

Silent Star

by Elizabeth Holden

Doyle came into his flat, and switched on one light. It wasn't enough to relieve the winter gloom, but he paid no attention. He threw himself on the chesterfield, put his feet on the arm, and wondered how he was going to get through the evening. The week. The month.

The season.

He'd like a drink, but drinking alone wasn't much fun. It wasn't as if he could drink with Bodie. It wasn't as if he could do anything with Bodie ever again, and where was the fun in that?

Sooner or later, he'd have to snap out of this funk and get on with his life.

Why?

It was just like Bodie, to die right before the fucking holidays.

Bodie had been a risk-taker, they both were, but he wasn't supposed to die.

Bodie had been flying in the Hebrides when the drug smugglers had shot down his plane six days ago. They'd heartily proclaimed their triumph and the death of Bodie and his Scots co-pilot. Search and Rescue had done their bit, in bad weather and with little hope. All they'd found had been the Scot's body, downed and drowned in heavy seas, and the torn remains of his parachute.

Doyle had wanted them to go on with the search, but it was too late, and the weather bad, and the seas some of the roughest in the world.

"Looks as if he went down with his plane," said the investigators.

The Ministry had complained about the loss of the plane. Cowley went about with haunted, tired eyes.

And Doyle could hear, over and over, the calm voice of his partner, the pilot, at the controls of the burning craft as it fell, recording for posterity. "Losing altitude. The tail is not responding to controls. We are losing fuel. Mayday." He had sounded calm, as if reading a weather report, but there was a tension in the voice that betrayed him to Doyle's sensitive ears. Bodie knew he was dying, and he didn't want to go.

And he had said, in a voice almost too low to hear, "See you, sunshine." The experts puzzled over that. Doyle did not tell them it was for him.

No reproach there. None. And Doyle had been so bloody stupid. He knew that, now.

There had been that time, that night in June after Dick Sutherland had died. They had been depressed, angry, drunk, spending the time together at a pub because that was what they did in those days, whether times were good or bad. The weather had been clear, it was summer, so they were in the garden at the back of the pub, where there were big wide umbrellas over the tables and little paper umbrellas in the more colourful drinks. They sat at the back, by the rhododendrons, and let the darkness come over them. The garden was lit by tiny Japanese lanterns. They ignored them.

He let Bodie kiss him. Not a sad, maudlin kiss, either, but a sensuous, forbidden kiss, there in the dark of the pub's back garden. No one was there to see them, so he'd let Bodie do it. Didn't push him away, or even laugh at him. Just let him. Didn't even try to pretend it didn't turn him on.

Bodie looked sad, frightened, confused. He'd known Sutherland better than Doyle had, he'd worked with him in the SAS too. They'd both liked and respected the man, who was as brave as they come, though you'd never see him admit it. He had a wife, two kids, and a dependent sister.

Death was not rare in CI5.

Bodie knew it could have been either of them, and his kiss, unexpected as it was, was a reflection of that. All those silly cliches about life in the face of death, love being part of mortality, arousal as a response to violence - if you wanted to, it was easy to rationalize that kiss, and Doyle's reaction to it.

Besides, this was Bodie, whose middle name was sex and whose reaction to anything at all was to shag someone if he could. He probably hadn't been thinking about it, but those hurt blue eyes had shown need and Doyle had accepted the kiss as an act of sympathy. Bodie was his partner: if Bodie needed comfort, Doyle could give comfort.

Hell. Who was he trying to fool?

Himself, perhaps, that day, when he'd made all sort of excuses for the response he didn't want to admit.

Bodie had said, "Doyle - " His voice cracked.

"It's okay," said Doyle quickly. "You're just stressed out, that's all. Anyone might've done it. It's only a kiss."

Then Bodie's expressive, anguished gaze had faded into something more familiar: amusement, the facade they all knew so well. "You ought to put up a booth at the fair," he'd said. "Lips like honey and all. No wonder you get the birds."

"As if you don't," said Doyle, irritated. He wasn't sure, at the time, what had irritated him. He

wiped his lips, wishing somehow that there was something he could do with them.

"Gotta go," said Bodie. He rose.

"To the loo? No wonder, all that beer."

"Home. Sleep."

"Well, don't drive, mate."

"Naw, I'll take a taxi." But for a moment Bodie didn't move, he simply stood looking at Doyle.

Looking at him, as if assessing something, or trying to remember a forgotten detail.

"What's wrong?" asked Doyle.

"Nothing," said Bodie, and left.

That was all. An irrelevant incident the night Dick Sutherland died, and maybe Bodie had a premonition of his own death. It hadn't seemed so at the time. Hadn't seemed like anything at all.

But the memory of the kiss had stayed with Doyle, and was strangely difficult to shake.

The memory came back to him too, when they'd been at that party Anson held for the Americans.

Anson did up good parties, invited only the hand-picked lucky few, and everyone talked about them for months - until the next one. Gave people incentive to stay on Anson's good side, Doyle reckoned. It seemed he wanted some favour from the CIA, because he'd invited several operatives.

So they were at Anson's and had been for hours, and it was getting on past midnight, and they were tiddly, which was right and proper under the circumstances. Anson, Chandra and Kelly were playing a complicated kind of poker that involved bizarre pledges on bits of coloured paper. It was Fourth of July, and Anson had things rigged to explode when they least expected it. One of his guests was a demolitions expert, Anson said, but he wouldn't tell them who it was. They tried to figure out which one it could be, but he was incognito, or covering, which all CI5 men knew how to do very well indeed.

Doyle was sipping a glass of beer and leaning over the chesterfield, watching the play. Someone joked about doing the same thing next year. Hell, thought Doyle, who knows if they'll both be alive next year?

At that depressing thought, Bodie came and stood beside him. The room was crowded and he could feel Bodie's body heat, and through the black silk shirt he wore. Doyle himself was in a red T-shirt with his gold chain, and jeans.

Bodie had to lean closer to Doyle to make himself heard, because an explosion had just gone off inside a fake lamp and everyone was screaming and blaming someone else. Then they started testing all the lamps that weren't on, just in case they were fakes, too. Someone loudly suggested that turning on a lamp might cause an explosion. There was much laughter, and some turning off of lights.

Bodie said, against the ruckus, "You look knackered."

"Not really," said Doyle non-committally. And he thought as he said it how nice it was to have Bodie standing so close, and what a good mate he was, not like some for whom a CI5 partnership was just a working relationship. Bodie was a true friend, too. He might have said so, even though Bodie'd never let him hear the end of it - he'd had that much to drink - except he made the mistake of putting his hand on Bodie's arm, enjoying the feel of it, warmth and muscles dormant under smooth silk, and he realised at the same time just exactly what it was he was feeling.

Getting turned on by Bodie was outside of enough. He was horny and drunker than he'd thought and it was getting late and he'd been on a session with Macklin that morning, it was enough to twist anyone around the bend, even if they weren't on that damned frustrating case where Alenkov wouldn't talk and Rivest wouldn't stop.

"Ray?" said Bodie. He'd picked up on something, God knew what, and Doyle took his hand hastily off Bodie's arm and said, "I'm going to find a bird, mate. Which one d'you think I should aim for?"

"Leslie," said Bodie promptly. "The typist?"

"She was eyeing you earlier."

"And you didn't tell me!"

"Fancied her for myself, didn't I? But you can have her."

Doyle grinned. He knew there was a reason he'd thought so highly of Bodie. "You're a friend," he said, and wandered across the room to chat up Leslie from typing. Later, when they were starting to get a little friendlier, he felt Bodie staring at him, and he looked up sharply. He didn't need to search to find where Bodie was sitting, just looked at the right place. He was talking to a Beta Squad rookie Doyle didn't know and a woman from MI5 that Anson wasn't supposed to invite to his parties, but did anyway.

If Bodie had been staring at him, he had looked away in the second Doyle had looked up. He was saying something to the woman, smiling slightly, in that way he had that always meant trouble.

He was breathtakingly beautiful.

Doyle kissed Leslie, feeling extremely happy.

The next morning, he tried to think it out. Why was Bodie getting under his skin like that?

No answer presented itself. It was midsummer, hardly the time for spring fever. He put it down to drunkenness and stress, and dismissed it.

Still ... Bodie was uncommonly attractive.

This new bodily awareness made him notice something else over the next month or two. Bodie was watching him.

Whether he had imagined it at the party, he did not know. Nor did he know why the memory of the event, which may or may not have happened, stuck so firmly in his brain as a puzzle to be solved. He remembered the sudden inexplicable lust he had felt for Bodie much more clearly than he remembered his more tactile explorations of the lovely Leslie, or how he'd got on with her later.

But even if Bodie had not been watching him at the party, he watched him at other times, in other places. Not just when he had to watch him to synchronize some strategic move on a case, or to communicate something with a nod of the head like "time to go now" or "you move in first" or "you handle this one gently, I'll play it tough and threatening". No, he just sometimes - particularly when he thought Doyle didn't know - watched him.

It made Doyle self-conscious. It made him feel warm.

He found himself unconsciously inviting Bodie's stare. Positioning himself. Trying to guess what Bodie was thinking, or feeling. Trying to catch his attention.

Eventually, he took the direct approach. They were lying on a roof, rifles at the ready, backing up a paramilitary action on a grocery store where two women, a baby and an old man were being held hostage.

"Why do you watch me sometimes?" asked Doyle.

"Eh?" said Bodie, staring through the lens at the cross-hairs of his rifle.

"You watch me sometimes. Especially if you think no one's looking."

"Yeah," said Bodie non-committally.

"Well, why?"

"Do you mind?"

"No. Course not. But I wondered why."

"Why d'you think? Why do people stare at other people?"

"I dunno. Because you think I'm going to do something?"

"Don't be an idiot," said Bodie. "You aren't that naive." And he turned from the sights of the rifle and looked straight into Doyle's face.

For once in his life, Doyle coloured.

"Oh," he said. Then, "Really?"

"It's as real as it gets," said Bodie. He turned back to the rifle, focussing his attention on the store windows. The soldiers were moving closer, with tear gas.

What is? wondered Doyle. But he turned his attention back to the matter at hand, shelving his curiosity till later.

They saved the women, the child, and the old man.

Had he misunderstood Bodie? The next day, in the car, he said, "What's real?"

"Dunno," said Bodie. "Where'd that come from?"

"Yesterday. On the roof. You said it was as real as it gets."

"Well, it is." Bodie sounded somewhat defensive.

"What is?"

"Oh, Christ, Doyle. You know what I'm talking about."

"No, I don't," said Doyle. "Or maybe I do. I'm not sure."

They were driving to Chen Li's restaurant, not to eat, which was a pity and a waste, but to see if he was harbouring three illegal Chinese spies who had a hold over him and his family. The CI5 agents feared they would never be able to eat his garlic stir-fry duck again.

Bodie didn't answer.

"C'mon, Bodie," said Doyle. "What's got your tongue in a knot? Explain what's going on in that block of wood you call a head."

Bodie parked the car with neat precision at the kerb. Stopped the motor. Sat for a moment. Then said, "You really can't tell, can you?"

"Not if you don't tell me."

Bodie took a deep breath, one hand on the steering wheel. "Well?" cajoled Doyle.

Bodie said, "It's the wrong time and the wrong place and the wrong circumstances entirely, but I can't help that. Can't help any of this. Wouldn't change things if I could. I love you, Ray. I love you - " He stopped, searching for words. "I'd give you the world if I could. That's what I meant was real. Loving you is the realest, truest thing I ever felt."

Doyle wondered if he should have kept his mouth shut. He should have stopped Bodie from talking, not forced him to it. Wrong time, wrong place, just - wrong.

"I know you don't feel that for me," said Bodie. "I know you prefer birds. I know you don't want me sexually. But," he smiled briefly, "I hope you don't mind that I like to look at you sometimes."

"No," said Doyle. "I don't mind." His voice sounded as if it belonged to someone else.

"You let me kiss you once," said Bodie quietly. "It meant a lot. Thank you."

What in hell was he talking about? Doyle wondered.

Oh, that. The kiss in the pub. Right.

Before he could speak again, Bodie had left the car, slamming the door behind him. "Come on, Ray, let's talk to Chen Li before his friends spirit him away."

So Doyle followed him into the restaurant, and they learned what they needed to learn from Chen Li, and life went on.

Doyle did not raise the subject because there was nothing more to say. Was there?

In the December darkness of Doyle's flat, a telephone began to ring. His mind on the past, Doyle heard it only as a nuisance, nothing that concerned him. Nor did he notice that the flat was cold, because he hadn't bothered to turn on the heat, or that he was still wearing his

leather jacket with the sheep's-wool lining, intended for outdoor wear. He didn't care.

Doyle had always known Bodie loved him, he supposed. Not that he'd ever thought about it before, or seen anything romantic about it. He hadn't thought Bodie wanted sex with him, though he hadn't considered the possibility, really, except for his drunken thoughts at Anson's Fourth of July party. No, he hadn't considered it in those terms, hadn't known Bodie was so inclined.

But he knew the love was there. Saw it, didn't he, when Bodie protected his back? Saved him from Preston, came back to the house to rescue him in that ridiculous boat when CI5 and the bigwigs had set him up as fall guy for some faked Arab diplomat, had refused to let him die after he'd been shot by Mayli. He'd always thought it was Bodie's strength of will, not his own, that had pulled him through that time, though Bodie said he was wrong.

It wasn't such a leap, then, to think that Bodie's love included other dimensions.

He remembered the kiss in the pub. Bodie had been drunk, sentimental over Sutherland, stricken by fears for his own finite existence. It struck them all that way, at one time or another. Nothing so odd. The kiss hadn't meant much, Doyle knew that.

It had meant enough that Bodie had remembered it after all this time, and thought enough of it to thank him.

Doyle remembered that kiss, too. The softness of Bodie's lips. The gentle touch, tasting of tenderness. Probably also tasted of beer, but Doyle couldn't tell, he'd been drinking it too. The kiss instead had a flavour that was sweet and mysterious, primal and important, like the ocean, or wind. He couldn't pin down the thought: it was formless and vaguely frightening. What did Bodie have to do with the ocean?

He remembered that Bodie had touched him when he kissed him, too. A finger under his chin, the finger warm, because it was summer, and a hot night. No woman had ever touched him in quite that way. The hand had dropped to his shoulder, the fingers wrapping around it.

A kiss, and he had responded to it. Out of kindness? No, be honest. Anyone can respond to anyone, anything can spark a sexual response, if the guard is down and the body is relaxed and lonely. Instinctive response. Could have been anyone.

But it was Bodie, and Bodie loved him.

He worried it through, but his feelings wouldn't come clear. What did he want?

For some reason he remembered when he had fallen in love with Ann Holly, an

uncharacteristic fit of melodrama that seemed the height of stupidity in retrospect. Opposites attract, he supposed.

The thing he remembered was the look on Bodie's face when he had learned that Bodie had been following them, investigating her. Doyle had been furious. He'd yelled at Bodie when he really should have been yelling at Cowley. He accused him of bugging their bed.

Bodie had been hurt, though he hadn't tried to justify himself. He'd only been carrying out Cowley's orders. But there was something else in his eyes too, that went beyond the surface situation. A hint that he hurt for Doyle's sake, and hurt because of Ann.

He'd been there, at the end. He always was. Doyle could count on that.

He was there always, until that day in mid-December when the stupid prat took a small plane out over the North Sea, and rode it to the sea-bed.

Bodie had been dead for six days. Six interminable days.

Doyle lay on the chesterfield, his mind on Bodie and the past. He had not moved nor undressed. He wasn't hungry, so he didn't bother eating. He could eat later.

It had been such a simple bloody case, the one Bodie had died pursuing. The cause he had died for.

Drug smugglers. Easy to take a plane to check out the island an informer had told them about, where the dope was hidden in a stone cottage.

No one anticipated that there were smugglers at the cottage already, with the firepower to shoot a small plane out of the sky before it landed.

The weather had been clear and mildly windy. He had been able to get a fair distance on willpower and air currents, fighting against the impossible, seeing the end coming, letting his co-pilot jump first, speaking calmly into the radio. "Losing altitude. The tail is not responding to controls. We are losing fuel. Mayday." And then: "See you, sunshine."

That was a stupid thing to say. Bodie, confirmed atheist, didn't believe in an afterlife. He would never see Doyle again.

Doyle, who was agnostic most of the time, wasn't so sure that death could make Bodie's proud spirit disappear just like that. Nothing could go so fast. He thought that something of Bodie's essence must remain, floating on the heavy waves, soaring in that windy sky. Couldn't be gone, not Bodie.

He thought he might go up there to that island with the stupid name and the cottage with the

drugs, and pay his farewells to Bodie. It would be something to plan for, something with a purpose. Perhaps if he had gone up while the search was going on - no, it was pointless. They had told him so. Might as well suffer the loss of a partner in London as on the dark Scottish waters.

Bodie had never wanted a funeral, and there was no body to bury - or, more accurately, it was buried under a deep and unforgiving sea and had been for six days.

Cowley knew that funerals were for the living, not the dead, so he had scheduled a memorial gathering, and had asked Doyle to say a few words. Doyle had said he would. It was scheduled for tomorrow, or the next day, or some bloody thing. He had changed his mind about saying anything. What was there to say? "He kissed me once, and I can't forget it."

No, let Cowley say the clever, respectful things. Talk about what a good agent he had been, which was true. Talk about the humour and the dedication and the courage in the face of danger. Bodie had once confessed to many dark fears, but he seldom let them show. If he feared death, no one could tell from his actions. That was courage, all right.

Doyle couldn't bring himself to say anything like that. He couldn't think of anything he could say about Bodie. *He told the best dirty jokes. And the worst.*

Or perhaps: *Drunk, he could recite all the verses of Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis". Sober, he knew better than to try.*

His hair was soft as silk.

What would the Cow say to that? He couldn't deny it, it was true.

Women knew it by instinct. *He was the sexiest man in CI5. No woman could resist him, but I could.*

A telephone was ringing. He pulled a pillow over his face, hiding in the darkness behind it until the sound stopped. Maybe it was Cowley, with another one of CI5's endless emergencies. Maybe the memorial service was tonight, and they wanted to ask why he hadn't turned up. Maybe someone wanted to sell him double glazing and he'd missed his chance to tell them what to do with it.

He had raged, alone in the dark. He had wept. He had punched the wall and screamed. He had curled up in a ball, and tried to stop the memories.

None of it cured the lump in his throat that did not go away. Nothing reached the searing pain of being alone, without Bodie.

After a while, there was a numbness, where once there had been sorrow and hunger and fury. He nurtured the numbness, because it was a relief from pain. He felt as if Bodie watched him still, but that must have been a dream, because he opened his eyes and he was still alone in a cold and dark flat that always, now, would be cold and dark however many lights he lit and however many fires he burned.

Funeral pyres. Every flame was a funeral pyre. *Oh, Bodie. Come back.*

Doyle lay, there on the sofa, one leg hanging off and the other propped on the arm. He had sought oblivion in sleep, but it did no good. It offered relief at first, but it led to nightmares. Images of water, of imprisonment in water, of drowning in a metal cage as Bodie must have drowned, alone in the dark.

And now it was he who was alone in the dark.

The first night, six days ago, he awoke screaming, frightening the girl he was with. But he said, "There, there, it's only a dream," and held her, comforting her as if the dream and the fear had been hers, and she had snuggled against him and they had both gone to sleep.

That was when he still had the energy for women, or the optimism to think that sex would make him feel better. It didn't. Instead it opened raw wounds. The second time he'd done it after Bodie died, that second night in a world without Bodie, he couldn't even keep his erection, and he started crying all over the girl, in great gulping sobs. It was the first time he had been able to cry, and the only time he had cried in front of anyone, and the humiliation was almost too much to bear.

That was five nights ago.

Nothing mattered any more but Bodie, and Bodie was dead, and the love he felt had died with him.

A day later, and he didn't even care about the humiliation. All he felt was the terrible loss. *Bodie.*

Kate Ross had tried to help, but he had asked her to go away. "I want to mourn him," he'd said. "I want to grieve. I don't bloody want to feel *better*. He was my partner, and he's dead."

"You had a partner die before," said Kate Ross, and he hadn't realised at first what she was talking about. Then he realised she must have meant Sid Parker.

Stupid that she made him explain. "Yes," he said patiently, "but this time, it was Bodie." She

left him alone then with his sorrow, and he was thankful.

Bodie had been alone, in the darkness under the waves, when all that skilful piloting could do had been done, and the messages on the radio were heard by ears too far away to help. Perhaps he had jumped with a parachute, following the Scot, whose name had been McGregor, Alex McGregor, and who had left family to mourn him. Perhaps he had gone down with the plane, knowing that a parachute would do nothing but prolong the experience of drowning by seconds or by minutes.

Doyle dreamed of it, Bodie's plane being shot down. He could see it vividly in the sky, coloured lights in the darkness against a backdrop of bright stars. Then the burst of gunfire and the plane exploding into flames, becoming a star itself, a falling star, as it shot through the sky to its watery grave, where the ocean swallowed the star and made it part of itself.

A stupid dream: it had been daylight when Bodie went down, and the plane had probably not exploded, though no one seemed to know for sure. There had been no witness except, presumably, the man who shot him down, and he was dead, caught in the gunfire when they had taken the whole covert cell into custody. Or if he was one of the survivors, he was not admitting to the murder of a CI5 agent.

For three days, Doyle had pursued the records of the rescue attempts. When that had been fruitless, he had pursued the case, Bodie's last case, until it was cleared up as tight as a sailor on leave.

After that, what was there?

Memories. Bodie's voice: " ...The streak of yellow down your back."

Running all the way, sir.

Liverpool for the cup.

Alone and palely loitering. Shakespeare? Probably. Bodie'd liked that line, anyway.

Now it was Doyle who was alone.

It filled him with bitterness, that he had wasted Bodie's love. All that love, like a volcano inside him, kept banked because he knew - he thought - Doyle didn't want him. He should have said - what could he have said?

Something. Anything. Or nothing at all. He could have just taken Bodie in his arms, kissed him as Bodie had wanted to be kissed, could have taken him to bed and showed him that he wasn't oblivious, wasn't cold.

But he was. Had been. And now it was forever too late.

He got a piece of bread from the kitchen. He took a bite. It was stale, so he threw it out. There was a tomato that wasn't bad, so he ate it. And some milk from the bottle that hadn't gone off. He noticed he was wearing his coat still, and took it off. Then he realised it was cold, so he put it on again.

He didn't know what day it was. He did know that Bodie had been dead for six empty days.

He went back to the chesterfield, and lay on it. Maybe he could sleep here. He couldn't sleep in his bed, he was too restless, and besides, the bed gave him bad dreams. Dreams of fish swimming by the cockpit, with Bodie's face in the window, his hand against the glass.

Regrets ran through him like a shower of water. Regret for what he'd failed to recognise: his own need for Bodie. Dare to say it: his own love for Bodie. Love that Bodie gave him without stint and without asking for return.

Sins of omission are much more painful than sins of commission, especially when it is too late to undo the harm. Bodie had died thinking himself unloved.

Bodie had liked to touch him. He'd known that before he'd ever known the extent of his feelings.

He could have touched him more in return, but he hadn't. Never really thought about it. It wasn't that kind of friendship.

It could have been.

He thought how strong and warm Bodie's hands were, and he wanted to scream because he had never discovered what they could do, or what his hands could do to Bodie in return.

Ever since July, he thought. Ever since before July, June was it? Ever since Sutherland died, I've known I wanted him, I knew in my heart of hearts that I loved him. And if that wasn't love I saw in his eyes, it was the closest thing that exists.

All that wasted time, and now nothing.

He thought of the last time he had seen Bodie. Bodie'd been about to fly up to Lewis to pick up the small plane that would take him to the island where the smugglers might be. Doyle had driven him to the airport, but hadn't gone inside with him. They'd been talking about some bets they'd made on the horses in the car. Bodie had won ten pounds on a horse called Antelope Ranger. Doyle had lost a quid on Heavenly Beacon. There was another ill-fated star, that horse, with a star in white on her forehead.

So they'd talked about the horses, Doyle complaining about his luck, and Bodie had said,

"Cheer up, mate, I'll buy you a pint when I'm back."

"I'll hold you to that," Doyle had said, as Bodie got out of the car.

Bodie had waved, and disappeared into the airport, while Doyle drove off. There had been no obvious premonitions, no spoken good-bye. Not until later, the calm voice on the radio. *See you, sunshine.*

He would never see him again.

He wouldn't want to have known that Bodie would die on that day, at the age of thirty-one, alone in the water. But he wished he could have known that their time was limited, that if he didn't love him then, he would never have the chance. Never be able to touch that silky hair again, never feel that hand touch his arm or his shoulder or his arse, never share a laugh or bet on a horse or be saved from likely death or be irritated by the perverse humour, so like his own.

Never feel the touch of those lips again. Just that once, that incredible time, when he had been too stupid and too stubborn to admit how much he liked it and wanted it. He should have dragged Bodie back to the flat and to his bed, instead of saying, "Anyone might've done it. It's only a kiss."

Only a kiss. The most treasured moment of his life, now.

Bodie hadn't forgotten either. He too must have cherished the moment, remembered the way it felt and the way it made him feel.

It had meant so much, and Doyle had dismissed it as a mistake. Stupidest thing he had ever said to anyone.

He could have righted the mistake at Anson's party, or that day in the car, or any time on any day at any opportunity. Instead he had let it slide, ignoring what he felt, denying Bodie what he wanted desperately and hopelessly.

Sometimes, Doyle hated himself.

There was daylight for a while, or what passed for it: dim light on a dark winter's day. Doyle didn't feel like shaving. He took off his coat, put on a sweatshirt, made some attempt to brush his hair, and ate a piece of bread, which didn't seem so stale today. He even put a little marmalade on it, to cheer himself up.

It didn't work.

He lay down again in the living room. He decided to listen to some music, but two minutes into his favourite album he turned off the music again, unable to bear it. Shivering with pain, he lay still in the growing dark.

Bodie, I loved you. Why couldn't I say it? Why didn't I say it?

He had bought Bodie a Christmas present. A cricket sweater. The box was on his floor, wrapped not because he was efficient but because he got the woman at the shop to wrap it, for 50p, for charity.

And now the rest of the world was getting on about Christmas.

He tore the wrappings off the box. He pulled out the cricket pullover, holding it up. Bodie would have looked so damn good in it. He held it against him, white wool against his cheek. "Bodie," he said, but there was no one to answer.

He lay on the sofa again, thirsty but not inclined to get up for glass of water. He folded the pullover like a pillow, resting his head on it as if it were all that was left of Bodie. And Bodie, missing Christmas this year, had never even seen it.

There was a knock on his door. He ignored it.

He pulled the pillow over his face again. It was a warm, silent, comforting pillow. In its darkness he could follow the silent star that was Bodie's descent, that was the spirit of Bodie, disappearing into the void.

No doubt the knocking stopped, because after a while there was silence. He relaxed again. Let the world leave him alone, he'd done all he could for it, he and Bodie.

After a few minutes he realised that it wasn't silence. The knocking had stopped. He could hear something, like mice.

He didn't have mice.

It was like a dog, scratching quietly at the door. He didn't have a dog either. He didn't quite have the energy to be curious.

Then the door opened.

A light came on, too bright for his eyes. He covered his eyes with his arm. Bodie said, "Bloody hell, Doyle, why didn't you answer the damn door?"

That was when Doyle knew he'd lost it, because Bodie was dead, and here he was, hearing his voice, hallucinating that he'd come back because he wanted nothing in the universe so much as to have Bodie come back.

The hallucination, however, seemed to want an answer, so he said, "What?"

Bodie walked into his field of vision. "You look a right mess," he said. "What'd you do to yourself?"

It looked like Bodie. Talked like him, walked like him. Was dressed in Bodie's clothes, looking neat and proper and clean, in a casual sort of way. Doyle sat up. "What?" he said again. And then, stupidly, "Bodie, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," said Bodie.

Which was when Doyle started to shake. Bodie put a hand on his shoulder, and that stopped the shaking. Doyle put his own hand over Bodie's hand, felt the warm fingers, just as he had imagined them, strong and substantial as ever.

Bodie said, "I didn't want to surprise you like this, but none of us could reach you. You didn't answer your phone, you left the R/T in the car, and in the end I had to pick your lock."

"You're alive," said Doyle. He looked up at him. Bodie seemed uncommonly blurred by the tears in his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm alive. Got myself to an island. Spent six days shivering in the rain and I was never so hungry in my life. You try living on roots and berries, mate, on a godforsaken rock that won't grow anything bigger than a matchstick. They found me two days ago, fed me, bundled me back home, put me into the hands of the witch doctors. There's nothing wrong with me that a little rest, food and sex wouldn't cure."

See you, sunshine.

"You're back," said Doyle. He took his hand away from Bodie's hand, still feeling the touch on his tingling fingers.

"Had to come back: I owe you a pint, remember?" When Doyle didn't answer he said, "Yeah, I'm back. Are you disappointed?"

His tone was joking, but Doyle's eyes filled with tears and suddenly the moment was very, very uncomfortable.

To break the silence, Bodie said, teasing, "Why are you tangled in someone's old cricket sweater?"

"Isn't old," said Doyle. "It's new." He was having some difficulty speaking clearly. He unwound the garment from his arm. He stood, thrusting it into Bodie's hands. "It's for you. For Christmas. Happy Christmas. I unwrapped it for you. "

"Christmas?" said Bodie, as if he had forgotten it was December 22. He looked at the crumpled wool, then back at Doyle's face. "Ray?" He put the garment down and moved his hand to reach up and wipe Doyle's tears from his cheeks, but pulled his hand away as if embarrassed by the motion.

So Doyle reached for his hand again, and it was real, all right. Real and strong and warm, just like he'd remembered. He kissed the palm gently and softly, and put it against his wet face and said, "No. I'm not disappointed. Kiss me."

Bodie didn't move, so Doyle had to do it, holding him with both arms and kissing him as they had kissed that night in the pub, only with intent, and neither of them was drunk now.

It was as good as he remembered. Better.

"Ray?" said Bodie, looking confused, as if he was the one doubting reality now.

"Got a second chance," said Doyle. "I'm not going to waste it. Love you, Bodie."

Bodie touched his chin, as he had before. "You haven't shaved," he said. "You look hungrier, colder and more miserable than I did when they found me. You're still the most beautiful person I ever saw."

"Owe you a lifetime of loving," said Doyle.

"You don't owe me anything." Bodie sounded alarmed.

"Trust me, Bodie. I love you. Let me show you."

"*Let* you?" said Bodie, a strange light appearing in his eyes. It might have been joy.

Doyle pulled him more tightly into his arms, relishing the feel and smell of him. He said, "This is as real as it gets. Bodie, let's not blow our chance this time."

In Bodie's embrace, Doyle could feel the tension easing, the fear dissipating, the sense of grief and loss disappearing into thin air.

"On my rocky island," said Bodie, into Doyle's hair, "all I could think about was you."

Doyle smiled, and suddenly life was full of promise again.