

Freezing

By Helen Raven

*A sequel to Sebastian's remarkable sequence:
Siren / Bound to the Mast / Going for the Shore / Going for the Shore Part 2*

For Anne

That morning Bodie had thought that they were laying the foundations for something that would support and shelter them for months and years to come. A week later he knew it had been nothing so solid. It had vanished, leaving no trace. Like condensation on a window, burnt off by the heat of day, taking with it any clumsy pictures drawn in the drops.

He blamed himself for the loss. There must have been moments when, if he had known the right words, he could have charmed that Doyle, made him want to stay.

Why had Doyle softened at all that day? Probably for no reason that Bodie had yet examined. Maybe he had just been... trying the mood on for size. Bodie had seen him doing that often enough; there were signs, if you watched him as carefully as Bodie watched him. It wasn't done for manipulation, not really - the simulation of spontaneity was so faithful that most of the time Doyle himself was convinced.

So. The mood had chafed, and they were back to normal. A good normal, by their standards. After the funeral they had talked, properly, about impossible choices, slowly working their wide experience into the beginning of a philosophy. Too abstract, maybe, but it had felt like an achievement, a demonstration of their fitness as partners. Apart from the less-abstract moments of that discussion, there had been no arguments.

But Bodie had a sense of failure. On some days the reasons for this seemed clearer than on others, but they never seemed laughable, or even ignorable.

He thought about Doyle most of the time. That was nothing new. Doyle must know; he'd certainly known in the beginning, when Bodie's yearning had been different, fiercer.

What Doyle was thinking, though...? About tactics, about Cowley, about a suspect's story - as always, broadcast so clearly that it baffled Bodie that people found Doyle inscrutable. *But about me? About us?* Silence, right across the dial.

Maybe it wasn't a question of tuning. Maybe there was nothing there.

Like... the way you don't think about breathing? You just do it. Maybe it's like that for him.

He watched Doyle's face, and wondered, and the months passed.

* * * * *

It was a Friday night, with the weekend free, and they had gone to bed early, unable to wait any longer. They lay quietly after the quick and basic start, Bodie holding Doyle, the back of Doyle's hand resting against the top of Bodie's thigh. Bodie made vague plans for the next stage, knowing that Doyle's plans would always be the more important.

But when the time came, Doyle just grunted lazily, smiled, and stretched extravagantly, presenting his body to Bodie's hands and mouth. Bodie was slow and thorough as he moved downwards.

"Oh. How'd you get this?"

"Mmm?" Doyle blinked, then propped himself up, and peered at the small bruise that Bodie had found on his inner thigh. "Huh." Bodie, looking up, saw the end of Doyle's immediate reaction: the mouth straightening from a smile; more blinking. "Dunno. Must have bumped into something." Not interested enough to be puzzled.

Bodie grinned. "You do know, don't you? C'mon."

A shrug. Offhand: "Really can't remember." Doyle lay back, half-closed his eyes.

Bodie tweaked the bony knee-cap, watching for the flash of teeth, then, done with teasing, bent again.

The bruise kept drawing him back. Must have been painful, that high up. Narrow escape, too. A man would remember that. Edge of a desk, maybe. Or scaffolding? Now where, since Wednesday...?

He drew his head back, letting more light past, and looked again.

"Who? *Ray*. Who was it?" His fingers were gripped into the flesh of Doyle's thigh. There would be more bruises in the morning.

Doyle wrenched his leg free. He seemed irritated, but not angry, and that was the confirmation for Bodie.

"Who?"

They stared at one another. Now Bodie could make nothing of Doyle's expression, had a brief image of him rifling through a wardrobe of moods with no strong preference. He imagined his own face was grim and determined.

"You don't know him."

Bodie swallowed, and sat back, still kneeling between Doyle's legs. His mouth seemed to be flooding with saliva. The sound of his breathing was loud in the room, moist and gasping.

"It's no big deal, Bodie. It was just..." A small shrug. "... fun. *You* wouldn't have turned it down."

Bodie gave no sign that he had heard.

Doyle watched him with quickly-growing impatience, then sat up, lifting his legs free. He settled against the pillows, arms crossed. "For God's sake, don't make such a production of it. I said it's no big deal. Won't happen again. Thump me if you're gonna thump me, and then let's forget about it."

Bodie shook his head vaguely, jerkily, as if trying to dislodge something.

“Well, then. Look, I *am* sorry. Make it up to you when you give me the chance. Now? OK?”

Bodie had started backing away across the bed, slowly and clumsily. His eyes were fixed on some point to the left of Doyle’s head. When his feet reached the edge of the mattress, he turned even more clumsily until he was sitting, back towards Doyle, facing the darkest corner of the room. Every cell of his body seemed slumped; his chin rested on his chest.

Doyle looked at him for a while, frowning.

Then, quietly: “Bodie. Come on.”

When there was no response, he gave a quick shrug, then stretched out again on the bed in an attitude of determined relaxation, legs crossed at the ankles, hands behind his head. In an ideal world his sunglasses would have been on his nose, riding low and allowing him to peer over their top with an expression of even greater detachment.

For a long time, neither man moved. Bodie’s breathing was still audible, but slower now.

The bed moved as Bodie levered himself to his feet. Doyle tensed slightly, though nothing showed in his face. But Bodie was still turned away from him. After a few seconds he moved to the foot of the bed and the armchair on which he always placed his clothes. He began to dress.

“Sleeping bag’s on top of the wardrobe. If you’re *determined* to sleep on the sofa.”

But Bodie was putting everything back on: watch, shoes, jacket, everything. Through his indignation, Doyle vaguely remembered the times when he had been the one running out. But that was different. This was his flat, not Bodie’s. In his own flat a man should be free to come and go as he pleases.

“Wish Cowley could see this. One of his top agents running away from a fight.”

At that, Bodie turned. “Tell him about it, Ray. Nothing stopping you.” The strain he had kept out of his face came through in his voice, though most of Bodie’s colleagues would have heard nothing strange. Doyle started to be afraid, with the fear of the unknown; he credited most of his life’s successes to the fact that other people were unable to control their strong emotions.

“OK, then, Bodie. Go and screw it out of your system. Don’t make too much noise when you come back.” Doyle was halfway under the duvet.

The bedroom door shut with a quiet click. Doyle froze, and listened for the other sounds, and stayed still long after Bodie’s car had become lost in the continuous traffic noise.

* * * * *

Bodie didn’t come back that night, or Saturday, or Sunday. On Saturday afternoon Doyle called Bodie’s flat, and counted fifty rings before he gave up.

Later he drove round. The silver Capri wasn’t in its usual space. Maybe someone else had taken that space, since Bodie had been away for so long. But the car was nowhere within two streets.

Someone gullible buzzed him into the building, and he stood listening at Bodie's front door for a long time before he knocked, knowing already that the flat was empty. He thought about breaking in; he had some tools back home. But he knew enough about the security system to know that it wouldn't be worth it.

So where was 3.7 then? Screwing it out of his system on the other side of town, as instructed? Probably. Best thing, really. Even things up. More than even, if Bodie was still at it more than a day later. When he got back he'd be feeling guilty, want to talk all about it. Doyle knew how it would go. It would be OK.

He didn't think he'd be seeing Alan again, though. Even if this all worked through to put him in a stronger position, it certainly hadn't been planned and he wouldn't do it deliberately. Maybe once he could have, but not now. He hadn't thought Bodie would find out. Hadn't thought of anything at the time except Alan's hope and excitement, and then his own pleasure. Bodie would understand, especially after this weekend.

* * * * *

On Monday morning, the missing car was in the car-park at CI5 HQ. Doyle searched discreetly for his partner, and found him in the rec room talking to McCabe, who was pointing to a page in the newspaper that was open in his lap.

Bodie looked up almost immediately, and nodded in greeting. He looked tired, as Doyle had expected. Everything would be OK.

"You got a coffee?" McCabe was not included in the question, but that was normal with 3.7 and 4.5.

"Mmm." Bodie swirled the liquid in the plastic cup. "'s cold, though."

Doyle took the cup and threw it away on his walk to the coffee machine. When he came back he sat on the back of the battered old sofa, almost behind Bodie's head, with one foot propped on the threadbare arm. He leaned over to look at the newspaper, but he wasn't really following the continuing conversation.

His upraised knee was just touching Bodie's shoulder, which was clad in the same jacket as on Friday night. Suddenly, strongly, Doyle wanted to touch Bodie's skin. Sitting here, he could simply reach forward and slide a hand under Bodie's collar, cup his palm around the moist neck, rest his fingers on the ledge of the collar-bone.

But he wouldn't, even if they were alone in his flat. The risk was too great. He knew his Bodie, knew what pathetic, desperate pleasure he would get from that touch, how his face would light up. Just imagining Bodie's reaction caused a sharp, restless pain deep inside Doyle, which made it a simple thing for him to fight these gentle impulses. He sat and waited for the day's work to begin, knowing from experience that the impulse would weaken once they were in action.

* * * * *

Two hours later they were still in the rec room. Doyle had taken McCabe's seat on the sofa, and he and Bodie were nearly ready to admit that they had been defeated by the Daily Telegraph's crossword.

Days like this, why didn't Cowley send them all home on standby? OK, keep a couple of teams around for immediate response, but when he didn't even have any make-work for them... Probably what he was discussing with the minister right now. Priorities. Lines of responsibility between departments. That sort of thing. CI5 knew what it was for during an emergency, but no one seemed sure what to do with it the rest of the time.

Bodie folded the paper the right way round, threw it towards the table. "How about a word with Len? 's been - what? - six months. Nearly eleven, he'll be at that bookie's by now."

"Yeah. OK." They hadn't seen Len in six months because he was near-useless as an informer; he believed almost everything he heard, and passed it on without judgement or commentary so it was rarely worth the effort of sifting through for the nuggets. Bodie had made the right choice if they were going to have to entertain themselves for the entire day - or the entire week.

Len was in the betting shop, as Bodie had predicted. They went with him to a quiet caff and took it in turns to nod and grunt in encouragement.

"What d'you reckon?" Doyle asked when they'd returned to the car.

"Dunno why we bother with him. Just an accident he knew about Carter that time."

"Makes him feel important. We've done our good deed for the day, mate."

"Great."

"Your idea."

"Yeah. Seemed worth it at the time. D'you reckon Markham was *born* with that godawful laugh? 's like fish landing on a tin roof."

Doyle snorted in amusement. "Nah. Take years of training, an offensive weapon like that." They exchanged a brief grin before Bodie turned back to the road.

Before they got much closer to HQ: "Where'd you get to at the weekend?" Doyle felt and showed only mild curiosity. He saw Bodie swallow. Apprehension, presumably. Guilt. As he'd predicted. "D'you want to talk?"

Bodie sighed. "I was going to wait until this evening. But I don't think we're gonna be called in. D'you? Not for a good hour or so."

How much did Bodie have to confess? "Uhuh."

Bodie took the next side-street, and then the next, and soon they were parked opposite a row of garages, with no one in sight.

"So where *were* you?"

"South coast. Near Hastings."

“Who with?”

Bodie shook his head, looking serious and sad. “No one.”

“What were you doing, then?”

“Walking. Thinking.” Pause. “About us.”

“Oh yeah? About what a worthless little slag I am?” Although this was not the scene he’d rehearsed, the words came easily to Doyle.

Bodie’s eyes were closed. “No. No.”

“Well, what else was there to think about, for God’s sake?”

Bodie arched his neck back once, then opened his eyes and turned towards Doyle. Doyle had seen him like this once before, had seen how that bleak courage lifted him into the high, spartan area of beauty. It had lifted them both, and now Doyle, grown used to the thin, fine air, could barely remember why he’d been so frightened of it.

“You were right, Ray. It was a mistake. All of it. I should have listened.”

“What was a mistake?”

“Us. Sleeping together. Living together. Or whatever we’ve been doing. You *did* tell me, I know.”

“But... What’s this got to do with me and Alan? I told you it was just a bit of fun. Won’t happen again. Nothing to do with... ‘us’. I can’t believe you’re taking it this seriously. Not with *your* track-record.”

Bodie continued without a change of tone or expression, and Doyle knew he would have to hear him out before they could start arguing. “You see, I was so sure that I was what you needed. *Had* what you needed. What you wanted. Dunno why, except...” He swallowed, hard. “Only just accepted... properly... that I’m not. Been so slow. Made it worse for you, I know. Anyone else would have... *seen* what it was doing to you. Let you go.” He tried to smile. “I’m sorry, Ray. But it’ll be alright now.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Are you saying you’ve gone off me ‘cos of what I did? That you don’t want me any more?”

“No.” Barely more than a breath. “No, I’m not saying that.”

“Then you’re doing this to get your own back. Why’d you have to make it so bloody complicated? We could have sorted this out on Friday with a quick fuck.” He glanced around the still-empty street. “Though you could have picked a worse place, I suppose.”

“Oh, Ray. Listen. I’m not... angry about... Alan? I’m not blaming you. You never made any promises. I know. It’s *me* I blame. You wouldn’t have done it if you’d really wanted me, if I’d been able to... to satisfy you. I mean, I don’t know why you ever said ‘yes’. Do you?”

Doyle was silent. Yes, he knew why, but Bodie shouldn’t ask questions like that, shouldn’t need proof. It wasn’t fair. Couldn’t Bodie guess what it would cost Doyle to speak?

And why couldn't someone as strong and brave as Bodie manage to make *himself* happy? What did he keep on trying to make Ray Doyle take the responsibility? Responsibility meant nothing without the idea of failure, and Doyle had been paralysed, as he always would be, by the knowledge that he would let Bodie down. This scene was bad enough, but how much worse it would have been if he'd ever made Bodie hope.

"You see? I reckon it was just convenient. Habit. Not bad enough for you to bother breaking. I always knew that but I thought... I thought - Anyway I can see now that it was a mistake. Stupid to carry on making it, eh? You'll find someone you really need, someone who deserves you. Had a run of bad luck, I know, including me. But it'll break. I'm just sorry for... sorry for mucking you about. Put you through a lot, I know."

Doyle was staring at him, carried on staring. Bodie met his gaze, broke it, met it again. Finally, Doyle said, "Why are you doing this, if it's hurting you so much?"

Bodie answered without a pause. "I'm not frightened of pain. I know how much I can cope with. What I'm frightened of is... what we'd become if we... carried on. I want to stop while I... still love you like this, like something good. Before I do something that - I just want to stop."

"You didn't cope before. Not for long. I don't think you *can* stop."

"It's different now. Back then... I thought it would work if we gave it a proper try. I know better now. And this time you won't... play with me. Will you? No more spur-of-the-moment showers in the middle of the night. None of that. Because if you do, I'll hurt you, Ray. Bad. Put you in hospital. You know."

"Yes." He knew. He believed. And that meant he had no way of getting Bodie back.

"It'll be rough at first. I know. But we'll get there. This time next week you'll probably be relieved, be asking me why I took so bloody long."

You said you wouldn't leave me. But that wouldn't work. Nothing would. Bodie had been thinking about this all weekend, had it all sorted out. He would have an answer to that too, something gentle and patient and utterly determined.

Doyle turned to look out of the side-window at the line of garages, hiding his face from Bodie.

How was he going to get through this? Bodie's presence next to him was unbearable and completely necessary. He wanted to go home and curl up under the bed. He wanted the pressure of Bodie's arms around him. He wanted to stop being Ray Doyle until this was over, just take a holiday and leave his body to totter on by itself.

What would happen to them? They would still be able to work together, he didn't doubt that; the team took care of itself, indifferent to the state of either of its members; it had proved that more times than he could count. But what about their friendship? If that was what it had been. It was like no other he'd had in his life. They *knew* each other - that was what it amounted to - and that sort of knowledge wasn't comfortable, wasn't cosy. Wasn't natural. Was never discussed on the squad. Or anywhere. No one had warned them. They were on their own. An Operation Susie.

“I thought I’d come around this evening. Collect my things. If that’s OK.”

No, it’s not OK. Never OK. Without turning round, Doyle said, “Come for dinner. Might as well. I bet you’ve got nothing at home except a bottle of ketchup and a packet of stale biscuits.” Bodie would think that this offer meant that he was taking things well. It didn’t. It meant that he was terrified of the future and was trying to charm it. If that didn’t work, he’d use another approach.

A light touch on his arm. Unseen, his face twisted.

“Thanks, Ray. It’s going to be alright, isn’t it?”

Oh, Bodie. He turned round. “Let’s get back, shall we? The Cow’ll be out of his meeting by now.”

* * * * *

The meal was easy. Perhaps they were both trying to charm the future.

Afterwards Bodie packed, while Doyle sat with a book and the last of the coffee, reading steadily as if nothing was happening. He joined Bodie at the door though. Only one suitcase. Strange. The flat had seemed filled with Bodie.

“Thanks for feeding me. I’ll get to the shops tomorrow.”

Doyle nodded, unsmiling. Pleas, offers were sliding around one another at the borders of his mind, while at the centre was the sight and smell of Bodie, and memories of touch and taste. Never again. Never again. He didn’t really understand that yet, and knew he was waiting for a reprieve. He had felt like this twice before in his life, and there had been no reprieves then. But this was Bodie. It had to be different with Bodie.

Bodie had opened the door. “Pick you up at eight tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

The door closed quietly.

“Bodie. Don’t. Don’t. You’ve got it all wrong. Bodie.” But Bodie might not have heard even if he’d been in the room. Eventually Doyle went back to his book.

* * * * *

Bodie knew he was doing the right thing. Sometimes he wasn’t sure about what the reasons were, but in all the arguments he had with himself or with an imaginary Ray Doyle, he never heard a convincing case for changing his mind.

They were both achingly unhappy. That was obvious. Murph (and others) had been unusually persistent in giving him invitations to the squad’s various piss-ups and sporting challenges; he didn’t think Ray was receiving the same attention, and that seemed so unfair and so sad. He accepted one invitation a week, waiting for the time - three months? six months ahead? - when such evenings would become bearable.

It was also obvious that Doyle didn't really understand what was happening; the expression that Bodie surprised most often on his partner's face was one of bewilderment. Well, why should he understand? Whatever he'd said (when half-stoned) he *didn't* have the same feelings. Before this love had clamped itself around his heart, Bodie himself would have dismissed as a fool or a liar anyone who told of protectiveness so immense, so selfless. And that protectiveness truly wanted the best for Ray Doyle, was insisting on this ending.

Even if there wasn't someone out there who was *perfect* for Ray, it wouldn't have been right for them to carry on. Bodie's resentments had been building up like a poison. Of course, he'd been aware of them before that Friday, but he'd imagined that the antidote existed in the real world, and that eventually he'd find it. But no, they would always be there, and he didn't want Ray touched by that sort of ugliness. Not any more. There must be many people who could simply accept Ray and be kind to him, who wouldn't burden him with their need and despair.

But to Ray, who had never been possessed by the protectiveness, or the resentments, it must seem as if Bodie had just given up in disgust. And that wasn't it, not at all. Bodie wished he'd managed to explain things better, but all the time in the car he'd been wanting to touch him, to show him directly that he was still loved; and being forced to use only words had made him feel separated from himself, as if he were trying to render whale-song using semaphore code. No wonder Ray had been indignant, aggressive, baffled. Later, when words felt more natural, he would try again.

He took care of the sexual longings with his hand. When possible he'd have a copy of Playboy open in front of him, an attempt to train himself, and replace the images that formed somewhere behind his eyes. It wasn't working.

Ray seemed to have the same problem. Often when they were alone on duty Bodie had seen Doyle grow erect inside the tight jeans. Sometimes he subsided, but more often, after some minutes of clumsily trying to hide his crotch, he would leave the room without explanation. Bodie didn't think Alan was responsible.

It didn't surprise him that Doyle was finding the parting difficult, although at times in his walks along the coast he'd imagined relief, even gratitude for a painless release. In many ways Doyle had benefitted from their affair: he'd received regular sex, company, security, devotion; and even if it had never been in the form he really needed, it must have been better than nothing.

Doyle never complained, though. At first, after the way he'd reacted that Monday, Bodie had thought he'd keep trying. Not with the games, the teasing, but with arguments, accusations, even tears. But he seemed to have accepted, and he had been silent. He might even be trying to make things easier for Bodie. Bodie watched the sad, resigned face, and saw a great, grim courage in it; this was the true Doyle, not that mass of insecurities that would flinch from a lover's touch. *No. From my touch. Just me. Look at him. Anyone could see that he can love. It wasn't that he was too damaged, too frightened. Look at him. There's nothing wrong with him, nothing at all. It was just me.*

When was it going to get easier? When Doyle found someone else? Months? A year, even? He tried to imagine a time when his feelings for Doyle would fade to a passionate comradeship, when they would feel comfortable drinking the evening away watching TV, or

crowded round the window on a stake-out, rating each bird who went by. He couldn't believe it would happen. He didn't want it to happen. What hell for Ray, though. Work wasn't supposed to be like that.

* * * * *

"Heard from an Army mate of mine." They were on stake-out in the car in Wandsworth, hoping a busy armed-robber would find time to drop in on his girlfriend.

"Ah?"

"Steve. Mooney. Sergeant, he was, when I got out."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Whiz-kid on surveillance, you know. Did all these radio courses. Got hooked."

"Got the bug, you mean."

"Hah. I'll tell him that. He trained himself, mostly. Had all these wild ideas. God, he could be boring when he got going."

"Practise on you, did he? Play the tapes on Forces radio?"

"xpect so. Not the radio, though, and never a word to us. I mean, he was *serious*. It wasn't a joke to him."

"Sounds a bit of a nutter."

"Steve was all right. Everyone's gotta be a bit crazy over *something*."

"So what's he doing now? Lying in a tunnel under the Kremlin?"

"Dealing with VAT and National Insurance the other side of the river. Started his own business a month or so ago. General security. He's hoping he'll get a name for himself, though, get a chance to try out those wild ideas."

"Lot of competition."

"Mmm. He offered me a job last week."

Finally he had Doyle's full attention. "You're not gonna take it. Are you?"

A shrug. "He was talking good money. Write my own job-description. I've had worse offers. What d'*you* reckon?"

Doyle was shaking his head.

"Bad move? Why? I think he'll make a go of it. Can't stay in the squad forever, can I?"

Still silent, still shaking his head.

"What, then, Ray?" Bodie folded his arms, and sat back.

After a long pause, Doyle said very quietly, "Why do you want to leave? Why d'you want to leave so much?"

Equally quietly: "I think it might be easier for us. It's been months, and... I thought we'd settle down to being mates, but it's not happening, is it?"

"You were wrong. You admit you were wrong." It was a challenge.

Bodie shrugged. "With you and me, I've been wrong about a lot of things. I've wanted to be, I suppose."

"But it doesn't mean you have to leave. You're so bloody stubborn. Blinkered. You always think you've thought things through, but you haven't, not really."

"Yeah, I know we could get re-teamed, but the squad's too small. 's a dangerous idea, Ray, especially for the poor sods we'd get partnered with."

"No. Admit you were wrong. Properly. It *wasn't* that bad between us. Better than this. You over-reacted, never let me show you I was sorry. You tried to make some point, and it didn't work out. Don't bloody run away again. Bring your stuff back. Move in properly this time. There won't be anyone else, I promise."

For a long time Bodie looked out at the street, face calm. Then: "Gotta admit, it's a new approach to seduction, Ray."

"Well, come *on*, then."

"No."

"Yes. Look, we're both miserable. Horny as hell. Lonely. Was that what you wanted? You made out like this was all for *my* good. Well, I don't want it, I want you back."

"Ray. You don't know how bad it was between us. You *can't* know. You're not the one in love. It makes you - the love make you - I dunno... *responsible*. Like you're looking after one of those Chinese vases. Sometimes... you have to accept that you're not the right person, that you're too clumsy, you don't know how to clean it properly."

"Jesus. I'm *not* fine china, for God's sake. I do this job as well as you. I don't need anyone to fucking take care of me."

"We all do sometimes. And I didn't mean *you*, not exactly. I meant *us*. Or my part of *us*. I was getting all twisted inside, worse all the time. You *must* have sensed that; it *must* have frightened you sometimes. Well, if we started again, it would carry on getting worse. I know it would. You've done your best with me, given it a fair -"

"You're not giving up for *my* sake, you bloody fraud. It's for *yours*. You got fed up with me. You just said it."

"No. How *could* I get fed up with you? I love you. You're all I could ever want. But... you don't love me - no reason why you should - and that makes it all wrong, for both of us. Isn't it obvious? Wouldn't you rather have someone you can love, someone you really *care* about?"

"I care about you. I want you back."

“In your own way, I’m sure you do. But not enough, Ray. Not enough to make it right for you to stay with me.”

“Yes. You think I don’t appreciate you. But I do. I *know* how good you’ve been to me. A .. a saint would have packed it in after a week, but you stuck it, and... and... Of *course*, I care about you. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me.”

Bodie reached over and rested his hand briefly on Doyle’s wrist. “So far, Ray. The best thing so far. You’re barely thirty. You’re easy to love, believe me. I’m just the start.”

“I want you to be the end, too. I want you. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Ray. Oh, Ray. I know... talking like this... I know it’s difficult for you, worse than me, and... I’ll remember. Always. But... it’s gratitude, or something. Not love. If you loved me - at all - you’d be saying... something... quite different.”

Vehemently: “I don’t see what it *matters*. As long as I want *you*. And no one else. And you want me. It’ll be better, I know it will.”

“I don’t. As for what it matters, well... I *said*, if you don’t feel it, you can’t understand. But... Look, there’s some new bloke on the squad. Likes them tall, dark and whatever. And soon enough he gets round to me. And he can’t believe anyone’d turn him down. So I say, ‘Look, you’re wasting your time. I’m taken. I don’t want anyone except Ray.’ And he says, ‘That skinny, foul-tempered little runt? God, you’d need a rest, I’d think. Do yourself a favour, man. Just for tonight.’”

Doyle whispered, “Yes. Yes,” but Bodie didn’t hear, wasn’t looking at him.

“Before I hit him, I say, ‘I did myself a bigger favour than *you* can understand when I talked him into my bed. He fits into my arms so neatly that anyone else would feel like a puppet, or a dummy from a shop window. The smoothness, the firmness of his buttocks, the way the flesh pushes back when I squeeze - I’ll be remembering that at the moment I die. Like, during the day, glancing over and seeing him concentrated on what Cowley’s saying, and knowing that we’ll be going home together in the evening, and that *he* wants me there. Like, coming awake, and he’s propped against the pillows looking down at me with that smile on his face, and I’m sure he’s just kissed me, and I feel like I’ve been sleeping on clouds in the sun, knowing he was there watching, thinking of nothing but me. No,’ I tell him, ‘you’ve got nothing to offer me. I’ve already got everything I could ever need.’”

Bodie stopped, drew a hand quickly and roughly over his face, breathed deeply. Doyle’s eyes were tight-closed, as if in a sustained flinch. Bodie watched him, and felt pity for both of them.

“Well, Ray, he’s got a partner. Who likes red-heads. Doesn’t go for bulk. Doesn’t waste time, either. What d’you say to him, then?”

After half a minute, Bodie decided there would be no answer. The conversation was over. In a few days, he’d ask again about Steve, keep it short. He leant back, rested one hand on the steering-wheel, and turned his attention to the job.

“I’d say, ‘No. No, I won’t. Because if Bodie finds out, he’ll be... he’ll be gutted. And I don’t want to do that to him.”

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn’t deserve it. An’ ‘e’s... ‘e builds things up, you see. Thinks he knows what this means, and that means, and you can’t put it right with him, he won’t listen. And if he...” Doyle swallowed. “I can’t lose him. I just can’t. It’d be like... It’d be like freezing to death.”

Silence.

“Not the same, is it, Ray? When those two compare notes, how long d’you reckon they’ll give us? Two months? As much as three?”

“You said you wouldn’t leave me. You promised.”

“I won’t leave. I’ll stay right here. I’ll call Steve this evening. I thought... I thought it might be easier, that’s all. I would only have gone if you’d said yes.”

“Call him from my flat. Come to dinner.”

“I’m not staying the night, you know. That’s over. Forever.”

“I heard you the first time. But we’re partners, aren’t we? Better start acting like it.”

“You think we can? You think it’ll work after... all this?”

“It has to. It just has to.”

* * * * *

After that, Doyle knew beyond doubt that he would never get Bodie back. Bodie had been thinking of leaving, had been ready to leave. If he did... They wouldn’t bother with the good intentions that are usually swapped when someone moves on. “*We must get together for a drink sometime.*” Not for him and Bodie. They would never meet again.

Bodie was probably right. It would be easier. But he couldn’t treat it as a kind of sum, like managing his monthly expenses. Not like Bodie seemed to. Or was that unfair? Was Bodie just braver? Able to face anything except not being loved.

But on that Bodie was so wrong. And *that* was why he mustn’t leave.

Why couldn’t he just guess? I told him as clearly as I could. What does he want? Bodie’s face at the beginning, their first night together. Bodie, who had no middle-ground between swagger and breath-held honesty. He wants what he’s given me. And he thinks it’s easy to give, because... because he doesn’t know how vulnerable he looks already. He frightens me. For God’s sake, I told him. If he loves me so much he should guess that I can’t... that I just can’t tell him any more.

Being angry with Bodie gave the only respite he’d found. Angry, mostly, that proof was so important to Bodie, that he thought it came cheap. That was an old anger; he had summoned it many times when he’d been trying to teach Bodie to be more realistic, to be more like he was supposed to be. And now Bodie had given up hope, and that wasn’t a relief

after all - it was perverse, and unfair. In the past Bodie *had* listened when Doyle risked... what he could. Not understood, of course, but taken some of it in, got *some* kind of nourishment from it. Now - he didn't trust, didn't believe, would never believe.

There was the pain of being close to Bodie, of having the power that Bodie had given him. And there was the pain of losing him, of seeing the power weaken. Each was paralysing in its force, hardly bearable. And they were joined together like two snakes biting one another's tails. Impossible. No way out of that circle.

He'd known by the end of their first month together that there would be no happy ending for them. It was Bodie's fault, of course. Why did he have to be in love? And why like that? If only it had been just sex. With, say, rough but sincere affection from Bodie... Doyle could have met that. They would have been fine. It could have carried on for years. Doyle's love wouldn't have asked for anything more, didn't need speech or proof.

But of course it had been the other way round. It had lasted longer than he'd expected. The ending was better, too; Bodie didn't hate him, was just weary, and wiser. He had made his mistake, and would not be repeating it. "*I care about you.*" "*You're the best thing that's happened to me.*" Once, at the beginning, such words would have melted him. Now they just brought a painful, patient smile.

Doyle would not get him back. He too had given up hope. But there are degrees of loss, and they still had something worth keeping. They were trying to be friends.

* * * * *

Birthdays in CI5 were either very public, or invisible; you stood the squad a round (or three) in the evening, or you kept your mouth shut. Doyle had always kept his mouth shut. Bodie spent a fortune and made sure he got it back over the rest of the year. Most years, Doyle stayed for a swift pint then nodded an unobtrusive farewell to his partner; Bodie had come up with many reasons not to be hurt by this.

This year Bodie's birthday fell on a Tuesday. "You going to the Marlborough next week then?" Work was finally over for the day, and Bodie was dropping Doyle off at the entrance to his block of flats.

Bodie shrugged. "Why not?"

"s like a barn. Dunno why we ever went off the Norfolk."

"Preston had a row with the landlord. I told you about it, didn't I?"

"But he's been away since September. And the Marlborough's the worst dump in the area."

Bodie frowned and sucked air through his teeth. Doyle watched him with the beginning of a smile.

"Except for Mabel's." It was simultaneous. They grinned at one another.

"OK. I'll make it the Norfolk, then. Dunno why you're bothered, though. We'll only see you for half an hour."

“You’re all gonna go blind, are you?”

“You’re never planning on sticking around the whole evening?”

“Well... Let you off too easy before. Reckon you owe me about ten pints.”

“Huh. Other way round. Since you’ve never even -”

“Not my fault. Never had a birthday. Was found under a gooseberry bush.”

Bodie looked at him assessingly for some seconds, then: “Yeah. I’ll believe that.”

“How long’ll you stay in the pub? Till closing time?”

“Shouldn’t think so. ‘bout eight, half past, Lucas’ll say, ‘Let’s go for a curry,’ and we’ll spend the next round working out who’s going and where and how to get there, and Gray’ll order three starters and four side-dishes and then say we should just split the bill six ways, and we’ll be the last to leave, and Lucas’ll be looking for a policeman to hit -”

“Just for old-times’ sake. I remember.”

“I remember how fed up you got last time, too. You don’t’ve to come. I don’t expect you to. No one does.”

“No, but - How about a change?”

“What? A Chinese instead? Lucas’ll sulk.”

“Let him go off for his own sodding curry. Don’t you ever wonder why -”

“What sort of change, then?”

“Well. *Doing* something.”

“Mmm?”

“You remember ‘Not the Nine O’clock News’? Well, that guy Rowan Atkinson -”

“The one with the face?”

“Yeah. Anyway, he’s in something at the moment. In town. Near the Aldwych. I overheard someone saying it was good. I’m sure we could get tickets.”

“It’s not gonna be one of those Russian things where they just wander round looking depressed?”

“It’s called ‘The Nerd’.”

“Hooh. I can hear the wrists being slit from here.”

“It starts at eight. Time for a few drinks, keep the lads happy. Once they get the scent of that curry they won’t even notice you’re not there.”

“They’re not coming, then?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“And you reckon we can get tickets?”

“I’ll ‘phone ‘s soon as I get in. Let you know tomorrow.”

* * * * *

“Yeah, no problem. All prices. I reserved a couple in the stalls. Pick them up tonight. Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“Nope. Looking forward to it. Wish you had a birthday. Treat you to a night at the dogs. Don’t look at me like that. ‘s fun.”

* * * * *

“God. I could cope with seeing that again.” Bodie was the passenger for once. “Come up for a drink, Ray. ‘s still early. When he turns up in that costume. And thinks they’re all in fancy dress. ‘Oh, I’ve got it. You must be a teacher. That’s really good. With the prissy bun, and those shoes.’ And when he...” Bodie lifted his hands to his armpits, made slow fanning motions, and bumped into the wall in the corridor, helpless with laughter.

“Shh. ‘s not *that* early. Yeah. And when he’s telling them how he’s an inspector in a chalk factory. ‘It sounds neat. But it’s really not.’ Wanna use that on the Cow one day. Or you. You’d do it better.” Imagining, he cracked up himself, leaning on the opposite wall.

Eventually, still giggling, they reach Bodie’s sitting room.

“Oh. A scotch. Just a small one.”

They talked about the play and about going to another soon, wondered which restaurant the lads had chosen and whether they were still there. Doyle refused a top-up, though.

“Nah. Not when I’ve eaten nothing but crisps and ice-cream.”

“Coffee?”

“Not tonight. Long day tomorrow, I reckon.”

“If Vigo comes up with the goods. Yeah.”

Doyle shrugged into his jacket and they walked to the front door.

“Thanks, Ray. That was a good idea. One of your best.”

Doyle looking at him, remembered Murphy’s raised eyebrows in the pub when Bodie had described their plans for the evening. Murphy thought an evening with Ray Doyle was more work than any number of heavy Russian dramas; he wasn’t the only one to think that - he was just the most obvious. There were plenty of people who wanted to rescue Bodie, stop him wasting his time on his twisted partner. But Bodie had never wanted to be rescued; Doyle had almost accepted that now.

“Yeah. Bodie?”

“Mmm?”

“Don’t put me in hospital. It’s not like that. I just...” Before Bodie could speak, Doyle stepped forward and pressed his lips lightly and briefly to the corner of the half-open mouth. “It was a good evening. I’m glad you’re still here. Happy Birthday.” He grasped the latch, turned it and pulled.

But Bodie was leaning against the door. Confusion was clearest in his face, some pleasure, maybe traces of fear. Doyle allowed his hand to be lifted from the latch.

“I wouldn’t put you in hospital. Don’t think I could. You don’t have to run away like that.”

“Yes, I do. There’s nothing to talk about. It’s over. You’ve made up your mind. I didn’t want to start another argument. I just wanted to... thank you. ‘re we supposed to pretend we’ve only ever been friends?”

Bodie didn’t reply immediately. Then, slowly: “I don’t know *what* we’re supposed to do. I guess it depends on which books you read.” Another long silence. “Maybe you *had* better go, Ray. I’m glad you - *It is* getting better, isn’t it? Easier.”

Doyle nodded. “Yeah.” Still terrible, but better than the first weeks. Not good now, though. He shouldn’t have kissed him. The smell of him. The feel of skin yielding to that split-second of pressure. And Bodie wanted him too. It was there in his eyes, not hidden as it usually was. “We’re doing OK, Bodie. We’ll make it.” Hand on the latch again. Bodie stepped away from the door. “What time sh’d I pick you up tomorrow?”

“Uh. Half seven.”

“kay. Night. Glad you enjoyed the play.”

“Yeah. Night.”

The door closed. Bodie lifted his hand to the corner of his mouth, closed his eyes, and stood very still, listening to footsteps, and then to silence.

* * * * *

The squad had some new members. 3.7 and 4.5 had been involved in a few training sessions, had made swift assessments of character.

“What d’you make of that Knighton, then? 2.4. Seems a useful sort of bloke. Won’t be long before he’s up to speed.”

Doyle had deliberately not volunteered any opinion on 2.4. The man had come from the SAS and Bodie usually went out of his way to avoid men who shared any part of his background. At first Doyle had wondered what scandal his partner had left behind him. Then he’d decided that Bodie was just concerned about his CI5 pose: the man who lived for the moment, to be taken entirely at surface-value, with a past that was treated as a joke, and a future that was never treated at all.

He’d taken to Knighton, though. Doyle should have seen it at the time, had just assumed that Bodie would never change in essentials. “Mmm. Bit of a plodder, maybe. But with the

right partner... Yeah.” Of course. Knighton was adopting the same pose; he was going to act as if he’d been *born* into CI5. The two of them would never embarrass one another with tales of the old days.

* * * * *

“Yeah, that was good, but - Hi, Ray - have you seen ‘The Dead Zone’? It was on TV - what? - month ago. Not his usual thing at all. No jungle. No helicopters. I mean, he was still playing a nutter, but - Wish I’d seen the end of it. There was that raid in Lewisham. It must have been more than a month, then.”

“Uh. Didn’t see it. Read the book though.”

“There’s a book?”

“Mmm. Stephen King. Quite short, for him. Wasn’t what *I* was expecting either. No monsters. No mutilation or anything. Just someone... who doesn’t belong anymore. Walken’d be just right for the part, now I think of it.”

“Ah. They’ve got it in my video place. I’d thought about getting it out anyway. You doing anything Saturday?”

“No. Good idea. Anything else you fancy seeing?”

Doyle got his coffee and wandered over to the window. Resting against the frame, with a foot propped on the sill, he could look down into the car park, feign an interest in the movements of his colleagues. Knighton wouldn’t expect him to butt in, perch on the back of the sofa; Bodie might, though. There were other conversations in the rec room, most of them closer and louder, but Doyle’s ears were tuned to Bodie, had been for years now.

What made it worse was the looks from the rest of the squad that he kept half-seeing. Because it was all so public. But how else could it be? 3.7 and 2.4 were friends. They went out drinking, watched videos, spent hours at the gym. Would you expect them to ignore one another at work, stage awkward, time-killing conversations, just to spare 4.5’s reputation and dignity? Well, Bodie might have thought about it, but how was he supposed to persuade Knighton? “*Ray’ll be jealous enough...*” “*You see we -*” “*Easier all round if -*” No. No way.

Knighton couldn’t have any idea of his part in the local gossip. After all, who would tell him? Even a hint. “*Look out for Doyle. He and Bodie are... close. Were close. He’s not happy.*” Sounds sinister enough, but a bit subtle for CI5. “*We always reckoned they were... you know.*” Yeah, that would be the style, but Knighton would just laugh it off as the wind-up every new face must get. Doyle himself wouldn’t have listened to *that*.

Unless... How could anyone relax with Bodie like that, laugh with him like that, and not want him? Finding him attractive, how could you stop half-way? Doyle couldn’t imagine it.

He turned away from the window and looked at the two men on the sofa, forgetting for the moment that he probably had an audience. What was going on between them? They touched... *There*. The back of Bodie’s hand batted Knighton lightly on the shoulder. But

they still kept some distance. Well, you wouldn't expect to see them sitting on one another's lap, but Bodie had this way of... getting very close. Or that was how he'd been with Doyle.

Bodie hadn't dropped him. It wasn't like that. Bodie hadn't changed at all. The time he spent with Knighton was time they'd have spent apart anyway. They'd been to a few more shows in the West End, Doyle fed Bodie occasionally, they talked. Doyle had told himself many times that he wasn't losing anything.

"... want one, Ray? Another coffee?"

Doyle returned to the scene in front of him. Bodie was on his feet, smiling. Had he *any* idea what his partner had been thinking? Did he even bother to wonder these days?

"Mmm." Doyle pushed himself away from the window-frame, and ambled towards the coffee machine, arriving there before Bodie.

"How does Knighton take it?"

Up the bum. Good and hard. Doyle's mind spoke the answer to his own question so quickly that for a hideous second he thought he'd said it aloud.

"Black. No sugar."

Doyle nodded and punched in the code.

"Thanks, Ray." Knighton had awful teeth, uneven, and very narrow. Though some people seemed to like the derelict-graveyard effect. All part of the wacky world of human sexuality.

Doyle returned the smile faintly, and turned to look for somewhere to sit, or lean. He didn't have far to look. Bodie was perched on the back of the sofa, and was obviously expecting Doyle to take the empty seat next to him. Oh, well. Have to get to know Knighton sooner or later.

Quickly, expression carefully casual, he glanced around the room, and saw conversations change direction very abruptly. That level of interest meant that bets had been taken. The bastards. When this was over he'd - No. It was already over. But they were still bastards.

"They've got you in Chepstow Gardens, haven't they?" Bodie had better appreciate this.

"How're you getting on with the shower there? I reckon it breaks the laws of physics."

* * * * *

It was a Thursday night, and Bodie had taken Knighton to see "The Nerd". Doyle had even joined in recommending it to him. And they'd asked him along, both of them.

Doyle wasn't sure now why he'd said no. Because he could never be happy watching them together, even though they included him as a matter of course? [He was sure now that Bodie must have told Knighton - Colin - some version of the truth.] Because he'd feel like a chaperone, imagining their hidden resentment, imagining their relief when they were finally alone together in Bodie's flat? But wouldn't that be better than sitting at home, imagining all that anyway?

He couldn't tell how far it had got. There was no point in comparing it with their... Affair was too small a word. Knighton wasn't the sort to force tears from Bodie. No desperate night-time visits, no ultimatum. It would be easy between them. Obviously. No crisis. No sudden change. It had probably happened weeks ago.

If only Knighton wasn't so ugly. Skin like a tortilla chip. Coarse, blond, scrubbing-brush hair. And his body was so solid and obvious. Not like Bodie's, which had drawn Doyle from the start by its secrets, its contradictions. Knighton looked like a South African policeman. Which was rough on him, because he was less the type than... well, Bodie. But he *was* ugly.

Did they kiss?

He imagined - often - the mouths meeting, Bodie's tongue sliding over that jagged line of teeth. He wanted to feel only revulsion. Maybe a twisting of jealousy. Why did he see their faces so clearly? How did he know that simple, confident happiness would smooth Bodie's features in that way? He didn't. He had never let Bodie look at him like that. But Knighton liked it. Knighton liked everything about Bodie, let Bodie do anything.

Now, Doyle saw Knighton push his fingers through the short, dark curls, heard the murmuring deep in his throat. Their mouths parted, remained linked for a brief moment by a line of saliva. Bodie's fingers on the buttons of Knighton's khaki shirt, sliding inside. Knighton, excited by this first touch from his Bodie, closing his eyes, arching forward, gasping Bodie's name.

"Colin." Doyle wasn't aware that he had voiced the word. "Oh. Colin." Bodie's skin, so pale, so firm. How many people knew that? How many had marvelled as Doyle had? Such little nipples, that turned such a gentle pink when the blood filled them. Knighton's rough hand pushed back the maroon shirt, traced the curves of Bodie's ribs. The big, flattened thumb with the cracked nail circled and rubbed, and the nipple peaked and became flushed.

Doyle stayed with them to the end and after. Many soft kisses as they lay sprawled on the floor, bodies too well pleased to complain yet of the hard surface or the abrasive carpet.

Did they know yet that they were in love?

Probably not. Bodie would think it too soon, and this easy kindness was too far from what he'd known of love. Knighton would realise it gradually, discovering one morning that he could never, ever give Bodie up. They'd stop touching so much after that, but they'd stand closer, share a cup of coffee without asking.

When will Bodie tell me? He won't love me by then. Not in the same way. By the time it's my birthday, he'll be able to get drunk with me, drape his arm around my shoulder like Lucas and McCabe do, like any other partners. He'll think he's done me a favour, taking away the love I didn't want.

Would they want to work together, be re-teamed? No, Bodie had too much sense for that. They were too similar. They'd make the same mistakes.

Will Knighton get jealous of me? Will Bodie ever tell him all of it? He'd... he'd get angry for Bodie, because he loves him. He'd wait to get me on my own and tell me what he thinks of me, and how he doesn't know how Bodie... And I'll look bored like he's talking about someone

else. And he'll never tell Bodie about it. What could he say? "You're right. He doesn't care. You wasted so much time and love on him." You don't do that to Bodie, not when you love him. And after that we'll ignore one another unless Bodie's around, when we'll act like friends so he's nothing more to blame himself for.

And by then the lads'll have got bored with watching long ago. They'll even have forgotten what it was like before Knighton turned up.

Was there anything he could do about it? Get Knighton out of CI5? Well, there was an obvious way, but... No. No. It wasn't even Knighton's fault. He'd lost Bodie before 2.4 had even had his first interview with Cowley. This mate of Bodie's, though. The surveillance freak. Maybe he had a cushy job for Knighton. If things hadn't gone too far between the two of them, if they were still at the stage when they could drift apart.

Doyle fell asleep imagining the two men getting back from the theatre, all in great detail: coffee and a drink, and another, and another, talking till one and later, Knighton making moves to say goodnight, but... somehow... never leaving. He dreamt about getting into bed with them: there *was* sex, but what he remembered in the morning was being close to Bodie, being allowed to touch him again.

* * * * *

"How was it a second time round?" Doyle asked when Bodie had settled himself in the passenger seat.

"Eh?"

"The play. D'it have the same ending?"

"Ah. Couldn't see any difference. Not in any of it. Just as good." A snort. "Colin was nearly pissing himself when he came out with that toilet paper. You should've come."

Would he say that if they'd gone to bed afterwards? Maybe. Who could tell with Bodie?

Knighton was already in the rec room. Well, he must have left before Doyle called for Bodie. If he'd been there. But Doyle had dreamt it; it had become part of his memory and he knew it was true.

Doyle asked again about the play.

"Great, yeah. Haven't laughed so much in... God knows. Nearly pissed myself when he came out with that loo paper stuck down... And when he was..." Knighton wafted the air around his armpits.

Doyle laughed. "What're you gonna see next?"

Knighton looked at Bodie. "Well, there's 'Noises Off'."

"Yeah? What's that about?"

It was Bodie who answered. "Some theatre group putting on a play, and they start having rows and..." He shrugged. "It sounded OK. Sort of farce."

“When’re you going?”

Knighton: “Wednesday, probably. You fancy it?”

Doyle didn’t hesitate this time. “Nah. Not keen on farce. All that panicking and rushing from one bedroom to the next. I mean, I dunno anyone who’s *got* a house that big. I’ll let you try it out.” No playing chaperone. He’d just decided. No interfering. Bodie was happy, for the first time in so long. He deserved it. He deserved someone like Knighton. *I’ve done enough to him already. Leave him. I can bear it. We’ve been through much worse.*

The work-day started soon after. Knighton was sent to the other side of town, and Bodie and Doyle swung into action as they (almost) always had, as if there was no one else in the world. No, they would never just be partners. Knighton might have Bodie during the night, but during the day he was Doyle’s, and everyone knew it. Doyle slept soundly that night.

* * * * *

It was several Wednesdays before Knighton and Bodie felt sure enough of their evenings to buy tickets. When the schedules were announced, and Doyle heard that flat note of disappointment in his partner’s voice, he would murmur a sympathy so muted it must sound like boredom.

He thought about them a lot. He thought about looking for some sex of his own. He did nothing.

“So what was it like then?” he asked on the Thursday, frowning against the brightness of the sun, trying to decide who that balding man by the chemists’ reminded him of.

“Better than the other one, even. Clever. Really. You should’ve come.”

“I told you I don’t like farce.”

“It wasn’t like that. Well - the play they were putting on was, but it was sort of taking the piss out of it. You’d’ve liked it. I’m sure. I wouldn’t mind seeing it again. Missed a lot of it, it was so fast.”

Doyle shrugged and gave a sceptical twist of the lips.

There was a slight pause, then: “You heard anything about this space-race film? About the first astronauts?”

“Just that it’s bloody long.”

“Well, ‘s a big story. Worst thing about being a Brit is knowing you’re never, *ever* going to get to the moon. ‘less it’s on some fucking package holiday when you’re ninety-seven.”

Unseen, Doyle raised an eyebrow. Typical Bodie. Why couldn’t he set his heart on something that money could buy? “Wanted your name in the history books, did you?”

“Huh. But sounds as if they’re got a lot of it right. Better than most documentaries. I was thinking of going Saturday night?”

Finally Doyle took his attention from the pavement. “Where’s it on?”

“Well. Notting Hill. Meet at Colin’s local. Go for a curry first. I thought.”

Doyle had started shaking his head before Bodie stopped speaking. “It’s just not...” Back to the pavement.

Bodie sighed. Once they were past the shopping district and on a clear stretch of road, he said, “You don’t like Colin, do you?”

Doyle met his eye instantly. It looked like genuine surprise. “That’s not true.”

A shrug. “You avoid him like the plague. Except when you’re being paid to talk to him.”

“It’s not *like* that. Course I like him. Nothing not to like. But he’s *your* mate. Don’t ‘ave to ‘ave me round all the time, do you?”

“Why don’t you come along on Saturday, then? C’n go to another film. A shorter one.”

You don’t suggest leaving him out of it, do you? Won’t change your plans that much. There was too much sadness for resentment. Doyle was aware as never before of the passage of time, of the past drifting steadily out of reach, of the future turning itself into the present. “I dunno. Just wanna stay in, I think. Vegetate. My brain doesn’t even want to be entertained. You ever get days like that?”

Bodie took his cue, and then they drifted into a silence that lasted until they arrived in Felixstowe.

* * * * *

The sun had long set by the time they began the journey back to town. Doyle had offered to drive.

“Nah. I’m OK. Unless you really want a change?”

“Uhuh.”

Silence. Doyle stared out at the silvery fields. Bodie turned the radio on low, found some bland music.

London gradually got closer.

“I do like Knighton, Bodie.” No emphasis or warning. As if the other conversation had taken place only a minute or so before. Doyle had obviously been thinking. Bodie became very still.

“Yeah?”

“You need someone like that, you know. Someone like him. After all this time.”

Bodie opened his mouth. Sodium light fanned across his face. And again. “You reckon?”

“Mmm.” A new song started on the radio. “Have you slept together yet?”

By that time Bodie was concentrating so intently on Ray that his own astonishment seemed distant to him, and was easy to hide. A quick swallow to ensure that his voice would work.

“No. No, we haven’t.”

“Ah. Hard to tell with you two, you know. Taking it slow, then. Yeah, I can see that. No need to rush, is there? Not with him.”

Bodie said nothing. He risked a quick glance at Doyle, saw that he was turned slightly towards the driver’s seat, studying the dashboard - if he was seeing anything.

“I didn’t want you to think... or him to think... that I don’t like him. Know it must look like that, but... It’s difficult... sometimes... to see you together. You know. You must have told him... enough... about us. Will you explain to him for me? Tell him I’ll deal with it, I won’t - Just give me a bit longer.”

A very long silence.

“Ray. There’s nothing to worry about. Honestly -”

“We’ll still be partners. Friends. I know. ‘s gonna be fine. I’m not worried. And you don’t have to work so hard to include me, and - You wanna be on your own. ‘s natural.”

Doyle gave a weak laugh. Very weak. “Took me a while to figure out what was happening. Must have surprised you too, eh? Turn up one Monday morning and there he is. Easy as that.” He was talking very quickly.

“And... I’ve seen enough of him... of the two of you... at work - without the curries and the films and everything... Well, I’ve seen enough to know that he’ll make you happy. The way he looks at you. It’s obvious. I see him sometimes... He’s noticed the way your hair curls just after it’s been washed. The way the smell of you changes as the day goes on. Hasn’t he? Everything. And he tells you. Can’t help himself. Though it’s obvious, anyway, that he thinks about you all the time.

“And when he tells you... he watches you so carefully. Doesn’t he? D’you know why? D’you know what he’s storing away for the daytime? He’s in love with the way every line of your face softens, and your mouth falls open like your lungs need more than air, and your eyes seem to be seeing... something else. And the way you don’t even know that it’s happening. You think you’re just smiling. Sometimes I see him look at you, and I know... he’s remembering.

“It doesn’t frighten him, you see. For him it’s... it’s wonderful. He *wants* it. He *likes* feeling his heart... turn over. Doesn’t frighten him. Not at all. You see, he knows what you know - that it’s all going to work out. No need to rush, even. He’ll keep you happy. Always. And he knows it. s’...” A loud swallow. “You’ll always... soften when he... Always think you’re just smiling. He’ll always be what you want. What you need.

“I’m -” His throat jerked. “I’m glad for you. Will you... tell me when you move in together? Or whatever. I’d like to know. Like to... get you a present, or something. Thank him for - Will you?”

“Ray?” The word was a croak. Bodie cleared his throat. “Ray? Come home with me tonight?”

In the dim light, he saw Doyle shake his head.

“Please. Please, Ray.”

“s too late. Don’t wanna cook. Or drink. Or anything. Tomorrow, maybe. Come round. Do you a lasagne.”

“Tonight. To stay. Please.”

He heard Doyle turn in his seat. “What d’you mean?” Puzzled, and too tired to work it out right now.

“Come home, and sleep in my bed. Let me hold you. Let me love you.”

“But it’s over.” A protest.

“No. I don’t think it is. After all.”

“Knighton. Colin. You can’t do this to him. Think. You don’t mean it.”

“I’m not doing anything to him.” Finally, Bodie laughed. “I wouldn’t even think of it. He’s a good mate, but - God, he’s ugly. Don’t you think he is?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why would I lie?”

Pause. “Because -” Pause. “To - I dunno. But...”

“I couldn’t love anyone but you. You know that, Ray. Deep down, you know that.” A swift change of tone. “Why’d you have to come up with this on the middle of a bloody motorway? I can’t even look at you properly. Wait till we get home. Please.”

“You said it was over. I don’t understand wh...”

Slowly: “You really don’t, do you? Don’t you ever listen to yourself, Ray? When we get home... Well, ‘s gonna be hard to convince me I didn’t hear - Yeah. Leave it till then.”

Doyle said nothing, did not insist that he was going back to his own flat. After some ten miles had gone by, he leaned forward and turned up the radio so it was a voice, not a whisper. Bodie nodded to himself, and kept his eyes on the road.

* * * * *

“D’you want that drink after all?”

Doyle shrugged, or so Bodie guessed from the movement of his back.

“Small scotch? Coming up. Siddown, Ray. Get comfortable.”

Doyle sat, but he was tense, frowning.

Bodie handed him the tumbler and joined him on the sofa, leaving a foot or more of distance. It *was* late, and Bodie wasted no time.

“Why does it frighten you? When I look at you and... don’t hide how much I love you. Why?”

No reply.

“Ray. There is nothing whatever going on between me and 2.4. He hasn’t talked to me about my hair curling, or my aftershave or anything like that. If he gets all dreamy-eyed he’s thinking about his *dinner*, not remembering...” He shook his head several times.

“OK? So what you were saying back there in the car. It’s not about *him*. And me. It’s about you. Why does it frighten you? You’re not leaving until I get an answer.”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know. Why?”

Doyle shook his head slightly and bowed his head over his glass.

“Do I really smell different?”

A nod.

“Which is best? Which time?”

“Umm. Evening. Maybe.”

“Yeah?” Encouragingly. “What’s that? Beer and sweat?”

“All sorts. All heated up about the same. ‘s like... a surprise casserole, I suppose.”

“Hah. Bodie the Slo-Cooker.”

“And morning. Simpler. Mint ‘n’ the sea-shore ‘n’ spirits. And night. Well...”

“Why does it frighten you, Ray?” Nearly a whisper.

“Because... you want me to make you happy. And I can’t.”

“But... when I smile at you like that... isn’t it obvious that you already *do*?”

“It won’t last. I can’t... encourage you. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Why won’t it last? No -” Interrupting himself. “I remember. Colin. You said, ‘He’ll always be what you want.’ That’s it, isn’t it? You think... I’ll get tired of you or... or *something*’ll go wrong.”

A slow nod of the head. “You trust me too much. You shouldn’t, I’m... not like you. I wanted you to... learn to be reasonable. Not to depend on me to - For God’s sake, I told you this from the start, didn’t I?” Finally, they were facing one another.

“Yeah, but... I thought you were warning me off because you couldn’t be bothered. Because it was all just a nuisance. And that’s not it at all, is it? Is it, Ray?”

Pain. Unmistakeable. “Don’t, Bodie. Please.”

“How long has it been love, Ray? How long?”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.” Doyle was almost shouting. “You don’t -”

“Yes. You told me this evening. When you tried to let me go. Gave me -” An audible swallow. “- your blessing. That’s... how I feel about *you*, Ray. It’s love.” A deep breath. “So. How long?”

Doyle turned his face away. Muttered, “I don’t know. Always.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me? Why?”

“I didn’t want to... I didn’t want to make things worse for you.”

“When you let me down?”

Eyes closed, Doyle nodded repeatedly.

“I could cope with it. Don’t you think I’d like a *chance* to cope with it?”

Shaking his head, now.

“Ray. You own my heart already. The gap’s...” Unseen by Doyle, he pressed his fist to his chest. “... sealed up. I can’t take it back. It’s too late. Whatever you do. Or don’t do. And I’m *not* frightened of pain. What I want - more than anything - is to have you love me... and show it sometimes... for as long as it lasts. And... I don’t care how long that is. Or how it ends.” A long silence, then, very quietly, “Do you believe me?”

Doyle lifted his head, met his partner’s eyes. “Yes.”

“And what do *you* want?”

A deep sigh. “I don’t know.”

“Shall we try again?”

Doyle opened his mouth slightly, then closed it again.

“You’re still frightened?”

A brief nod.

“What it I... hide what I feel? Tone it down. Till you get used to it.” It was intended as a serious suggestion, but there was so much scepticism in Doyle’s raised eyebrow that at the end he could only smile weakly, and shrug.

But Doyle returned the smile.

“What do you want, Ray?” Gently.

“You.”

“Can you do it? Show me... sometimes, that you love me. Give me... a bit more.”

“I want to. I want to be able to. I *do* believe you. But it’s been so long. I don’t - My throat, it’s -” He raised his hand to his larynx. “Everything says, ‘Stop. No. Don’t.’ Freezes.”

“Panic. ‘s classic.”

“Um. Yeah, I -”

“If it was work, what would you do? To... unfreeze yourself? I know you’ve got techniques. I’ve seen you.”

“Think of something else. Break it up into little steps. Don’t look at the whole thing.”

“Mmm. What’s the first step?”

It could hardly be caused a pause. “I want to kiss you.”

“Yes.”

Bodie leaned forward to take the glass from Doyle’s lap, but Doyle was there before him, taking his out-stretched hand, pulling him to his feet. Long fingers cupped his face. Wide green eyes met his. His heart was pounding. Doyle didn’t look frightened. Not at all.

Their lips met, warm and gentle, and they opened to one another as if it was the first time.

The End