reckon. Accused me—us—of playing cowboys, implied I'd been messing around with Cookie's life."

Bodie scowled. "Ah c'mon, Ray, you meant well, more money would've been useful, what with the baby and all."

"Yeah," Doyle sighed. "Tell me again what they say about good intentions." He paused and took a sip of his half-pint of Worthingtons. "Anyway, that's not important now. But—"

"No, you're wrong." Bodie fixed him with an intense gaze. "Doing a mate a favour, *trying* to help out a mate, well, it matters." He shrugged, looking down abruptly and fiddling

with the coaster his beer had been sitting upon.

Doyle felt a slow spreading warmth inside at Bodie's partisanship. Maybe things between them weren't as fucked up as he'd thought if Bodie was still trying to defend him, even from himself. "Okay. Thanks." He paused again. "But what I was trying to say is that I was thinking that maybe she was right."

"What! you're not seriously telling me that you thought you'd killed Cookie or anything daft like that. Jesus, Ray—"

"No, no. Not about that. About the cowboys bit. Made me wonder whether that's what I'd been doing, playing around."

Bodie groaned. "I don't believe you sometimes. If you think that this is just a bit of make-believe—"

"So, why d'you do it?" Doyle interrupted. "I asked you that once, remember?"

"And I told you."

"Yeah, money. I didn't believe it then and I don't believe it now."

Bodie shrugged airily, gaze bent upon where his hands were slowly tearing the cardboard coaster apart. "S'not the point why I'm doing it, is it? You said that you wanted to do something worthwhile and that's why you joined the Mob. Changed your mind, did you?"

Doyle cleared his throat. "Not exactly. But..."

"June got you wondering whether it's really worthwhile?" Bodie didn't even wait for Doyle's nod of agreement before he was off and running, hands clenched tight around the shredded remains of the coaster. "You stupid prat! You know what your trouble is? You think too much. Christ! When I think of all the times when you've lectured me, *ad bloody infinitum*, about how we're looking out for folk, protecting them, you even meant it when you said, 'keeping these shores green and pleasant'—" He held up a silencing hand, spraying confetti from his palm to fall unnoticed to the floor, as Doyle opened his mouth. "You did! Don't try and deny it. And then to lose it, just because some woman who's

not only just lost her husband but is about to drop her latest sprog besides... Un-fucking-believable."

Doyle's face felt warm. "Okay, okay. But she got to me, y'know."

Bodie snorted. "Obviously!"

"Anyway," Doyle spoke doggedly, determined to have his say. "I—I was thinking of resigning."

Bodie's face went blank, wiped clean of all expression. "I see." There was a pause, then, "So, are you going to?"

"No."

"Why not?" His voice held nothing but idle curiosity.

Doyle smiled a little. "It was the caravan."

"Eh?"

"Doesn't matter. I just realised that I was wrong—that June was wrong. That's all."

Bodie rolled his eyes. "That's great, Doyle. Can we go back to the car now?"

Doyle stared at him, nonplussed. He wasn't certain what reaction he'd expected from Bodie to his announcement that he was staying with CI5, but he'd anticipated something, well, *more*. Of course, Bodie hadn't known that he was thinking of leaving. That probably accounted for it. But his brilliant plan of getting Bodie to confide in him looked like it was about to bite the dust. He looked around quickly, searching for inspiration. "But..."

"What?"

"I haven't finished me beer."

"Drink up, then," Bodie said, already on his feet. Faced with Bodie looming over him, arms folded, Doyle had no choice but to quickly down the rest of his drink and meekly follow Bodie back to the car.

Conversation was desultory, consisting mostly of Doyle providing directions to their destination, which was hidden away down a long drive off a little-used 'B' road. The house was large, with immense, staring windows as was typical of houses built in the Edwardian era, and surrounded by a neatly tended garden.

"Wouldn't like to try and defend this

place,” Bodie said, over the sound of the car wheels crunching on the gravel of the drive.

“Location’s not bad.”

“Yeah, but look at those windows, and there’s too much cover for anyone approaching from the back.”

“Lucky we’re just here to talk, then.”

“You hope!” As he spoke Bodie brought the car smoothly to a halt outside the imposing front door and scowled up at the ivy climbing around the frame. “Just how does an IRA activist end up with a house like this, anyway? Fighting for their fucking cause.” His eyebrows drew together, disgust redolent in every feature. “Lining their fucking pockets is more like it.”

“You read the briefing,” Doyle said as he climbed out of the car, stretching slightly to relieve an ache in his shoulder. “And it’s ex-IRA,” he reminded Bodie.

“Officially.” Bodie’s gaze was sceptical as he glanced across at Doyle over the top of the car. “They never *really* leave, you know, just stop going out on ops. And yeah, I know, his wife’s got money.”

“Possibly not as much as you think. I mean, how much can even a house like this go for round here?”

“Good point. It is a bit back of beyond,” Bodie agreed, pushing on the doorbell firmly.

The door was opened a moment later by a man in his fifties, silver-grey hair thinning and with a definite paunch. However, his blue eyes were shrewd as he sized up the two men standing outside. Doyle recognised him from his photograph as Jimmy Lynch, *Sinn Fein* member and a supposedly former leading light in the IRA. “Yes?”

“CI5,” Doyle said, proffering his ID. “Doyle.”

Lynch took it and examined it closely. “You’ll not be English, then?” He had a pronounced Derry accent.

“British,” Doyle said with relish.

“And yours?” Lynch said, looking at Bodie.

“Want the code-word as well?” Bodie said as he handed over his ID.

Lynch ignored the words, although he glowered at Bodie. “You’d better come in.” His mouth twisted as he spoke, indicative, Doyle thought, of his distaste at having two English rozzers inside his house.

“Ta.” Bodie glanced at Doyle as he spoke, shrugging minutely.

They followed Lynch down a long, wide hall that smelt pleasantly of the beeswax emanating from the polished wooden floorboards into the lounge, a warmly appointed room with two long, overstuffed couches clustered around the coffee table. Lynch lowered himself onto one, while the two CI5 men took the other.

There was silence for a moment. After a quick look at Bodie, Doyle spoke. “You wanted to see us, Mr Lynch.”

“I wanted to see Cowley,” the man growled.

“Mr Cowley’s busy.” Bodie beamed at the man with spurious friendliness. “Reserves himself for the important people.”

Lynch’s eyes narrowed. “Aye, well. Happen I’ve got important information.”

“So you said when you contacted Mr Cowley,” Doyle said, making no attempt to disguise his impatience. “We haven’t got all day, Lynch.”

Lynch’s lips pursed. “There’s trouble coming.”

“There always is where you lot are concerned,” Bodie agreed dryly.

Lynch fixed him with a hard-eyed stare. “I do hope you’re not insinuat’ that I’m a member of an illegal organisation.”

“Cut the crap, Lynch. We’re not here to nick you for being an IRA member, just to listen to this so-called information you say you have.” Bodie favoured the man with a particularly sweet smile. “Of course, I do have to wonder where an ex-IRA man like yourself gets his important information from... Retirement a bit boring is it?” he finished in a

sympathetic tone of voice.

Lynch's hands clenched tight, but a pleasant smile illuminated his face. "You're ex-armed forces, aren't you?" Bodie's mouth opened but Lynch continued with barely a pause, "You must be, a grand lad like yourself. What was it? Marines? Paras? SAS? Enjoyed your tour of the Provinces did you? What is it you were doing? Ah yes, 'keeping the peace'. Is that what they're calling killing unarmed women and children nowadays?"

Bodie shook his head. "Wrong. Not a bad guess, although not exactly a great leap of imagination, seeing as we're from CI5. No, Doyle here's the army man—" Doyle kept a straight face only with difficulty. "—I'm an ex-copper myself." It took all Doyle's powers of concentration to keep from choking.

Lynch favoured Doyle with a slow stare. "Him? The British Army?" He snorted. "It's a fine yarn you're spinning there."

"Just goes to show you shouldn't judge by appearances, doesn't it? Now then, Mr Lynch, the information, please. We haven't got all day." There was a definite snap of command in Bodie's voice, the ex-army sergeant extant.

"You're no copper," Lynch muttered, then continued without missing a beat, "As I said, there's trouble brewing. But it's not us—not the IRA," he added hastily and then hesitated. "Kids!" he spat out, bitterly. "Little shites, think they know it all. Think they're the likes o' Michael Collins. Feckin' heroes for the Cause. But we made them and we'll—" He stopped abruptly, the words strangled in his throat.

Doyle's eyes narrowed; it was as they suspected. "What exactly is it you're saying? Not that some of your lot are going off on unauthorised 'activities'?" He drew out the last word, making no attempt to hide his disgust.

"I'm not with the organisation," Lynch protested but obviously only for form's sake. "But I keep my ear to the ground. There's been a split," he said bluntly. "Some of the boyos, they're calling themselves the 'Real IRA'."

Lynch snorted, making no attempt to hide his disgust.

"What are they going to do?" Doyle spoke slowly, feeling his gut clench tight at the thought of the havoc that might be wreaked by a splinter group from the Provos, a group that was violent enough to worry the IRA old guard. CI5 was already well aware of the rumoured existence of this new group but to have it confirmed by Lynch—to have an approach made by the likes of Lynch—showed a real depth of concern on the part of the Provos. And if the Provos were worried... It didn't bear thinking about. Except that he had to.

"The rumour is a fine, big campaign hitting the tourist spots. London, o' course. Chester, Bath, York, Canterbury, Durham."

"Hit us where it hurts, eh?" Bodie's gaze was level upon the IRA man.

"Aye."

"I wouldn't think that would be something your lot would mind."

"Their methods aren't condoned by the organisation."

Doyle vented a short, humourless laugh. "That's rich. I don't recall the IRA exercising too many scruples in Guildford. Birmingham. Or in Harrods."

Lynch's eyes wavered the merest fraction. "That's in the past."

Bodie's mouth twisted in an approximation of a smile. "Lost some of your Yank funding, did you?"

"And it's what's to come that we're discussing here," Lynch said, ignoring Bodie's words.

"All right." Doyle's voice was leached of all warmth. "What are the details?"

Lynch shrugged. "I've already told you."

"That's it!" Doyle stared at the man in disbelief. "That's very fucking helpful, that is. There's rumours of campaigns in the tourist spots. Oh yeah, that gives us a lot to go on. We'll have absolutely no fucking trouble stopping them with info like that."

“It’ll be handled.” Lynch’s steady gaze took in both Bodie and Doyle. “We’re only telling you now just in case. If it isn’t handled in time. So you’ll know it’s not us. Not the Provos.”

“Or so that you can use this as an excuse.” Bodie’s gaze was similarly steady. “Not a bad tactic. Make up some pretend splinter group, tell us they’re going to be causing trouble and sit back and reap the rewards while having none of the bother. If a few tourists are maimed or killed, so what? Wasn’t the IRA. Keep the Americans happy.”

“That’s not—”

“Consider yourself warned,” Doyle said, cutting off Lynch’s attempted protest. “If this so-called ‘Real IRA’ isn’t stopped before they do any damage it won’t matter what your lot claim, we’ll tell the world that it was all a set-up. Better ‘handle’ it fast.”

As one, he and Bodie stood up, preparatory to taking their leave. “Sure you haven’t got anything else to tell us?” Bodie asked as they turned in unison for the door.

Lynch shook his head, by now also on his feet. “Just that I’ll be telling the boyos to ‘consider themselves warned’.” He smiled. It was not a pleasant expression.

Doyle felt his muscles bunching up as he turned round, not sure what he was going to do, but a touch from Bodie on his arm stopped him from acting. Bodie gave a minute shake of his head, echoed by Doyle’s equally minute nod in acknowledgement. Silently, both CI5 men made for the front door, followed by the equally silent Lynch.

It was only when they were pulling away from the drive that either spoke again. “Well that was a waste of time,” Doyle said.

Bodie shrugged. “Had to be done, though.”

“Yeah. He’s a hard man, Lynch,” Doyle commented.

Bodie nodded, even as he shifted gear expertly. “Good tactician, too. Least we know now why he used his home for the meet.”

It was Doyle’s turn to nod. “Think he figured that the lack of secrecy might alert the Real IRA.”

“Only if they knew that he’d made contact with Cowley. But yeah, it’s a good way to find out if anyone high up in the hierarchy is a Real IRA man.”

“But only if the Real IRA don’t actually make a move.”

“Which presents our friendly Provos with a dilemma.” Bodie’s smile was grim. “Do they ‘handle’ the Real IRA straightaway, or do they wait to see whether they’ve flushed out a traitor in their midst.”

Doyle grinned happily. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer bunch of people.”

“Yeah.” Bodie grinned back at him. He sobered abruptly. “Can’t say that I’m happy at the thought of an IRA splinter group—worse than the Provos—running around though.”

“Me neither.” There was silence for a moment broken only by the roar of the Capri’s engine when Bodie caused the car to accelerate on the flat. “Reckon the Provos will sort them out?”

“Sooner or later.”

“Yeah, but some of their own and all.”

“Honour amongst thieves.” Bodie’s voice was dry. “Haven’t noticed it myself, let alone amongst terrorists.”

“You think there’s no loyalty, then?” Doyle was genuinely interested in Bodie’s opinion, knowing that he had seen rather more of the way that the IRA operated than Doyle had. Bodie hadn’t talked much about his army posting to Northern Ireland, beyond saying that he’d been ‘strictly keeping the peace’, but Doyle’d seen from their subsequent dealings with the Provos that Bodie evinced them little respect, combined with a dangerous delight in provoking them.

“Loyalty’s in short supply nowadays.”

Doyle blinked at the bitter statement. “What d’you mean?” he asked, surprising himself by the cautious sound of his own voice.

Bodie stared straight ahead. “Nothing.”

Doyle chewed on his lower lip for a moment while he considered whether he should just let the subject go. “I don’t think so, mate. It’s not nothing.”

Bodie sighed. “There you go again, over-analysing the situation as usual. You’re worse than a dog after a bone. I didn’t mean anything by it. I told you.”

Doyle swallowed heavily, feeling a suspicious tightness at the back of his throat. Bodie was lying to him again. “Are you accusing me of disloyalty?” He forced a dispassionate note into his voice. No need to stir things up any more than he had to. But Bodie didn’t answer. “Are you, Bodie?” At his partner’s continued silence Doyle’s temper flared. “Fuck you!”

Bodie turned a sardonic eye upon him. “Oh, that’s very nice, that is. Charming as ever, Doyle.”

“If you’ve got a problem with me, you can fucking well tell me, all right,” Doyle snapped. Then, unable to prevent the hurt from seeping through, “I thought we were mates.”

“So did I.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Bodie shrugged. “Sounds straightforward enough to me.”

“So, what are you saying? That we’re not mates? I— I don’t understand.”

“Don’t be so thick.” Hardened CI5 man though he was, Doyle was unable to prevent himself from sinking into his seat at the note of derision in Bodie’s voice. “Mates look out for one another, trust one another.”

“They do. We do.”

Not for the first time that day Doyle found himself unable to read the glance that Bodie threw his way. “I was right the first time,” Bodie muttered.

“What?”

“Remember when you and I were first teamed up? What I said?”

“Stay cool. Don’t get involved,” Doyle quoted.

“Yeah. Good advice, that. Think I’ll take it.” Bodie shifted gears with a definitive motion of his hand and resumed staring ahead. His gaze didn’t waver.

What the fuck? Doyle couldn’t think of anything that he could possibly have done which could have caused Bodie to be even mildly pissed off at him, let alone accuse him of disloyalty. And he knew that loyalty was very important to Bodie, had seen that demonstrated over and over, in his interactions with Doyle, Cowley and other CI5 agents. Not to mention old mates of Bodie’s, Keller, to name but one. “What’s wrong, Bodie?”

Bodie’s voice was flat. “You’re not stupid. Work it out.”

“Honest, Bodie, I dunno what you’re on about. We’ve not always seen eye to eye in the past, fair enough, but you’ve always been there for me, I know that. And I thought you knew that you can rely on me.”

“Seeing as how you’ve never let me down in the past.”

To his horror, Doyle felt a wave of heat travel up his chest to his forehead. “Yeah, okay. I’ll admit that I could’ve behaved better once or twice. But damn it, Bodie! I know you, you’ve never exactly been shy in coming forward whenever I pissed you off.”

“I know you, too, Doyle. Don’t think I don’t.”

“I know that you do. We’re a good team, you and me. We’re the best and that’s important to me and I thought it was important to you, too. But here you are, making vague accusations but not actually giving me a fucking clue about whatever it is that I’m supposed to have done wrong and I tell you, we won’t be a fucking good team for much longer!” Doyle had not intended to shout but was desperate to cover the hurt that he could hear thick in his voice.

Bodie shrugged, still not looking at Doyle. “I didn’t say anything about breaking our partnership.”

“No, but that’s where we’re going. You

accuse me of being untrustworthy and—”

“I never said that,” Bodie protested mildly.

“Yes you did. You said—”

“Didn’t say anything about trust.”

“Okay! You said loyalty, but I don’t see that they’re that different. For fuck’s sake, why won’t you tell me what the fuck it is that I’m supposed to have *done!*?”

Silence, then at long last Bodie sighed again and spoke. “It’s like I said, I know you.”

“Yeah, but I don’t see—”

“You want me to tell you or not?” Doyle shut up. “I know how Cookie’s death hit you, could see it. You’re not exactly inscrutable, you know. I was expecting you to start talking about resigning, ’s par for the course with you. But you didn’t. But I knew that you were brooding about it. Then I realised that you were really serious about it. I kept on expecting you to talk to me about it, but you didn’t.” Bodie brought the car to an abrupt halt by the side of the road, although he didn’t switch off the engine, and turned round to face Doyle. “Tell me, Doyle, were you even gonna say goodbye before you pissed off out of CI5?”

Doyle blinked. A second later and he felt the anger, deep scarlet red. “*This* is what all the trouble’s about? Just because I was thinking of— Oh for fuck’s sake! Since when did I have to discuss my whole bleeding life with you? Christ! The way you’re carryin’ on you’d think we were married or something.” He felt a vicious sense of satisfaction at seeing the colour drain out of Bodie’s face. “What, Bodie? Want me to tell you every single fucking detail of my existence? Should I let you know whether I’ve wiped me bum this morning? You stupid prat! You jump to some fucking stupid conclusion, without a scrap of evidence and start sulking over it. You’re so bloody stupid that—”

“Shut up!” Bodie’s shout reverberated in Doyle’s ears. “Just shut the fuck up.” There was silence for a moment, broken only by the sound of harsh breathing. All the colour that

Bodie had lost had come flooding back, staining his face with a rich, dark colour. “Go on then, Doyle. Tell me I’m wrong!” Bodie’s voice was hard, vibrating with anger. “You said it yourself, you were gonna resign. Would’ve been nice to know that I ought to start looking for a new partner. But you didn’t fucking well bother to tell me. Too bloody selfish, just thinking of yourself as usual. Don’t know why I even bother, it’s par for the course with you.”

Doyle could feel his heart pounding in his ears as one phrase out of all that Bodie had said reverberated in his head. “Is that what you were going to do? Look for a new partner?”

“Eh?”

“Were you going to look for a new partner?”

Bodie shrugged. “Suppose so. I could work solo, maybe. But—” He stopped abruptly.

“What?”

“Nothing. Let’s get back to the point here. You were going to resign, right?” At Doyle’s continued silence Bodie repeated harshly, “Right?”

“All right,” Doyle snapped. “So I was thinking about it. Didn’t know that was a crime.”

“You—” Bodie shut his mouth abruptly. “Yeah, well, so I was right.”

“I *told* you I was thinkin’ of going.”

“So you did. Today.” Bodie’s voice was flat. “You said that you’re staying.”

“So what more do you want?”

There was a long silence, then Bodie spoke, his voice a low monotone. “Nothing.” He put the Capri into gear and eased the car away from the side of the road carefully, exhibiting none of his usual careless flamboyance.

∞ **CI5** ∞

Again silence. Finally Doyle broke it, his gut knotted with formless anxiety. “We’re still partners though, right? I mean, you’re not actually looking for anyone else, are you?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it fucking well matters, you cretin!” Doyle exploded.

“Why?”

“What d’you mean, why? We’re a team, the best. You want to throw that away?”

Bodie laughed. There was no humour in it. “Should’ve guessed. Stupid. You’re right. Be stupid to throw away being the best.”

“So it’s settled, then?” Doyle persisted.

Bodie shrugged, the merest movement of his torso. “Suppose so.”

“Right.” Once more silence fell within the car. Doyle looked down at his hands, surprised to find that they were clenched tight, knuckles white with pressure. He swallowed heavily and consciously relaxed. It was sorted. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing.

He was still telling himself that twenty minutes later when they were driving past the Anston caravan convention once more. Neither man had spoken further. Doyle glanced idly out of the window and vented a low, respectful whistle. “Look at that. There’s even more of them now.”

Bodie grunted. He didn’t turn his head to look at the caravans. Doyle subsided into silence, not speaking again until he spotted a sign on the motorway stating that there were services one mile ahead. “Pit stop?” he suggested.

Bodie’s glance at him was cool. “I’m not bothered either way.”

“You’re not tired?”

“No.”

“Don’t fancy a drink?”

“Nope.”

“Afternoon tea?”

“I said no.”

“Okay, okay. I was only asking.”

“And I was only answering. Happy now, Doyle?”

“Not particularly,” he muttered but Bodie ignored the comment and once again silence descended.

Doyle gazed unseeingly out of the car

window, tension aching in his shoulders and down his arms to his hands, scrunched together on his lap. There was only so long he could continue lying to himself. It wasn’t sorted. Not at all.

Bodie was treating him like a— a— Well, precisely like what he was. His partner. Just that and nothing else. Not his mate, not even the bloke you regularly met down the pub when you went for a pint. He swallowed heavily. He hadn’t fixed it. Not at all.

What he’d done was fucked up. Badly. Because Bodie was hurting. Badly. And he knew why, as he knew his partner.

Trust, it was all a matter of trust. Only it wasn’t Bodie who’d broken the pact, but Doyle.

Up to him to fix it then. He’d wanted to avoid this, had hoped to avoid it when he’d made his decision earlier. He’d been running all the persuasive arguments he could think of in his head for weeks now, had got to the point where he’d—almost—convinced himself, but never quite reached it. Now, he was going to have to make himself vulnerable. God, he *hated* that.

He heaved an inward sigh. How many times had he threatened to resign? And how many times had Bodie talked him out of it? But this time he hadn’t given Bodie the opportunity, had he?

And why hadn’t he?

“I wanted you to come with me,” he blurted out abruptly.

“Eh?”

Doyle was helpless to prevent the slow flush that made its way from chest to forehead, but he persisted doggedly, determination colouring his voice even as he tried not to show the vulnerability, knowing that Bodie would see it all too well nonetheless. “If I resigned,” he mumbled, then cleared his throat and continued in a louder voice. “Knew you could talk me out of it, o’ course. You always do. But this time I was...I was really serious. Needed to keep me head clear, not let you muddy the waters.”



“Since when do I—”

“Always.” Doyle favoured him with a wry smile. “Could charm the birds out of the trees when you put your mind to it.”

He was hoping for a smug smile from Bodie, together with a comment along the lines of, “Already have, Raymond my son, already have,” but wasn’t surprised when Bodie merely stared at him, dark brows knotted. “Go on,” Bodie said tersely, flicking the indicator and causing the Capri to change lanes, sitting comfortably behind a lorry in the slow lane.

Doyle chewed on his lip for a moment, then inhaled deeply. Time to lay his cards on the table. “Know how much you like being in CI5. But I thought that if I came up with something good that you’d like doing you might, um, comewithme,” he muttered, the last few words blurring into one.

“You what?”

Doyle swallowed, hard. “You heard.”

There was a short pause, then, “Why?”

“What d’you mean, why?”

“What I said.”

“You— Oh, for fuck’s sake, Bodie—”

“Why, Doyle? Because we’re ‘the best’, is that it? Don’t want to muck up the team, is that it?” Bodie sounded almost bored and derision threaded through his voice. But Doyle watched his hands, clenched tight around the steering wheel of the car.

“How about pulling over?” Doyle asked abruptly, suddenly desperate to see Bodie’s face, read the expression in his eyes. Bodie said nothing in response, but the Capri moved smoothly onto the hard shoulder and came to a halt. He left the motor running but flicked on the hazard warning light, it’s rhythmic tick-tocking a regular counterpart to Doyle’s suddenly unsteady breathing. There was silence for a moment, then Doyle cleared his throat and spoke, voice still a little hoarse. “Because you’re my mate. My best mate. And I’d, you know, if we— It wouldn’t be the same, would it? If you were still in CI5. And I...”

“Wasn’t?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“You have to know when it’s time to move on, Ray.” Bodie’s voice was unexpectedly gentle.

“Like you do?” Doyle was vaguely horrified at the harsh sound of his own voice.

Bodie shrugged and slid the gear stick into first, preparatory to moving off.

“No, wait!” Doyle blurted out, placing his hand momentarily over Bodie’s to halt his movement. “That’s not—” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Sorry. Look, I’m not good at this, but if you weren’t there, I’d, you know, miss you.” Bodie said nothing, so Doyle continued on, face burning, “And I was thinking about the future, what’s gonna happen when we don’t make the A Squad any more. Dunno about you, but I don’t fancy a desk job at the Cow’s beck and call.”

“So, you’ve been making long term plans, is that it?”

“No, not really. I mean, yes, that’s part of it. But when I thought about it, what I might end up doing, I just— That is, no matter what, I couldn’t imagine anything where you and me weren’t togeth— Partners. Um, a team,” he finished hastily.

“A team.”

Doyle could read nothing in Bodie’s echo of his words, but shook his head determinedly. “Partners. Mobile ghetto, even. Remember when you said that?”

“Yeah.”

“Like knows like and all that,” Doyle finished lamely.

Bodie’s mouth twitched. “Think we’re alike do you?”

“I— Yeah. In every way that counts.”

“What, a cold-blooded killer like me and a starry-eyed idealist like you?”

Doyle winced at the reminder of some of his less than temperately spoken past words. “All I know is that you’re the one person I trust. And I don’t want—” He bit off what he was going to say, knowing that once the words were out, there would be no going back. And

he was too afraid to take that step, always had been.

“Don’t want what?”

Did he dare risk it, even now, when he’d almost succeeded in destroying what they already had? If he’d read Bodie wrong... “You know what.”

“Do I?” The voice was mild but underneath Doyle could sense it, the tension and something else. That something which had been unspoken between them for so long, silently understood maybe, but to acknowledge it would change everything and put at risk all that they had. But if he didn’t... It had been too long and what they had was dying, withering on the vine before it ever came to bloom. Time to clear the air—if only he had the guts.

He gulped. “To be without you.” The words were blurted out, fast. Doyle squeezed his eyes shut, tight.

For a moment there was silence, then, “Getting sentimental in your old age, Ray?”

“I’m only a couple of years older than you.” The words came automatically, an echo of old, old squabbles.

“So you keep telling me. And you always were the sentimental type.” Doyle cracked open his eyes. Bodie was grinning at him, a familiar smirk, except for the underlying tenderness in his eyes.

“As opposed to the great big softie sittin’ next to me.” Doyle bit down hard on his smile, almost incandescent with relief. It was going to be all right.

“There’s nothing soft about me, mate. It’s all muscle.”

“Prove it!” The air in the car shrank and wound tight around Doyle as indigo blue eyes met his. Bodie switched the ignition off. Doyle swallowed. Never dare Bodie, never dare Bodie, never dare Bod—ie—

Heat scorched Doyle, pierced his groin. Bodie’s lips were silken, yet firm against his as his breath caught, mingling hotly with that of his partner, his mate, his best friend— Doyle

groaned and shifted, arching closer to Bodie, feeling the long muscles of his back clench beneath his fingers. The arousal was sharp, shocking him in its intensity. He’d long known he wanted Bodie, in an admiring almost abstract way, but he hadn’t known. He’d been blind and stupid, deliberately so.

Warmth faded as Bodie’s mouth left his leaving him bereft as Bodie pulled away a fraction, but only for an instant. He nuzzled at Doyle’s neck, where the t-shirt gaped wide, then a second later he was pulling it up with an impatient murmur, running strong callused hands over Doyle’s chest. Jesus. Doyle let his head fall back against the headrest of his seat as his cock jumped in response. Fuck! If Bodie kept this up wasn’t going to be able to control himself much longer—and his jeans were killing him.

“Bodie!” he gasped. “You’ve got to— Oh Christ!” The rasp of a zipper being undone was loud in the car and Doyle whimpered as he felt Bodie’s hand envelop him, fingers caressing the head, smearing the moisture that trembled at the tip.

“Like this?” Bodie’s hand moved. Doyle moaned, as much response as he was capable of making, breath coming in little, strangled pants. Bodie’s hand moved faster, then faster yet.

Nothing had prepared him for the tidal wave that crashed over him, subsumed him, then deposited him on the shore, leaving him weak and trembling. He opened sated eyes and feebly reached out to lightly touch Bodie’s face. “I— Bodie, that was...”

“Good, wasn’t it?” The voice was ostensibly filled with self-satisfaction and a smug smile wreathed Bodie’s face, but Doyle clearly heard the wordless anxiety buried deep beneath.

He smiled slowly, watching with pleasure the way Bodie’s eyes lightened at his response. “Yeah. C’mere.” He reached out and drew Bodie’s sturdy torso close, taking his mouth in long, slow, deep, wet kisses until Bodie was

moaning deep in his throat, clutching frantically at Doyle. Even as his tongue penetrated deeply into Bodie's mouth he was reaching for his groin, adroitly pulling down the fly, shoving aside snug briefs and reaching with pleasure for the silken-smooth, iron-hard length of Bodie's erection. The cock leapt, eagerly straining towards completion. Doyle hesitated a moment. What he was considering was really, really stupid, considering that they were pulled over on the hard shoulder of the motorway, open to the eyes of any passing lorry driver. Not to mention that it was illegal.

Oh the hell with it. Doyle finished the kiss, ignoring Bodie's wordless protest, bent down and took Bodie's lengthy, curving erection in his mouth. The flavour exploded on Doyle's tongue, indescribably, uniquely Bodie.

"Doyle! Fuck! Are you craz— Oh God!"

Doyle swirled his tongue around the head, enjoying Bodie's whimper in response, exercising skills that had lain long-dormant, unused since his art school days, before he'd joined the Met. He moved his mouth up and down the long length, rejoicing in the feel and taste, adoring the sound of Bodie's harshly quickened breathing as he got closer and closer to the edge. He was making Bodie feel good, special, knowing that this time it wasn't because he fancied getting his leg over but because he loved—

"Ray! Shit, Ray, it's— I'm—"

Doyle swallowed and swallowed again as Bodie erupted inside his mouth, the bitter taste never before so satisfying to him, never so deeply savoured. He let go of Bodie's softening erection with a last, regretful kiss, then sat up to the gratifying sight of a thoroughly debauched Bodie, eyes glazed, chest still heaving for breath, face flushed rosily red as he sprawled untidily in his seat. Doyle's cock gave an interested twitch as he contemplated the pleasant thought that if this was what a well-blown Bodie looked like, he couldn't wait to see a well-fucked Bodie. He sighed a little,

regretfully, at the realisation that that would definitely have to wait for later, for reasons of discretion at least, not to mention that although the spirit was definitely willing it was a bit premature for the flesh.

He waited expectantly for Bodie's words as his partner's breathing steadied, then slowed. Bodie rearranged his trousers, zipped up the fly, then his mouth opened and finally he managed to speak. "Ray! Are you mad? You gave me a fucking blow-job, in broad daylight, on the bloody M1 motorway." The supposedly outraged tone of voice didn't quite come off, Doyle thought.

"Yeah, where anyone might've seen us," he agreed, laughter trembling in his voice as happiness spread warmly inside him, tingling in his toes.

"Coppers, terrorists, MI5..." Bodie reached over as he spoke and kissed Doyle lightly on the lips. "And you, sunshine, have done that before."

"Not on the M1, I haven't." Doyle's mouth quirked as he tried to hold in his grin at Bodie's ostensibly annoyed glare. "Besides, who did you think you were dealing with? Some sort of amateur?"

"You? Never." Bodie shook his head, the grin coming freely now.

"Anyway, you saying you haven't?"

Bodie cleared his throat. "Not exactly."

"Thought so. Tell you what, you can tell me all about it on the way home."

"Whose home?" Bodie's eyes were intense as he awaited Doyle's answer.

"Yours, mine, 's all the same isn't it?"

A searching look, then the tension subtly disappeared from Bodie's tight-strung form. "Suppose it is," he said easily.

"Okay, then. Well," Doyle demanded a moment later as Bodie had made no move to start the engine. "We going? 'cos I dunno about you, but I'm looking forward to, er, relaxing in a nice warm bed, after a lovely long shower, of course."

"You'll be lucky to get more than a trickle

## MANDRAGORA

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out of my shower.”

Doyle ignored Bodie’s rueful comment. “Or a bath. I’m not fussy.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Dinner would be nice, as well,” Doyle continued, determinedly.

“You cooking?”

“Don’t I always?” Doyle said smartly. “Tell you what, though, I’m buggered if I’m always going to be lumbered with it, ‘specially when we’ve just come off stakeout and are really knackered.”

“But Ray...” Batting your eyelashes like that ought to be illegal, Doyle thought. “...you know that we’ll starve if we have to eat my cooking.”

“Yeah, you’re wasting away there,” Doyle said, pointedly eyeing Bodie up and down.

“Takeaways,” Bodie protested.

“You never fooled me, you know, not for an instant. I know you can cook.”

Bodie’s mouth twitched. “Not for an instant?”

“Maybe for an instant,” Doyle admitted, remembering his disgust when he realised that Bodie’d been taking him for a ride about his lack of culinary skills. “We’ll take it in turns.”

Bodie shrugged. “It’s your stomach,” he said, easing the car back onto the motorway.

“We’ve got plenty of time for you to get it right.” Doyle reached up to pull down the seatbelt.

“Have we? Plenty of time, I mean?”

Doyle’s hands slowed. “Something we need to talk about, maybe?”

“Yeah, but not now, eh. Later.”

“Later,” Doyle agreed, the bright shine of his happiness a little dimmed but still burning steadily. After all, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t come up with several ideas as to what a couple of former CI5 men could do to earn a socially responsible living—some of which Bodie might even like. He reached out and squeezed Bodie’s thigh, hard, craving the contact.

“Oi! Do you mind! I’ve got to drive the motor, remember.”

“Don’t mind a bit, mate.”

“That’ll leave bruises, that will,” Bodie groused.

“Want me to kiss it better?”

A pause, then, “Maybe later.”

Doyle laughed and left his hand resting on Bodie’s thigh as the car sped south, a promise of what was to come. ∞

**Author’s Note:** I refer to the ‘Real IRA’ in the story as being a splinter group of the IRA (more properly called the Provisional IRA, colloquially known as the Provos). To my knowledge the Real IRA didn’t actually exist at the time this story is set, although there is a group called the Real IRA in existence nowadays who are indeed a splinter group of the Provisional IRA, following disagreement amongst IRA members as to the Northern Ireland peace process.