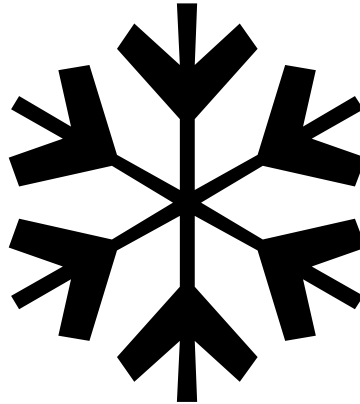


BENEDICTUM

❄️ *A DICKENSIAN CHRISTMAS* by M. FAE GLASGOW ❄️



WARNING: THIS ZINE CONTAINS SAME SEX, ADULT ORIENTED MATERIAL. IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN.

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This zine is dedicated to my long suffering husband, LDM.

—CKC

And also to Freddie Mercury.

—MFG

INTRODUCTION



Why, we have been asked, begin a new zine series? Why *Bene Dictum*? Well, to be truthful, we delight in wordplay and we had been toying—naturally—with producing something called the “Dick” series. In particular, the time of year, late October, suggested *A Dickensian Christmas* and we were off and running. Still, just plain “Dick” didn’t seem elegant enough, we needed a better overall title. Ergo, *Bene Dictum*—well put, well, said, and above all, well dicked. Who could resist? On to the next question: was it possible for one writer to produce an entire zine of Christmas themed Pros stories? “Dead easy,” said M. Fae. The Glaswegian is nothing if not completely confident in her ability to produce. (Now 118,540 words of fiction later, she’d rather not have to write about Christmas for a while. Say, at least for another year.)

Now if you’re familiar with the tone and content of a lot of what we publish, then you may be a bit surprised by this zine. Generally it is lighter and more romantic, but you’re not going to overdose on sweetness and syrup (“Baaah Humbug!” is full of *sturm und drang*). Many of the stories are what I like to term ‘cozies,’ (‘cosies’ if you prefer the Scottish idiom) pieces where the focus is on the main characters (Bodie and Doyle of course) to the almost total exclusion of any secondary characters. In addition, the action is often confined to one setting or two, particularly a setting which cuts our heroes off from the outside world, isolating them physically and emotionally. In these circumstances the writer is forced to concentrate on psychology, motivation, and character development, something the Glaswegian excels at.

In addition to the ‘cozy,’ there are a number of themes which seem to run through most of *Dickensian Christmas*. Many of the stories deal with coming to terms with oneself, with one’s own sexuality, and with love. M. Fae has also reworked or provided her own take on a number of popular Pros fanfic topics: Christmas (!), CI5 parties, undercover operations, teddy bears, and elves.

And then there is “Snowbound” which deals with partner rape. Or it doesn’t deal with partner rape. It depends on which version you read; both are included. If rape offends you, read only the alternative series.

Enjoy the zine!

Caroline K. Carbis, editor

SHOPPING DAYS

OR

DOYLE

THE COPPER FELT^{UP}



We open with a humorous tale wherein our hero longs for a bit of tail or at least wishes someone would wag his for him. Undercover and in the roles of a lifetime, here are Bodie and Doyle as you never expected M. Fae to write them. Or perhaps you did. Be warned: never tell our Scottish lass that she would never pen a particular sort of piece. She will, of course!

A fairy-tale castle in the gritty kingdom that was London, the shop glowed and glistened with thousands of lights. Twinkling brightness festooned the ornate stonework, transforming Victorian stolidity to Disneyesque airiness, mile-long strands of light limning the structure, forming reins to hold the giant glory of Santa's Sleigh in place. The sleigh itself was green, the reindeer all in gold, save for Rudolf's beacon nose of red, of course, and the great piles of presents that shone with every colour under the rainbow. But the front seat was unlit and unoccupied, for as every child and empty-pocketed adult knew, Santa wouldn't take to his sleigh until Christmas Eve. Until then, he was inside Grace's, sitting amidst heaps of cotton wool snow and under screeching cascades of children.

Imagine now, in the early darkness of winter's

day, if we were to walk along the rain-drenched streets until we reached this beaconing display, we would catch sight of ourselves in the puddles of reflection, and turn to see ghosting images of ourselves in the great plate-glass shopping displays. We would, beguiled or repulsed by the over-abundance displayed, fight the hordes or join the crowds, depending upon our desire, but it wouldn't matter: contained in the press of people, eventually we would be swept to the great double doors, to be blasted by dry heat stifling after the cold dampness outside. Then we would give in, go inside willingly, to hoard the heat against the nagging ache of winter outside, to drink in light as antidote for darkness falling so miserably early.

Displays reaching to the ceiling, glitter and glister and gilt, all the colours and brightness of Christmas, clouds of streamers and clusters of

balloons, red sweaters and black stockings, blue slippers and tartan blankets, white china and multi-hued books, all of this would bedazzle us, intoxicating us to wander around with our necks stretched to see more, eyes widened like children.

Unless, that is, we had some of those children with us, tugging at our hands, pulling at our sleeves, trying not to cry or trying to scream as loudly as possible, depending on what tactic would work best on us to make us give in and spend some more money, to bring Christmas—so long awaited, so desperately needed—here today and not a week from now. Any present, but the bigger the better, children feverish with the need to possess and own, uncomprehending of why they simply must have this, or this, but infected with the acquisitive lust of the season.

And we, willing to pay anything for a minute's peace in this so-called time of Peace, would say 'yes, yes', and hushing the hiccoughing whimpers, would drag them up the escalator, woollen gloves sodden from the rain and odorous from the drying heat, to the third floor where Heaven awaits the young. Toys, as far as the eye can see, and hidden away by the seductive colours and shimmering cellophane, price tags lurked, waiting to cause heart-attacks at the till. Dolls in fantasy dresses of froth, Cindy and Tressy with long blonde hair and acres of net, Action Man in khaki drab ready for combat or in dress uniform ready to be decorated for exceptional bravery. Bikes, red and pink and snow white, prams of pink and lavender, or navy blue for practical practising mothers. Motor cars in enamel paint, toy trains with daddies clustered round, brand new walking-talking dolls with mummies crowded round to watch. And there, where all the signs lead, where the great long queue winds its sinuous length of fidgeting children to the painted quaintness of an indoor North Pole, was Santa himself, red suited and white bearded, sitting on the huge white chair, a child on his lap, a sack of giveaways to one side, the endless stream of children to the other.

With a sigh, we would deposit our child at the end of the queue, signalling to Santa's Helper that here was another one to watch over. And without a backward glance, we would hasten off to do the last of our shopping, the children's toys and father's presents, something for the woman down the street who was never too busy

to help us out.

A weight off our shoulders, we'd smile with relief and leave our child behind, safe in the capable hands of one of Father Christmas' elves...

Not that the elf viewed it quite the same way. The elf was here on sufferance, extreme sufferance, in his opinion. He was supposed to be undercover, but in this costume he felt more exposed than covered. What a rotten fucking way to spend his first Christmas in CI5! the aggrieved thought soured through his mind. But the Cow had spoken, so here he was, undercover to see if the highly-placed informant was right: that this toy department had been targeted for bombing by your friendly local terrorist organisation. Keep your eyes peeled, he'd been told. More like keeping his arse peeled in this bloody outfit. But he was keeping his eyes as peeled as he could, watching the few parents who insisted on staying with the children, keeping track of every package in sight to make sure that it wasn't one of the nastier presents that they'd been warned would be in the shops this Christmas. He knew it was a job that had to be done, but he was positive that he wouldn't have been stuck doing what he was certain was based on a duff tip, not if he hadn't argued with Cowley about that last job. 'So you think you were too important for that last bit of work I sent you on, do you? Well, you'll be perfect for this one', the old bastard had said. In fact, the elf, as he twisted and turned to tug at the back seam of his green tights where they were sliding between his nether cheeks, would have much preferred to have been playing Scrooge. Now that, given his current surfeit of both children and professional holiday cheer, was a role he'd be perfect for.

Tangling round his legs, there was a wandering child, fist stuffed in its mouth, wails threatening to erupt past the stopper, eyes liquid with impending weeping to go with the wailing.

"Oh, shut up," he snapped, forgetting for a second he was an elf, until stricken big blue eyes reminded him, yet more tears welling threateningly. "All right, all right, don't start crying about it, you'll get to see Father Christmas."

His voice obviously moderated far less than

childhood's ears needed it, the tears erupted along with blood-curdling howls. Doyle winced, then tugged his elf's hat more firmly over drooping curls and dropped to his knees beside the bawling five-year-old. "What's the matter, little boy?" he asked in his best North Pole sing-song, glad that no-one he knew could see him.

"But I don't want to see Father Christmas!"

So what the fuck are you doing standing here, you stupid brat? Doyle thought to himself. Mindful however, of both Cowley's dire warnings and the newly-transferred sales manager's even more immediate direness, he said, really quite sweetly under the circumstances: "But Mummy brought you here to see Father Christmas so that Father Christmas can give you a nice present."

It wasn't doing the trick: the crying was getting louder, threatening to touch off a chain reaction of horrifying proportions. An entire after-school queue of over-tired, over-excited children the Friday before Christmas, and every single bloody one of them looked about to burst into bloody tears. Doyle heaved a great sigh and picked the screaming brat up, thinking of all the nicely vicious things he would like to do to it as a runny nose was wiped on his shoulder. Noisily, and wetly. Swallowing his lunch for the *n*th time that afternoon, he patted the brat on the back, thinking longingly of thumping it hard enough to give it something to cry about. "There, there," he said, cringing at his own mawkish tone of voice. "Why don't you tell the Nice Elf—" he winced again, a sudden, appalling image of himself in green tights, red peplum jacket and green elf's hat flooding his mind, "all about it. What's the matter...poppet?"

The words were choked out on a rising wail. "But my mummy said I was going to see Santa Claus!"

Just what he really needed. Christ, kids nowadays, not even knowing that Father Christmas was Santa Claus—and at five years old, for fuck's sake. And he knew the little monster was five: he'd become quite an expert at judging the snivelling, snotty brats' ages over the past week. "Now, don't you worry, Father Christmas is just another name for Santa Claus so you'll get to see him just like Mummy said." And if he smiled much longer, his face was going to crack. But not, perhaps, before he

cracked this ankle-biter one across *his* face.

Listening to what he was thinking, he forced himself to unclench his jaws and put the child down in one piece, unbruised and limbs all still firmly attached. "Tell you what," he said as he crouched down beside the woe-wrung face, "you come on with me, and I'll take you to see Santa right away. How does that sound?"

That, of course, was the right thing to wipe the tears from the face and have the smile come out. It was also the right thing to say to have great wailings and moanings and gnashing of teeth from the hordes of other cherubs waiting impatiently for their turn at Santa Claus, Father Christmas or whatever you wanted to call him. Doyle wanted to call him bastard, prick, swine and a few other choice words, but in deference to young ears, he'd stick to Bodie. Snatching the once-crying five-year-old up again and escaping by the skin of his teeth out from under the baleful glower of four of Santa's other elven helpers, Doyle wove and dodged his way to the head of the queue, where Bodie sat, resplendent in all his glory: snowy white beard, red suit, black boots and belt, and that enormous jovial booming laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Ho ho ho your bloody self, Doyle thought with real animosity, barely stifling a yelp as one well-worn welly came perilously close to his green-clad groin. It was all right for Bodie: all that jammy sod had to do was sit there and pretend to be interested in whatever the monsters were whispering and then fob them off with a present that wouldn't last ten minutes before it fell apart and the parents were left with screaming brats. By the time the beasts—sorry, delightful little children, he corrected himself, half convinced that the sales manager could read minds from such close proximity—got to Santa, the tears were forgotten and all the little angels could think about was getting their grubby little paws on their present.

Acutely aware of the penetrating stare of Captain Peacock the sales manager, Doyle sidled up to Father Christmas, neatly elbowing two extraordinarily buxom elves out of the way, quite spoiling Bodie's lovely scenic view. "Excuse me, Santa," he said as one child slithered off the great red lap and before the next child could be popped on with assembly-line effi-

ciency, “but could you take care of this little boy first? He’s been very good, and he was ever so frightened that he wasn’t going to get to see Santa. His mummy hadn’t explained to him that Father Christmas is just another name for you.” Like rotten fucking lucky bastard, he thought behind his falsely bright smile and tinkling elven voice.

“Ho, ho, ho!” boomed Bodie, red felt trimmed with fake white fur reaching out to take the welly-booted five year old from Doyle, an enormous grin visible behind the froth of beard as one of the boots managed to catch Doyle in a very sensitive spot with a very insensitive kick. “Well now,” Santa Bodie boomed on, while Doyle stood cross-legged and cross-eyed, muffled swear words streaming from him to the tune of ‘Deck the Halls’, “there are lots and lots and lots of little girls and boys just like you,” a very Clausian tweak of a rosy cheek and a Fatherly pat of fair hair, “and if I only had the one name, it would get all worn out, wouldn’t it?”

Doyle thought he was going to be sick, and not from the subsiding pain of the welly-boot. Shit, but Bodie was nauseating when he came over all avuncular like that, as if he had a dozen kids of his own and adored them all as well as every other brat ever born.

The little boy wasn’t looking entirely convinced that this man with the big voice and the big beard and the big hat didn’t come under the heading of Strangers and should therefore be bitten and run away from. “Mister Elf...” the small voice trembled.

“What is it, poppet?” Mr. Elf asked with a smile sweet enough to garner glacial approval from Captain Peacock, and give the rest of the world diabetes.

The little boy had abandoned his claims to being a big boy and his bottom lip was as ominously wobbly as his voice. He gave Bodie the kind of look usually reserved for dentists with drill in hand. “Is he a bad man?”

It was tempting, oh, it was so sorely tempting, but manfully, Doyle resisted, hitching his tights up and tugging his jacket down instead of shouting YES at the top of his lungs. “Of course he’s not a bad man. I wouldn’t take you to a bad man, would I? And your mummy left you with me and she wouldn’t leave you with a bad elf,

would she?” Fucking hell, it was contagious! He was beginning to sound like Father fucking Bodie and Enid Blyton rolled into one.

“Noo,” the boy said, looking from green and red elf to red and white Santa, thence to the titillating sackful of toys. Father Christmas made a funny face and a funnier noise and said, “And what do you want for Christmas, little boy?”

Avarice and greed won where decency and niceness had failed. The boy smiled like the angel on top of the tree, clambered gracelessly up onto Santa Bodie’s lap and proceeded to recite a list that was, as far as Doyle was concerned, satisfyingly long. He grinned, not nicely, and more like a banshee than an elf.

“Mr. Ray, would you come with me a moment, please?” the pseudo-upper class voice of the hastily transferred sales manager intoned, fondly-remembered days in the military barely leashed in the clipped tone.

Doyle groaned, pointedly ignored Bodie’s self-righteous tut-tut-tutting and followed on behind Captain Peacock like an obedient child, in stark contrast to the shuffling mob that was waiting in an ever more disordered line. “Yes, Captain Peacock?” he asked as soon as they were behind the stock-room partition, grabbing the opportunity to haul his stupid green hat off and soothe flattened curls, blissfully unaware of the visceral sexual lure of his lean body.

Captain Peacock cleared his throat hurriedly, straightened his tie and visibly got a grip on himself—his reactions, not his...prurient interest. The legitimate cause for bringing Mr. Ray the Nice Elf in here was dragged out to cover the very illegitimate reasons and Captain Peacock’s voice was very stern indeed. “That manner of facial expression is not the sort of thing we want our young clients exposed to, you know.”

“Yes, sir,” Doyle said, no sir, three bags full sir, he thought, paying Captain Peacock no attention whatsoever whilst indulging himself in a good two-handed scratch of a scalp that had never suffered the indignities of a hat before.

“And do stop that! It’s so...uncouth.”

Doyle stopped, just in time, before he asked what the ‘couth’ thing to do would be. “Yes, sir,” he recited again, thinking about how Bodie had this fellow ex-Army man eating out of his hand, getting extra breaks and little treats brought to keep him going while he was doing such a good

job. And what do I get? Doyle asked himself, squirming to readjust his briefs in the clinging theatrical tights. I get Captain bloody Peacock strutting around flapping his tail feathers and moaning at me. “Yes, sir,” he said again, on the general assumption that whatever Captain Peacock had just said was another injunction against uncouthness, this time regarding the rearranging one’s genitals in front of a former Army officer of the Queen.

It was at that moment Doyle rediscovered his CID and CI5 training, or at least the part about never making assumptions.

And as he was doing that, Captain Peacock was displaying the fact that he’d never forgotten his old Boy Scout motto and was proving that he was, still, always prepared. The very proper English gentleman was spreading an absolutely huge white cotton handkerchief on the floor. And kneeling on it. In utter shock, Doyle’s glance flew to the patrician face, in time to catch the Captain twirling his moustache as one would before beginning a cordon bleu meal or as the villain would before beginning the carrying-off of the reluctant virgin. There was no possibility of Doyle misunderstanding the Captain’s intentions: intentions which gave a very interesting twist to the phrase ‘an officer of the Queen’.

Doyle’s hands covered his groin, hiding his assets from view whilst enlarging on a certain not-so-small problem. “Captain Peacock, this isn’t quite what I meant...”

Incredulous brown eyes looked up at him with dismay. “You wish to fellate me? Oh, but that wouldn’t do, oh, no, that would not do at all. That’s really not my cup of tea. I’m very fond of firm young meat, you know.”

“Yeh, I can see that,” Doyle said, stepping back out of the reach of perfectly manicured hands, only to come to an abrupt halt as he and the partition met. “It’s only...”

Captain Peacock’s face lit up brighter than the twelve-foot fake Christmas tree behind Santa. “You’ve never done this before?”

Doyle almost burst out laughing at *that*.

Captain Peacock obviously thought the sudden puce of Doyle’s face was a sign of embarrassment rather than mirth. “How absolutely delightful!” he crowed, literally licking his lips in anticipation. “And you so very, very pretty as

well. Who would have thought you’d still be a virgin with your looks?”

Not bloody many, Doyle thought, and all of them would have to be complete morons.

“Well, all you have to do, Raymond,” the name was rolled trippingly off the tongue and given a decidedly Continental rill until it sounded more like Raimaunde, whilst Captain Peacock was as avuncular to Doyle as Bodie was to frightened, inexperienced children, “is lean back and enjoy, my darling young thing.”

Doyle stepped to one side, intending to escape the dim storage room and get back onto the sales floor but a particularly piercing shriek from beyond the stock-room door made him hesitate as he automatically slipped into CI5 training and assessed the situation. Unfortunately, Captain Peacock took the moment to slip into something far more intimate than Doyle’s training and was busy assessing another situation entirely. Doyle’s jacket was pushed upwards, tights pulled downwards, briefs tugged out of the way and his cock freed all with an impressive speed and economy of movement, the ostentatious product of many years’ experience with the Household Guard.

“Aah,” the sigh was long and lush, pleasure evident on Captain Peacock’s face.

“Aah,” the sigh was longer and lusher, pleasure evident on Mr. Ray the Nice Elf’s face as Captain Peacock stopped sighing and started sucking. All right, so Doyle didn’t usually indulge himself either in public or with fifty year olds, even such well-preserved and handsome fifty year olds, but he wasn’t stupid enough to take his cock out of so talented a mouth either. Tossing caution—not to mention discretion, logic and good common sense—to the winds, he indulged himself in this wonderful fantasy of fantastic sex as the extraordinarily gifted mouth worked miracles on his flesh.

“Captain Peacock!”

The sound of Bodie’s impending voice was as shocking as a wet finger in a live socket and had Doyle hauling himself free with scant regard for teeth or anything but dignity—or as much dignity as he could muster as he tried to stuff eight and a half inches of absolutely rigid cock into minuscule briefs and clinging tights. At least now he knew why they always got women to play Prince Charming in the pantomimes and

left the men to wear the voluminous dresses of the wicked stepsisters.

“Yes, Bodie? Is there something with which I can help you?” Captain Peacock asked with considerable aplomb, considering he was using his white handkerchief to wipe his mouth free of tell-tale signs of sucking.

Bodie rounded the divider, glancing sharply from Doyle to Captain Peacock, making Doyle itch to check that he’d managed to get himself tucked away properly. Hardly three months partnered, he was too sensibly cautious to risk Bodie finding out about what the bigwigs would call his lamentable tendencies, right before they decided to call him fired.

“One of the little girls just managed to get herself stuck up the display tree,” Bodie said in that annoying tone of voice Doyle imagined as fitting perfectly into the CO’s office and report-making, “and we can’t find the control switch for the...em...fairy lights.”

Doyle looked at him sharply for that, but Bodie was his usual self, apart from the fine show of military decorum he was putting on for Captain Peacock, and there was nothing at all to show that Bodie suspected anything at all.

“Well, you’re a very capable young man,” Captain Peacock smiled pleasantly, edging round towards the luscious curves of Doyle’s buttocks where they stretched the green tights, his attention bent on indulging in activities of a very bent nature. “I’m sure you can deal with the situation whilst I, er, finish with Raymond here.”

Raymond was hereby choking on a combination of embarrassment, fear and rampant lust and looking anywhere and everywhere but at Bodie.

“Normally, yeh, I could deal with anything or anyone tangling with, you know, fairy lights.”

Still nothing there but oblivious innocence, but Doyle was almost sure he had caught Bodie flickering a glance at him, but that was—stupid wishful thinking, he snapped at himself, so stop trying to make a silk purse from a sow’s ear.

“But the problem is that the little girl says the lights look just like the Snow Queen’s sweeties and she’s trying to loosen one so that she can eat it.”

“What?” Captain Peacock shrieked, abruptly losing all interest in Doyle’s well-formed rear

end as he found himself overcome by the thought of dreadful segments on the *Six O’Clock News* naming the name of the shop that had electrocuted a little girl in their Christmas tree. “Well why didn’t you say so? Quickly, quickly! Raymond, you can come with me.”

Raymond would settle for coming on his own, but despite a week of being a Nice Elf, even he hadn’t gone off children enough to let one fry herself. Plus, Cowley would have his guts for garters and being too busy having a wank was no excuse where that dried up old prune was concerned. With a grimace to heaven and a pronounced list to his walk, Doyle hurried out behind the other two, hoping that no-one would ask why the Nice Elf was holding his hat in front of himself in such a peculiar manner.

By the time he caught up with Bodie and Captain Peacock, the front seam of his tights was threatening to vasectomise him without benefit of anaesthesia, which might not be the best way to control the situation, but at least it meant that the little girl wasn’t the only thing descending rapidly. Muttering under his breath—five bloody shopping days of being such a Nice Elf to such naughty children had increased his vocabulary no end—he went back to his position, still walking slightly hen-toed as his erection faded to mere tumescence and his balls decided they were more fragile than Christmas tree ornaments of blown glass.

How he wished *he’d* been blown. Or that he’d never let Peacock start. Or that Bodie hadn’t come in. Or that Bodie *had* come in, but to tell him it was knocking off time. He groaned to himself, cock twitching as it took the other meaning, obviously remembering that knocking off didn’t just mean finishing work for the day, but also other, more passionate pursuits.

His boss for this current operation was glowering at him, pointed stare aimed at an equally pointed hat that Doyle was holding in front of his groin. “Hat, please, Mr. Ray,” Captain Peacock said in profound innocence.

With yet another grimace towards heaven, Mr. Ray the Nice Elf obeyed.

“Oh,” said Captain Peacock in the profound absence of innocence and a decided flood of desire as the reason for this display of a somewhat uncommon reason for wearing a cocked hat was exposed to his very appreciative gaze.

“Yes, well... Perhaps we should continue our...ahem, discussion now?”

Doyle stepped forward, for once in his life more than anxious to obey the orders of a boss. And trod, not lightly, on the nearby foot of a fellow elf. Who stumbled, and landed, also not lightly, amidst and under the gaudy display of fake parcels.

So much for having the time to go off for a private discussion. Fulsome with apologies—all this being nice to children might yet prove to be irreversible—Doyle helped her up, his cock paying careful attention to her luscious bust even as his mind paid attention to the fact that her ankle was beginning to swell as much as her red jacket. “I’m really sorry,” he said, managing to accidently run one hand over the curve of her tights-covered rump, “let me give you a hand to the nurse’s office, okay?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Ray, I think you’d serve us all much better if you stayed here and put all these parcels to rights,” Captain Peacock said, much to Doyle’s irritation. “Miss Fry can help Miss Brahms to the nurse, can’t you, Miss Fry?”

Miss Fry, being no fool, leapt at the chance to skive off for a good half hour and escape the weepings and wrestlings and wranglings of children. “Oh, absolutely, Captain Peacock sir,” she said in her enthusiasm to put her feet up in the nurse’s office and have a good cup of tea and a nice chin-wag. “I’d be delighted to help our poor Miss Brahms up to Nurse.”

“But...but...” Doyle stammered, staring in agonised dismay as his ticket to blessed orgasmic release departed Santa’s Grotto, ripely twitching bottoms dancing out of sight. All right, so the bodacious Miss Brahms would probably have belted him one if he’d chanced his arm with her, but at least he’d have had time to nick into the lavatory and take care of some very...pressing business.

Captain Peacock harumphed, none too gently. “The parcels, Mr. Ray, if you don’t mind.”

Doyle minded, but that obviously didn’t matter. He bent down to retrieve the first of the parcels, and nearly fell right into them as he found out why Captain Peacock had been so very keen to have him stay. A very knowing hand ran along his back seam, from waist to crotch and then forward to his balls, fondling him with perfect firmness. Naturally, Doyle

was in no hurry to straighten, until he got far enough beyond what was happening to his front to notice what was happening right in front of him. Bodie was standing not three feet away, and staring. In fact, Doyle’s partner was just beginning to crane his neck to see precisely what Captain Peacock was up to round the back of Santa’s sleigh where the children could see even fewer details than Bodie could. Hurriedly, before Captain Peacock could continue his tender ministrations, Doyle stood, and showed all the world and Bodie too just precisely what *he* was up to.

“Oh, very nice, Mr. Ray Elf,” Father Christmas said. “You’ve obviously been a good boy. Hoping for a big pressie from Santa, are we?”

For once in his life, Raymond O’Connell Doyle was utterly dumbstruck. It wasn’t so much what Bodie had said—Christ, after three months of twisted humour, he was used to the great oaf camping it up—it was the way Bodie had said it. Off balance and therefore immediately on the defensive, Doyle looked away, throwing himself into clearing up the upended parcels, inadvertently upending his own rear in the process. Captain Peacock, obviously, had yet to depart.

“As soon as the Misses Brahms and Fry return, Mr. Ray, you and I shall have to continue your dressing down.”

At this juncture, Doyle would cheerfully have dressed himself down right here in public. But then the dulcet tones of a whinging child brought him back to reality, and by the time Mr. Ray the Nice Elf had finally re-stacked the silver- and gold-foiled empty boxes into a mountain of tempting presents, his large problem had subsided to a small bulge—well, as small as Ray Doyle ever got, the Nice Elf routine be damned—and a not so small ache. One glance at Bodie’s cheerfully benign face convinced him that what he’d thought he’d seen in those blue eyes and what he’d thought he’d heard in that deep voice was nothing more than the product of his own over-active gonads. Grimly, he jammed his Robin Hood-meets-the-Gnomes hat on his head, pasted a smile on his face, and went back to work.

And by the time another crush of children had been funnelled through Santa’s Grotto and out onto the bedecked sales floor, he swore—under his breath, of course, ever mindful of

delicate and youthful ears and the neither delicate nor youthful boss of his that would cheerfully condemn him to watching Russian trawlers from some uninhabited Scottish island if he were caught corrupting the young—that if he heard Bodie say ho-ho-ho once more, he was going to scream. Unfortunately, as his poor pounding head attested, the children seemed determined to do all his screaming for him. It was with the most heartfelt and fervent hope that he saw the Misses Brahms and Fry returning to the Grotto through the staff door and then, real relief pouring through him for the end was now in sight, the talented Captain Peacock beckoning imperiously to Santa’s best elf from the storage room door. Relief, relief, relief at last! The child was dropped onto Santa’s lap so quickly the previous one hadn’t managed to get off yet—just like Doyle, in fact—and then Mr. Ray the Nice Elf was rapidly turning into Ray Doyle, randy toad, desperate for anything on offer. A quick blow job in the store room before Bodie could get off the floor, and Doyle would be a very happy little elf indeed. He’d taken the grand total of a single step when, somewhat unfortunately, it was at that precise moment Bodie’s relief—Dickinson from CID and still in his civvies—chose to turn up, thereby throwing Doyle’s own intimate relief right out the window, because that meant it was shift-changeover for Santas. So now he definitely wasn’t Santa’s Little Helper—or anyone else’s, for that matter.

This was definitely his day for grimacing to heaven, and just as definitely not his day for achieving heaven. Still, he was a resourceful CI5 agent, not to mention a stubborn bastard, so he decided that if he hurried, he could get changed before Bodie would be able to disentangle himself from the yards of red felt and fake fur, which meant that he could thereby lumber Bodie with going in to HQ to make their reports. And while Bodie was stuck coming up with a report and dodging Cowley’s idea of an evening’s entertainment, he himself would make for a very accommodating pub not too far from here. Of course, if he decided he couldn’t wait that long, he could always simply disappear off for his ‘dressing down’ from Captain Peacock, but given his druthers, he’d rather have someone younger—and someone who wouldn’t let the wrong comment slip around his partner’s too

perceptive ears the next tea-break.

Meanwhile, as Doyle bemoaned his dreadful fate of unrequited lust, Captain Peacock had come up behind him, the click of his quintessentially polished shoes well covered by the mewling, moanings and generally loud complaining of waiting children and trod-upon elves. “Mr. Ray, you shall have to take Father Christmas off for his ‘tea’,” the child-protective euphemism slipped easily from a mouth that looked as if the only protection it would enjoy employing was Durex or a full rubber suit, “but if you’d care to earn a spot of...overtime?” Captain Peacock murmured, edging Doyle round the back of Father Christmas’ throne and out of sight of childish eyes, even as his left hand wandered, quickly making Doyle’s small problem one of rather large proportions once again.

“Very kind of you, Captain Pea—” and Bodie hesitated for just a second, clearing his throat as if he were coming down with a cold and not making an extremely pointed comment, the impact of which was lost on Doyle, who was too busy being aware of the impact of a very discreet hand, “—cock, but we’ve got a lot to get done. So we’ll be off now. See you in the morning.”

Bastard, Doyle muttered spitefully to himself, what a time for Bodie to be fucking conscientious about stupid sodding reports and showing up for de-briefings. But he was a big brave CI5 agent, so he swallowed his dismay and his annoyance, pinned a sappy smile on his face and began his lilted spiel to the rapt faces of the brats clustered around him like bees waiting to sting. “Father Christmas has to go away for a few minutes for a nice hot cup of tea. After that, he has to see to the factory where all my other elf friends are making brand new toys for us to put on the shelves for you.” He was on the point of turning away when a harrumph from the good—the very good—Captain Peacock informed him that love may be blind, but lust keeps its eyes wide open. With yet another grimace to heaven, the Nice Elf pasted yet another smile on his face, this one somewhat strained, and then finished the spiel prescribed by the shop. “And don’t forget to have Mummy and Daddy show you all the lovely toys my friends the elves have been working so hard to make for you. Now Santa will be back in just a few minutes, so be good

little girls and boys and wait patiently and he shall give you a lovely pressie.”

He guided a waving and nauseatingly ho-ho-ing Father Christmas across the sales floor and thence to the staff door, abandoning Bodie to his fate the second that same door was shut, before Bodie might possibly utter another mutter about elves who thought they were fairies. And then Doyle was racing up the stairs to the staff room, hat off and jacket unbuttoned long before he was even in the changing room. Dickinson from CID was already there, guffawing in sheer delight as Doyle raced in.

“Look!” the man who didn’t need any padding to play Santa shouted, pointing at the tousled vision in green tights and peplum jacket, “it’s the fairy queen!”

“Belt up, Dickie boy,” Doyle snapped at him, turning his back to peel his tights off without revealing the rather major spot of bother he was in. “Just be grateful you only have to doll yourself up as Santa. In fact,” he cast a disparaging look over his shoulder in the general direction of the rotund and varicosed Dickinson, “it’s the rest of us that should be grateful you’re not wearing these bloody tights.”

Bodie arrived at that very second, saving Dickinson all unknowingly: the Detective Sergeant had been about to innuendo rather suggestively as to why Doyle was the only male elf in this operation. Struggling with clinging nylon, Doyle winced inwardly as he replayed again the root cause of his current elven predicament: he really shouldn’t have shouted the odds at Cowley over that last job. Probably shouldn’t have said that Cowley was a stupid bastard and the Queen a stupid cow either. Actually, upon reflection, perhaps he should consider himself lucky that all he had to do was dress up like a fairy.

“Fancy a drink, mate?” Bodie was asking him from a confusion of beard and jacket and padding.

“Nah,” Doyle answered, seeing a way of getting off on his own—or more accurately, being without his partner and therefore able to find someone to get off *with*—if Bodie were anxious to go for a pint or two, “you go on without me. I’ll do the reports tonight.”

Pity that Bodie was so bloody obtuse today, wasn’t it? “Oh, no, I’ll come in with you to do that first—Murph promised he’d give me back

that tenner he borrowed last week, and I’m not stupid enough to let you get your mucky little paws on it.”

Brilliant. Absolutely bloody brilliant. Why did Bodie have to pick tonight of all nights to be a skinflint? And it wasn’t like him: one of Bodie’s most endearing characteristics was his generosity, an aspect especially popular the Thursday before pay day and this really wasn’t the day for Bodie to go tight-fisted and untrusting on him. Still, all might not yet be lost. “All right, then,” Doyle snapped, his temper shortening in direct proportion to his cock lengthening under the influence of stripping naked in front of the beautiful Bodie, “why don’t *you* go to HQ, do the reports and get your tenner from Murphy, and then I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You’ve forgotten, haven’t you?” This, decidedly muffled as a white cotton stomach of daunting proportions was pulled off over Bodie’s head.

Oh, shite, now what? he thought, taking a deep breath and turning away from the temptation of staring at that expanse of smoothly muscular chest. Given his present state of affairs, the last thing his cock needed was any more inspiration. “Of course I haven’t forgotten—you’re the one with the memory like a rusty sieve.” He had time to unfangle his tights from the shoes he had neglected to take off and put a pair of clean underwear on before he had to accept that bloody Bodie wasn’t going to say another word. In the interests of speed and amity, he turned back towards his partner, gave him the grin that always seemed to put Bodie in a good mood and conceded. “Oh, all right, all right, so I’ve had more important things on my mind than whatever it is you’re rabbiting on about.”

“Going round Luigi’s for Jax’s birthday,” Bodie told him, scratching newly bared skin luxuriously, making Doyle’s mouth water. “It’s not till half eight, so we’ve got plenty of time to go for a pint first.”

Go for a pint, then go to HQ, then go to Luigi’s till God knew what time, with Bodie at the very least constantly with him—bloody hell! This just wasn’t his day, but he wasn’t going to admit defeat. Not quite yet. He hauled his street clothes on with a vicious frustration that matched his voice, all considerations of being nice to Bodie

completely discarded. There was no doubt about it, he was unnervingly fond of Bodie—but it was in spite of himself and against his better judgement. “I know when Luigi’s fucking is, Bodie. Which is why I was going to go in to HQ and do the sodding paperwork and get it over and bloody done with,” he tiraded, conveniently forgetting that he’d been trying to get Bodie to go into HQ so that he could bugger off somewhere—*anywhere*—else. “There’s sweet fuck all to report, so that’d leave me time to go home and get changed before I go to fucking Luigi’s.” And that way, I’d still have time for a good wank, he thought longingly, resisting the urge to ease his cock into a less uncomfortable position. Or to pop into a certain pub and have a lovely, long blow job, or a hand job, or maybe find someone who was in the mood to bend over for a quick hard fuck.

“What d’you want to do that for, Ray?” Bodie asked, obviously still referring to the conversation about Doyle going home to change his clothes and not to the thoughts running through Doyle’s head. “You’ve just this minute got yourself into clean stuff. I mean,” and the wicked eyes twinkled, “it’s not as if you’ve been wearing your own clothes all day, is it?”

It was the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back, the final insult considering that he’d actually been trying to be nice. “Don’t you start, Bodie, you stupid bastard. I’ve had it with you today, in fact I’ve had it with you all week, and—” Now what was wrong with the stupid great prick? Doyle shut up and took a good look at Bodie, at the way his partner was averting himself from Doyle’s gaze, at the abruptly tight set of the jaw and the droop of the lips. Shite, he’d hurt Bodie again, Christ knew what over this time—could be anything from not appreciating the bugger’s joke to hurting his feelings by making him feel that his friendship wasn’t welcome. Or it just might be that Bodie didn’t have Doyle’s life-long experience with Doyle’s explosive temper and runaway mouth. Doyle wiped a weary hand over his face, weighing up quick meaningless sex and thereby upsetting his partner against an evening of banked sexual tension and thereby keeping his partner happy and making up for his own temper. There wasn’t much choice, was there? The partnership had been oddly tense for days now, a tension that he

would have called sexual if it weren’t coming from Bodie, a fragility in the bond between them, an unnerving feeling that it might break, where from the second they’d met, it had always been rock solid and taken for granted. Well, it looked as if tonight was going to be a night for a different kind of rock solid. He took one more good look at Bodie’s tense face and troubled eyes and this time he gave in and admitted defeat: better to have blue balls than a blue Bodie. He sighed and sat himself back down on the bench, running his fingers through his hair in the substitute for combing used by curly-tops the world over. “So where d’you want to go for that drink?” Of course, just because he had given in didn’t necessarily mean that he’d gone completely soft—in the head, that is, because he certainly hadn’t gone completely soft anywhere else yet. “And as it’s your idea, you’re buying, mate.”

Doyle called himself for all kinds of fool as Bodie’s face lit up and Doyle realised that having his balls in knots was worth it just to see Bodie so pleased. Oh, well, one of these days he’d finally get used to being this stupid and soft over his partner. In the meantime, he’d make the bugger pay for the drinks and cough up for their share at Luigi’s tonight as well. The thought of an all-expenses-paid night on the town cheered him up enough to make him wait for Bodie to get back into civvies without much more than the occasional wiggle of discomfort. Although, with Bodie’s back turned to him and Bodie therefore oblivious to the way he was being looked at, Doyle indulged himself in a few minutes of Bodie-watching, the muscular curve of buttock making him wriggle a little bit more enthusiastically. All things considered, it really was just as well that he wasn’t wearing his usual jeans. Cold weather and pleated woollen gabardine trousers had something to be said for them after all.

Still, half an hour later, by the time he got out of the car at HQ, he was even more glad for the fact that his jacket was long and could hide a multitude of sins—or soon-to-be sins, if his cock had its way. He strode off ahead of Bodie, dodging the worst of the puddles, distracting himself from Bodie’s too-close presence in the car with a recitation of the report he was going to be writing as soon as he got in out of the cold.

Nothing happened, no-one showed up, no drugs, no weapons, no terrorists, no nothing, apart from this agent suffering strangulation of his scrotal region, brought on in equal parts by the stupid fucking costume and the gropings of a man old enough to be his father.

He was actually considering putting something of that nature down on paper, right up to the moment when he heard Cowley's less than dulcet tones ripping several layers of skin off Murphy for a facetious comment in one of his reports. And if Murphy, he of the subtlest, slyest digs in the history of CI5 had incurred his boss' ire, then Doyle wasn't going to chance a thing: Cowley would probably have him going undercover as the fairy on top of the fucking tree if he weren't careful.

Bodie, not surprisingly, had sloped off to the rest room to wait out of Cowley's sight until Murphy—and Bodie's £10—resurfaced from the mauling. Which gave Doyle a chance he wasn't going to skip. He made a beeline for the toilets, thinking longingly of lockable cubicles and what he could do with such privacy.

But then he discovered that the stomach virus had finally hit CI5. Wonderful. Abso-fucking-lutely wonderful, he thought to himself, thumping the door jamb, giving Lucas such a fright he almost lost control of his grumbling bowels much to the horror of everyone else in the queue. Retreating under the onslaught of Lucas' fierce glare and foul-mouthed opinion of himself, his immediate family and everyone who had ever borne the name Doyle, our Raymond got out of there as quickly as he could. Only to walk slap bang into Cowley, which not only put paid to any faint feeble hope he might have had of finding a nice unoccupied office, but also put the mockers on any thought of Luigi's, a drink with Bodie or, for that matter, time enough to go for a pee. He did, however, get the chance to wave a fond farewell—actually, he raised two fingers in that eloquent and ever-so elegant gesture of complete disgust—to a gleefully departing Bodie. Partnership, obviously, didn't stretch itself as far as getting trawled in to help Cowley do an extra job on a long-awaited night off. Doyle managed a truly innovative list of invective, all of which slid off Bodie like water off a duck's back. And all it took to get Doyle vicious enough to do his job was to think about

Bodie, at Luigi's and how the only reason Doyle had even come in to HQ was to be nice to his bastard of a partner. Frustration did nothing whatsoever for Doyle's sweet nature, as even Cowley found out as the night wore on ever longer.

By the time he crawled into his flat at a quarter past three that morning, he had done the shop report, combed the files for information on one suspected gun-runner and interrogated four yobbos who'd been caught with their hands in a very unexpected till indeed: it wasn't every day MI6 caught four teenagers running around their corridors with the petty cash crammed into their pockets. And by the time CI5 had sorted that out in the most suitably embarrassing (to MI6 and therefore to Cowley's teeth-bared satisfaction) fashion, it was half two. By the time he'd dropped Cowley off at home, it was a quarter to three. By the time he persuaded the two over-zealous coppers in the panda car that he really honestly was a member of CI5 and the green tights and silly hat draped over the passenger seat were nothing indecent or transvestite, he was dead on his feet.

He didn't even bother to turn the light on in his bedroom, collapsing into the unmade bed, fighting with the sheets and blankets and quilt only long enough to cover the worst of the cold, and then he was asleep. Not, more's the pity, for long, though. The alarm clock was insulting in both its volume and its liveliness, subsiding to chirruping tings after a leaden arm had thumped it right off the bedside table. Eyes gummy, Doyle dragged himself from his warm and cosy bed, shuffled witlessly round the flat till he ended up in the kitchen, staring in dumb agony at the empty coffee jar and equally empty bread-bin. So much for breakfast. Eyes still half shut, scratching an errant atom of sleep that was clinging to the small of his back, his brain finally noted that a shower would help. Yawning again, his fingers clawed his scalp where his hair was lying in the wrong direction. Then the meagre comfort of carpeting ended and he woke up abruptly, wishing he had the energy to hop as his poor bare feet collided with winter-chilled bathroom linoleum. It took him a while, but he was eventually, if you were of a kind and forgiving bent and didn't look too closely at the details, presentable for another day in the farcical

world of CI5 undercover. The streets were mobbed with bad-tempered workers and clouds, the morning darkness yet to lift and the frost yet to clear, and none of it did anything to ease his own mood. The mere thought of an entire day spent with all those squalling brats and Captain Peacock's ogling was enough to make him simmer and steam.

First, though, before he once more experienced the joy of being Mr. Ray the Nice Elf in tights that cut his circulation off, he had to pop in to HQ: there was a vague and fuzzy memory of Cowley muttering something about picking something up at HQ in the morning, something that just might be his jammy sod of a partner. He brightened at that, the rough velvet of Cowley's voice replaying in his mind as Doyle had stumbled, half asleep with all the adrenalin rush used up. 'An' don't you be going straight to your assignment in the morning, Doyle—you'll come in here for the usual updating. You can pick Bodie up while you're at it—I've got him coming in to help Jamieson with the mopping up on this one." Oh, that was a good one. Bodie loathed getting up early, really loathed it. Poetic justice, really, to have Bodie dragged from bed at some ungodly hour, hopefully only minutes after the lazy bugger had got to sleep. No, even better, a good half-an-hour after Bodie had started snoring: he'd've been in a good deep sleep by then, and *really* miserable at being woken up and hauled off into the cold. Served him right for going off like that the night before, when Doyle had been bending over backwards to make his partner happy.

By the time he'd gone through Security, there was enough spring in his step for him to make it up the stairs with nary a grumble, the thought of a bleary Bodie cheering him no end. There was justice in the world, after all.

That pleasant thought lasted until the precise moment he walked into the restroom, felt the sudden tension in the atmosphere and saw the alacrity with which certain support staff scrambled to leave. He might only have been active in CI5 for a few months, but that was still time enough for him to have built up a formidable reputation and understand why, exactly, CI5 had earned such a formidable reputation of its own regarding ragging and practical jokes. Eyes narrowed, he stalked his gaze round the cluttered

and tattered room, looking for whatever joke that was aimed at him and then he saw it. Right there, bang smack in the middle of the notice board for all the world—or the department at least—to see: a glossy 8 by 10 photo. And those measurements didn't refer to certain impertinent parts of his anatomy, although Doyle wouldn't have minded *that*. It was the pose that he minded, and the outfit, and the pristine clarity of the picture that left not a single doubt in the mind of the viewer that here was Raymond Doyle, street rat, former hard-nosed policeman, boxing coach to wild and woolly teenagers, CI5 *agent extraordinaire*, in his other guise, a.k.a. Mr. Ray the Nice Elf, done up as the proverbial fairy. Immortalised for eternity, in glorious colour, photographed from behind, caught in a pose of Betty Grable proportions, straightening the seam on those sodding tights.

Hanging, obviously, was too good for him—both for Doyle-the-elf on the notice board and for Bodie-the-bastard who was the only person who could have possibly managed to get the photo into CI5 HQ. There was a profound silence from the few, duty-trapped rookies who were the only populace of the restroom, apart from a poutingly preening elf on the wall and a fuming Doyle in the doorway. "Excuse me," he muttered in a parody of politeness, "but I think this is mine."

All smouldering, self-conscious machismo, Doyle stalked over and ripped the photo from the board, restraining a wince as he came face to face with himself bedecked in green, arched to see if his tights were straight. Pity he didn't exactly look straight himself, wasn't it? Christ, but he was going to hang Bodie by his balls! Photo tucked securely and invisibly inside his jacket, Doyle wolved off in search of his soon-to-be late and unlamented partner.

"Hello, Puck, met any nice Queens, have you?" was the first thing he heard. Lucas.

So much for his fond hope that only the early-bird rookies had seen the bloody photo. "Met any nice queens? Not recently, no. Why—you lost yours, have you?" he snapped, side-stepping Lucas, only to come eye-to-eye with McCabe.

"Watcha, Doyle. You're in bloody early. Been out jogging?"

Doyle looked at him askance, saying nothing, only too aware that McCabe would have some

punch-line coming—and also just as aware of what would happen to Doyle himself if he punched McCabe after the line.

“Course not,” Lucas answered, playing straight man to McCabe, which adjective immediately made Doyle cringe.

“That’s right!” McCabe went on in a voice of prodigious innocence. “You’d be out dancing round the fairy rings before they faded, wouldn’t you?”

He was going flail Bodie before he hung him by his balls.

McCabe and Lucas, showing far more wisdom than Cowley usually gave them credit for, beat a hasty retreat before the only beating going on was Doyle grinding them into the carpet. They even managed to get to the corner of the corridor before collapsing in gales of giggles and staggering off out of sight.

But not, as it were, out of mind. Doyle stomped off in the other direction down the corridor, determined to find Bodie. Unfortunately, Murphy found Doyle first. “Petal!” Murphy cried, falling to one knee upon the carpet. “Come run off with me and be my love!”

Doyle, stoically refusing to waste any of his fury on so minor a target, walked on, ignoring the laughter that wailed in his wake. But not only was he going to flail Bodie before he hung him by his balls, he was going to dip him in salt as well. With a generous dash of malt vinegar as a special treat.

Stewart didn’t actually say anything: with the pointed way he looked at Doyle, he didn’t need to; whistling the song ‘Killer Queen’ was more than sufficient. It was, needless to say, another nail in Bodie’s coffin. From an open office door came a reminder of the hat he was wearing so fetchingly in the photo. He gritted his teeth as feminine voices raised in ‘Robin Hood, Robin Hood riding through the glen...’ He most emphatically did *not* want to hang around long enough to hear what they had done to such sterling lines as ‘with his band of men’, knowing, as he did so very well, the obscene senses of humour of that particular bunch.

By the time he had run the gauntlet of HQ looking for Bodie, he was fit to be tied—and if Cowley had seen him, he would have been, and handcuffed as well, just to make sure that this dervish in denim wouldn’t do something every-

one else would regret. Simmering loudly, he threw the door to the gym wide open, slamming wood against wall, saw Bodie, opened his mouth to begin his superbly searing tirade, then shut it, quietly. The slamming of the door had jolted Bodie, supremely un-Christmassy in black, from the inward focus of his martial exercise. For a moment, Doyle stared at Bodie, unused to such an expression on a face he was sure he knew better than anyone else—as well he ought, since he’d paid far more attention to it than anyone else. There was...he wasn’t sure, just...something was different. Not different as in Bodie had suddenly gone insane and grown a moustache, just...something...in the eyes, in the expression, in that second of startled honesty.

Then Bodie grinned, and the difference was gone, wickedly amused Bodie replacing the vulnerable bareness of before. “Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” Bodie carolled, neatly side-stepping Doyle and edging down the corridor while his partner was still just staring at him in disbelief that even Bodie would be so insane as to dare sing what Doyle thought he was going to sing.

But Bodie did. “Don we now our gay apparel—”

At which point, Doyle took off like Donner and Blitzen and all the other reindeer combined, with the express—the very express, considering the speed he was running at—intent of nailing this particular Santa Claus to the top of the nearest Christmas tree. Bodie, being of a daring bent but far from stupid, used his ten-yard lead to get him safely into the briefing room and under Cowley’s gimlet gaze before Doyle could catch him up, much to Doyle’s disgust. Bodie even had the balls to shove his way up to the front row of the metal seats, tossing a wickedly superior grin over his shoulder at his fuming partner. Doyle sat six rows behind him, amusing himself with thoughts of darts in the back of Bodie’s skull. Poison darts. With barbs.

The usual run-through was run through, and somewhere in amongst it all, Doyle noted that he was still—still!—stuck undercover as a bloody elf in a bloody toy department with bloody Bodie sitting on his arse all day going ho ho bloody ho. Life, he decided, was grossly unfair, and if Murphy didn’t stop fluttering his fucking eyelashes at him, then Murphy was going to

find out what it was to be stuffed like a Christmas goose. And he didn't mean from over-eating, either.

"Bodie," Doyle said, coming up behind his cupid-smiling partner.

"Doyle!" said Cowley, neatly stepping between his two best agents and thereby preventing the fight of the century. "A word, Doyle?" Oh, Doyle could come up with a word or two for Bodie... "In my office, Doyle. Now!"

"Yes, sir," he snapped, drawing Bodie another dirty look and preceding Cowley towards the office, forcing himself to be a model of self-discipline, dignity and restraint. All of which almost went out the window with Bodie when an impromptu choir began to sing 'Dick the balls with elves and fairy...'

Hanging, definitely, was too, too good for Bodie. Revenge. That's what he needed. Nair in the underwear... The tape he'd made of Bodie sweet-talking that girlfriend, the one who was into kinky stuff... Exploding Santa beards... Super-glue on the toilet seat... Oh, yes, there were one or two things he could think of, and did think of, the entire time Cowley was supposedly running over the prior night's operation.

By the time his boss was finished, Doyle knew that Bodie was going to be securely ensconced as Santa and that revenge was going to have to be postponed. But only until he had the opportunity to get into Bodie's flat and into a certain shoe box that contained certain revealing photos of Bodie playing some very sophisticated games with a very buxom 'milk-maid'. (He'd found the photos when he'd gone snooping to find out what kind of a man he'd been partnered with.)

But before that, there was traffic, and road works and the joys of parking in central London. Then the shop, the costume, the brats. More bloody stuffed toys and stuffy noses, more sweetly phrased comments to kids he wanted to sacrifice on sharp sticks over hot fires. Rotisserie brats, yum, yum, he thought, pulling an eighteen-month-old's curious fingers from his mouth and getting them in the eye instead. Next time, oh, next time, he'd make sure he got Bodie to do the arguing with Cowley, let Bodie be the one to end up dressed like a fairy, done up like an elf, smiling sweetly in pretty tights and silly hat. Scowling, he jammed the hat on his head, tugged

his tights up high enough to make him a proper little soprano, and sailed across the sales floor to pull the six-year-old out from the infamous pile of parcels, the cacophony of colours assaulting him almost as much the racket kicked up by whining brats.

Groaning knowledge hit him with the horrible truth: it was Saturday. God help him, it was the Saturday before Christmas and he was working as an elf in the toy department of one of the country's biggest shops. And, he cursed as he had to adjust his tights to lower his voice back down to tenor, he was still wearing the stupidest outfit known to man. Even Puck wouldn't be caught dead in this, an outfit not even Oberon could love.

And the ultimate indignity, he thought sourly: it wasn't just the departmental Christmas tree that had blue balls around here. Uncomfortable, feeling as if his spine needed a good scratch from the inside out, he tried to force himself to think about something—anything—but sex. I'm not randy, he told himself. I'm fine. I'm all right, I'm okay and I don't want to throw Bodie to the floor and fuck him right through to Menswear, Ladies' Wear and Suits. It went without saying that he was scowling ferociously and walking knock-kneed by the time he had come back to the writhing, deadly serpent that some people might insist was actually a queue of excited children waiting to see Father Christmas, and had unceremoniously dumped the baying six-year-old right at the very end of it.

"Late, Mr. Ray?" Captain Peacock, pomposity personified, one eyebrow raised in disapproval at the time revealed on his gold watch.

Just what Doyle really needed at this time of the morning when he'd already had to deal with one boss: his second boss coming after him for being late because of his first boss who was after him for not producing enough results because his second boss kept him doing his second job instead of his first job. This was the kind of day that made him wish he'd listened to his mum for once in his life and run off to join the Navy. At least there, not only wouldn't he have these grubby little children clutching at him, but he'd have full access to as many men as he could handle. And that was quite a few, ambidexterity having its advantages.

Captain Peacock was looking at him again, or

more accurately, Captain Peacock was staring at Mr. Ray-cock. "Are you free, Mr. Ray?"

Not by a long chalk, he thought to himself. You couldn't afford me in a month of Sundays.

"Mr. Ray, I said, are you free?"

There was a positively predatory gleam in Captain Peacock's brown eyes. Perhaps Doyle wouldn't have to go as far as the Navy to get all the man he could handle. Perhaps ex-Army was as far as he'd need. Perhaps being desperate was worth the next-day cringing when he remembered what he'd done, and with whom.

"Yes, of course, Captain Peacock," he said, temporarily dropping the notion of being embarrassed at being done for trade by an older man and dropping, just as adroitly, the idea of sticking to someone in his own age group. There was a lot to be said for age and experience, he told himself, his balls dictating the rationalisation to his brain, and most of it deliciously rude. His cock was busy remembering the state it had been in yesterday and how very nicely Captain Peacock had managed to get it like that.

Just as he was really getting keen contemplating the combined pleasures of Peacock's age and his own soon-to-come experience, there was a voice at his knee, one of those piping voices that cut right through you like the wind and carry to every nook and cranny and dour dowager of the largest crowd.

"Is 'at a man or a lady, Mummy?" words accompanied by chubby finger pointing at the svelte Captain Peacock who merely scowled and very sensibly turned on his heel and walked away. Mr. Ray the Nice Elf had no such fine options, unfortunately, trapped beside the staircase where he was supposed to watch for a hinted-at exchange that would be very much to CI5's advantage to stop. "Is it, Mummy? Is 'at a man?"

"Yes, that's a man, darling," 'Mummy' replied and Doyle's hackles raised immediately: he'd been around enough almost-three-year-olds this past week to be suitably wary when even the mothers got *that* look on their faces when the tiny tots started asking things in *that* tone of voice.

"'At a man cos him got a m'tache?"

"That's right," the mother replied absently, looking around the displays as if distancing herself from anything the small child was planning on saying.

"'At a lady, Mummy?" This, directed at Miss Brahms, who might not be a lady, but there was no doubt that she was demonstrably—rather largely demonstrably—a woman.

The child obviously realised this, bell-like voice chiming on without waiting for an answer. "An' is 'at a man?"

Uh-oh. Doyle stiffened automatically, dividing his attention between the suspicious character in a rain coat and the even more suspicious character in red duffel coat and yellow wellies with wombles on the side. That last question was about him...

"Mmhmm." The mother, disturbingly, was contemplating the fourth wall tile on the third panel behind the register, and if she hadn't been holding the child's hand, one would have assumed that she'd never seen the little one before in her life. And that, Doyle knew only too well, usually spelled trouble. Doyle glowered intimidatingly at the small child, who was obviously used to better than he.

"Him not 'ook like a man, Mummy!" she sang out, loud and clear, making all the children stare and all the adults suddenly appear enthralled by displays of wrapping paper.

"Oh, he's a man, dear," the mummy all but whispered, still not looking at her child.

"But him not got m'tache, Mummy."

The mother smiled broadly, the threat of infantile embarrassment removed by the innocent comment. "That's because some men don't have moustaches."

The child stared at Doyle, thinking deep thoughts, giving Doyle cause for relief when Captain Peacock had to assist Father Christmas and distracted the child enough that the bright brown eyes went back to regarding the pneumatic Miss Brahms.

"'At lady got a 'gina, Mummy?"

Funny how everyone can understand the most twisted of tot babble when the word involved is in reference to private parts or bathroom function?

"Yes, dear," Mummy managed, obviously one of the new sort, the kind who rightly refuse to bring their children up with guilt and then have ample opportunity to regret their modernity every time they take the children out in public and they start asking if ladies have vaginas.

Now it was Miss Fry's turn to come under the magnifying glass of childish curiosity. "An' 'as 'at lady got a 'gina, Mummy?"

"All ladies have one, dear." Mummy was growing decidedly pink around the ears, but fortunately, Miss Brahms was used to nieces and nephews and men, and so took all this in her stride.

"You 've got 'gina, Mummy," the little angel said with pride.

"Yes, dear, Mummy's got one too," the mother said, now positively roseate with embarrassment.

Captain Peacock fell under the piercing stare, the innocent eyes of the child examining his form for the necessary tell-tales that would answer a three-year-old's deep and difficult questions of man or woman. "'At man got a pee-nees, Mummy?"

Mummy looked like she wanted to die. "Yes, dear, of course he has. Look, Sarah, there's Santa!"

The child, however, was not going to be distracted from her quest. "Santa a man, isn't him not? He got a pee-nees, Mummy?"

Doyle nearly choked, but at least he didn't laugh out loud.

"Father Christmas is a man, yes, Sa-sa dear." Doyle gave the mother points for answering yet another one of these questions without actually using any of the words her daughter was tossing around with such reckless abandon.

"Oh," said the child, obviously satisfied. But not, it seemed, for long. Doyle, about to check the stack of cuddly teddies to make sure that all they held was stuffing, was arrested by the shrilling voice directed at him once more. "Is 'at a man, Mummy?" the little girl asked again.

"Yes, Sa-sa, he is," said the mother with obvious unease, as if horrifying experience had taught her what was coming next.

"But 'at man got long hair! 'At's like a lady, Mummy!" Disapproval oozed from every pore in the distilled outrage of the very young.

"Some men have long hair, just as some women have short hair, dear," Mummy answered, grabbing her child and turning her towards the side wall where stacks of toys rose half-way to the ceiling. "And look, Sa-sa, isn't that a lovely dolly?"

The child, however, was not so easily turned

aside from her quest for her own personal grail, completely unmoved by mere hairless baby dolls. "Oh," she said, taking a minute to think about this strange tonsorial detail in the interesting world of men and women and boys and girls. "Seen ladies with short hair, haven't I not, Mummy?" Another pause for thought, but the stare on Mr. Ray the Nice Elf was unwavering.

Doyle tugged his jacket down, glad that he had both stopped thinking about fucking Bodie under the Christmas tree and that after yesterday's débâcle of wielded welly boots and unrequited passion, his over-sensitised and demanding cock was tidily tucked away out of sight, one of the many tricks he'd learned from old Marvellous Mary, the best drag queen he'd ever seen. He dreaded to think the kind of question this brat would come up with if she could actually see his important little places. But then again, perhaps it would have been better if she had.

"'At not a man, Mummy," the little girl said with certainty.

"Yes it is, dear," the mother smiled at him in apology whilst Doyle scowled at the child.

"But him not got a pee-nees, Mummy."

Doyle couldn't help it: he looked down at himself, just to check. He did too have a peenees, but it was held snugly by tight briefs, lying down quietly between his thighs, which obviously wasn't where the monster-child was used to telling the difference between men and ladies.

"Of course he has," the mother said bravely, obviously wishing she had never started all this openness and honesty rubbish and stuck to shame, subterfuge and wonderfully incomprehensible kiddy-words like her own mother so sensibly had.

But her little girl wasn't finished, not quite yet. With a sneer worthy of an adult, she looked more closely at Doyle and then announced, with all the utter certainty of the very, very young: "Then him got an itsy-bitsy 'ittle peenees, Mummy."

There was, not entirely unexpectedly, a sudden chorus of coughs from every adult in earshot.

Doyle fumed. He fizzled. He opened his mouth to deliver a stinging invective at the child, but fortunately for the sanctity of infancy Captain Peacock was back, one re-

straining hand on Doyle's arm to remind him that until 3.30, he was also Mr. Ray the Nice Elf.

"Are you free, Mr. Ray?" he asked in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Yes, sir, Captain Peacock sir, of course I'm fu—"

"That'll do, Mr. Elf. Come along now."

Come? Come along with Captain Peacock? Well, maybe it was better than infanticide. Yeh, he'd come along, and Captain Peacock could take care of it in the store room right now and if bloody Bodie stuck his nose in again the way he had yesterday, then Mr. Bloody Bodie could just get an eyeful, couldn't he?

"Actually," and there was bloody Santa at it again, butting in where he wasn't wanted. Well, he was wanted, and wanted a hell of a lot, but not in a way that Doyle thought Bodie would be keen on accepting.

"What is it now?" Doyle snapped viciously.

"Actually, Mr. Ray," Bodie said serenely, taking hold of Doyle's other arm, neatly rendering him helpless, while the small child meandered on to the interesting question of why reindeers have horns and if they had a pee-nees or 'gina, "I think that Father Christmas needs some help from his little helper because it's Santa's tea-time."

"Oh, yeh? An' what—"

"Mr. Ray, be a Nice Elf and come with Father Christmas, please?"

And there it was, an echo of that peculiar expression that Bodie had had on his face yesterday. Doyle's eyes narrowed in speculation. Then, decision made with his usual speed, he took Santa by the red-clad arm and saying, "Do let me help you, Father Christmas. At your age, your arthritis must be acting up something chronic," led Santa from the ravening hordes of greedy children and those small people who make impertinent comments about a certain elf's pertinent parts.

"What is it, Bodie?" he asked as soon as they were on the staff stairs, Bodie's red bulk heaving its way up the steps in front of him.

"It's tea-time, Ray. Even Father Christmas gets to stop for tea, doesn't he?"

They were at the staffroom now, Bodie closing the door behind them. "In other words, you just wanted to get me out of there before I did something to that kid that Cowley would make

me regret?"

"I wouldn't actually say that, no. Although," and the wicked glitter showed that this was, indeed, the kind of man who would plaster an embarrassing photo of his would-be best mate right dab in the middle of CI5 HQ, "she's right, you *do* have such an itsy-bitsy pee-nees!"

At which point, the devil in Doyle decided to show its horns. Or one of them, at least. He'd get his own back on Bodie right now, embarrass the hell out of the rotten sod. "If you call this," and he pulled the peplum of his jacket out of the way and straightened his tights once more so that his cock wasn't tucked away out of sight but straining there, long and thick and blatant, "itsy-bitsy, then you've been hanging around with too many donkeys, Bodie." And he stood there, flaunting himself and posing, waiting for Bodie—the man who hated it when his girls kissed him in public, the only man Doyle knew who felt peculiar about peeing in public toilets—to blush furiously and dissolve in embarrassment. Bodie, however, had reasons other than modesty for being so discreet in public. It had more to do with exposing himself—in more ways than one—whilst standing beside the temptation that was Doyle than with any false notions of Victorian etiquette.

With ostentatious casualness, Bodie pulled his fake beard, wig and hat off and then said, with a sophisticated little smile, "Nice, Ray, oh, very nice."

Doyle stared, goggle-eyed. This was not what was supposed to happen, this wasn't what he'd expected.

"And you," Bodie's voice was lazily amused, "you dozy bastard, were going to waste it on old dried up Captain Peacock?"

Catching Bodie's drift, Doyle smiled, never one to complain about a bit of spontaneity. He wouldn't have thought it of Bodie, but there had been doubts these past few days, odd looks and odder expressions, peculiar reactions and that strange tension that had been lying between them. He'd thought it to be sexual, but he'd let himself be put off by a few photographs and a spectacularly straight attitude. The perfect match, indeed, for the way he himself had been with Bodie, wanting to trust, too smart to take the chance of confessing too soon and thus risking public exposure if he'd mis-read his

partner.

“You interested, then?” he asked, flaunting himself a bit more.

Bodie was grinning again, obviously delighted that his own suspicions had proved true. “I’m even more...interested than you are, titch.”

Not that Doyle could check the claim, not with Bodie festooned in all that red and padding. “Care to prove that, do you?”

“Here?!” Bodie squeaked.

And Doyle knew exactly how to have his revenge on Bodie, and his pleasure at the same time. Talk about having your cake and eating it too...

“Where else? We’re not due back on the floor for another ten minutes, Peacock’s been warned that we might have to disappear off now and then on CI5 business, so no-one’s going to come looking for us, are they? And there’s no-one here but you and me, is there?”

“But the door doesn’t lock!”

Oh, that panic was a lovely sight! Especially since Doyle noticed that the baggy trousers were tenting in a most impressively delectable manner. “Not to worry, Bodie,” he said, dropping his hat to the floor, stepping forward until he was less than twelve inches away from Bodie and certainly close enough to grab his partner through red fabric. “Oh, nice, very nice,” he echoed, massaging his favourite muscle, his other hand fumbling round to find the zip. “In fact, that’s so nice, I think I’ll have to have a look at it. Just to make sure you really are as...nice...as you feel, ’course.” With a small, wicked smile, he undid Bodie’s Santa trousers, hands slipping inside until they found out that it wasn’t just stockings this particular Santa could stuff and that the North Pole could be more than just Santa’s address. “Oh, nice, very nice,” he said again, bringing Bodie out into the open, breaking into a grin both at the luscious feel of cock in his hand and the mortified nervousness written all over Bodie’s face.

“Don’t, Ray!”

Who would ever have thought that big, tough Bodie could sound like Mickey Mouse? But anyone who knew Doyle knew how quickly he could adapt to any situation, chameleon change putting him in instant control. “No? You mean,” and he dropped suddenly to his knees, engulf-

ing Bodie with one succulent swallow, bringing his partner to full, throbbing hardness, then pulling back, “you want me to stop?” He pumped Bodie’s cock, skin flowing fluidly over rigidity. “Right now?”

Then he stood, and slowly, languorously, unbuttoned his jacket to reveal a cascade of chest hair and small, brown nipples that crowned when his whetted fingers circled them. “You mean, just stop?” He hooked his thumbs in the waistbands of his tights and briefs, pushing them down, not far, just enough for the tight lycra to cradle his balls. Plump and full, his balls were pushed up by his taut clothes, and his cock was standing up straight from nothing more than sheer passion. “Stop, just like that?”

Then he licked his lips, and stepped forward, pressing himself and Bodie cock to cock, taking both cocks in one hand, holding them tight, making Bodie’s breath hiss. “Pack it in, shall I?”

And he wasn’t using that in the slang meaning, not now. Bodie’s eyes were half-closed, and Doyle leaned in another inch and kissed him, moistly, masterfully, thrilling to the sensation of Bodie helpless in his arms. “D’you want me packed in to you?” he asked, breath souging over the exquisite paleness of Bodie’s neck.

“Here?”

“No, Bodie,” Doyle answered, free hand going inside red trousers and finding the sweet cleft of arse, “here.”

“Now?”

Passion-dark, Doyle stared up at him. “D’you really want to wait?”

“But someone might come—” Bodie broke off, hearing what he had said, feeling what Doyle was doing to him, seeing the way Doyle’s face flushed faint rose with passion. “And if we do it right, it’ll be both of us,” he whispered, leaning forward to brush Doyle’s lips with his own.

Doyle let go of Bodie’s nether region and interesting appendages and slid his hands up to cradle Bodie’s face, holding the other man still while he kissed him deeply, tongue inside Bodie’s mouth, stealing the breath from him, hips beginning an insistent, insinuating thrusting, body telling Bodie exactly what was in it for him—or what was going to be in Bodie, for Doyle. He wanted to kiss every inch of Bodie’s beautiful face, and did, small lingering kisses,

getting to know the satin of forehead and the comparative roughness of cheek, the fleshy pleasure of earlobe. Bodie was murmuring inanities, murblings of desire and pleasure, and Doyle gathered them up like Scrooge with his treasure horde, pretty words to be brought out and cooed over, preferably when the entire work-force of CI5 were present.

“Christ, Ray, this is fantastic, I wish we’d done this right at the start,” Bodie said, and Doyle envisioned Bodie’s face when they were all sitting around the CI5 rest room engaging in the traditional fuck-and-tell that marked every sexual encounter, Murphy serenely murmuring the filthiest rejoinders ever heard by man. Served Bodie right, putting that photo of him up in public for everyone to see. Smiling to himself, he feasted on the side of Bodie’s neck, desire tingling through him as he unbuttoned Bodie’s tunic and started pushing the padding out of the way, teeth fastening on pretty pink nipples.

But then Bodie was holding him close, and whispering some really sweet somethings, and Doyle began to wonder if he honestly were the only one in this partnership who’d got to the stage of putting his friend first. And he began to wonder if perhaps the tension in their partnership hadn’t had something to do with the fledgeling emotion between them. One thing was certain, though: with what Bodie was saying, with how Doyle himself felt, there would be no action-replay for the lads. No, he was going to keep this for the two of them, something to be remembered. And then he stopped thinking completely as Bodie started kissing him hard, thrusting his tongue into Doyle’s mouth, and Doyle found himself wallowing in the ferociousness of Bodie’s hunger, feeling it compound his own, and then he was pressing into Bodie, thrusting his cock into the slight softness of belly, taking control of the kiss, leaning into Bodie, once more the seducer.

“Like that, do you?” he whispered, smiling into the flushed beauty of Bodie’s face, tongue tip lapping at the corner of Bodie’s mouth. “Nice, innit? This,” his hands palmed Bodie’s hard cock, thumb teasing the slitted head, “is nice as well. Gorgeous, big and hard and gorgeous. Just like you, Bodie.”

“Fancy me, do you?”

“Mmm,” Doyle murmured, dropping to his

knees and licking the slit at the crown of Bodie’s cock. “Could go for you in a big way.” Suddenly wary amidst the ease of passion, his glance flickered up to Bodie’s handsome face and brittle blue eyes, checking to see if he needed to backpedal, to make it a size joke, to turn any suspicion of genuine affection aside. But Bodie meant what he had whispered so sweetly and was smiling at him, and the luscious cock was slid back into his mouth with sweet slowness, filling him up. In the background of his mind, in rhythm with the pulse of Bodie’s cock on his tongue, understanding dawned, all the little comments of their partnership making sense, all of them signposts leading up to this sexual understanding between them.

And the emotional understanding, too, he thought, shoving Bodie’s trousers down round his knees, getting to his own feet so that they were cock to cock again. “I’m going to fuck you,” he whispered.

“No you’re not,” Bodie whispered right back.

That shocked Doyle into silence for all of two seconds, then his cock pulsed at him again with two days of unrewarded lust and if they hadn’t been where they were, he would have let rip and shouted. Instead, he hissed, voice beginning to edge upwards: “What the fuck d’you mean? Too much the big man to get fucked? Well, you just—”

Bodie kissed his mouth shut, turning the quick flare of anger into a slow simmer of building ecstasy. “All I meant,” he breathed against Doyle’s lips, “is that you’re not going to fuck me up against the door of a scabby staff room when we don’t even have anything to use.”

Doyle leant his head on Bodie’s shoulder, a brief breath of laughter running through him. “Why, you worried you’ll get pregnant, petal? And you’ll get used to me flying off the handle, won’t you,” he murmured, bringing Bodie’s hand down to hold his cock tightly, thrusting into the warm fist, eyes wildly dilated as his body got closer and closer to flying off into orgasm.

“Get used to a lot of things, won’t we?” Bodie said to him, lips brushing Doyle’s ear, letting go of Doyle’s cock.

Doyle felt Bodie’s hands settle on his rump, then he groaned as he thrust forward. Bodie

parted his thighs briefly, then clamped them shut again, letting Doyle fuck him between the legs, Bodie's cock stabbing into Doyle's belly while Bodie kneaded his arse and Doyle fucked his tongue into Bodie's mouth. Harder and harder Doyle thrust, the door rattling under his assault, Bodie shaking with the onslaught of pleasure, both of them rushing headlong into climax, Doyle swearing and gasping as orgasm flooded him, but still, unwilling for it to be over. His hand filled with Bodie's cock, pumping him hard, demanding that Bodie come for him, now, here, like this, not content until Bodie had.

Slowly, Doyle slithered down Bodie's body, lapping at the beads of cum that were dotted here and there, rubbing the white wetness on his hands in between Bodie's legs, blending Bodie with himself, licking both of them up together.

And that was when he realised that not all the rattling at the door had been caused by him and Bodie. Startled, his gaze snapped up to Bodie, to meet equally appalled blue eyes. Frantically, they started stuffing themselves back into clothes that were wrinkled and marked, tell-tale moisture that would dry and show the world what they'd been up to. Bodie grabbed the remnants of his beard and scrubbed, desperate, at the marks on himself and Doyle, while Doyle crammed the wig back onto Bodie's tumbled hair and jammed his own hat back onto curls that he didn't even remember Bodie making such a tangled mess of.

Breathless, and from more than just the sex, Doyle threw the door open, glower fixed firmly in place, confronting a fetchingly jealous Captain Peacock. "You just interrupted CI5 business, this had better be fucking good!"

"On the Queen's business, obviously," Captain Peacock said, but left it at that, his own old training very much to the fore, which was why he'd been transferred to the hell of the toy department in the first place. "One of the men whose photograph you showed me has just made an appearance in the department, beside the teddy bears."

Doyle looked at Bodie, and the costumes made it incongruous to see such professional action-readiness on the faces of Father Christmas and Mr. Ray the Nice Elf. "Which one?" Doyle asked, shoving Captain Peacock aside, starting down the stairs two at a time. "Come on, which

one?"

"I don't know. One of the first batch of—"

But that was all either Bodie or Doyle needed to know, the first batch of photographs belonging to a group known equally for its drug-trading for arms and for its bombing. And this, the Saturday before Christmas, could well prove to be the peak of the bombing season.

Once on the floor, they slowed to what looked like a stroll, but was an efficient consuming of distance. Bodie ho-ho-hoed to children as he passed, Doyle smiled and picked one of them up, setting him back down out of the way once he'd plucked the teddy bear from his arms and checked it for suspicious lumps far more worrisome than cancer. Under the chiming Christmas carols, they crossed the floor, ignoring the cries of children who could suddenly see two Father Christmases, neither of which was sitting on Santa's throne.

Dickinson came up behind Doyle, speaking quietly. "Richards just called in to your mob on the R/T. They'll be here in a couple of minutes and your boss said something about ripping your balls off and feeding them to you if you hurt so much as one hair on a single child's head."

"Yeh, well I wish he'd tell our friend over there that. Listen, you get round the back in case we need you. He won't look twice at Santa and one of his elves, but two Santas'd put the wind right up him."

The second Santa melted out of sight behind the piles of presents, while Doyle and Bodie angled in on the freckled redhead so innocently going through the shelves of teddy bears. Innocent, but for his record, and the bulging carrier bag that had started at his feet and was now snuggled down all cosily behind the fat teddies.

"Hello, mate," Bodie said, casually taking the man's arm in a grip that could dislocate an elbow with ease. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Yeh, come here often, do you?" Doyle asked, neatly retrieving the carrier bag, his free hand grabbing the would-be bomber. "What's your name this time, eh?"

He and Bodie were marching the man so calmly through the crowd that the only looks they got were amusement at two grown men dressed up for the festivities.

"Forgotten how to speak English?" Bodie

said, twisting the man's elbow painfully at the first faint sign of rebellion. "Wouldn't try that if I were you," he said in a friendly voice, waving at an open-mouthed child as they walked past the food department and into the delivery area at the back. "You see, if you do that, then I'd have to do this—" a solid punch to the stomach, "and then I'd have to do this—" an upper-cut to the jaw, "and then—"

"Leave it out, Bodie," Doyle said, straight-arming his partner back from the reeling prisoner. "He's not worth getting fired for."

"Yeh, but I owe him and his mates, Doyle, Christ, what I owe them!"

Doyle looked calmly at his partner, and shivered as he realised that Bodie was now also a man he had had sex with. A man he could have as his lover, if he wanted to work at it. If he wanted to take on the darkness inside Bodie and allow Bodie to see his own darkness. If he was willing to take the chance of loving and still being rejected.

"He's not worth me losing you as my partner, Bodie," he said, staring into Bodie's eyes, making an offer, upping the ante from sex against a wall to building a proper relationship, based on friendship and partnership and the understanding that came from sharing a dirty, necessary job with all its attendant violence and horrors.

Bodie took a deep breath, flexed his fingers out of their fist, used his hand to mockingly smooth the ruffled red hair. "He's right, you know," he smiled at his silent prisoner. "You're not worth spitting on."

Then Doyle was looking at him again, smiling, seeing Bodie's smile turn from dangerous, leashed violence into that odd vulnerability he'd surprised on Bodie's face in the gym that morning.

"If you two have quite finished gaping like landed fish, we've got a job of work to do here." Cowley, of course, showing up at the worst possible moment. But there was an echoing throb of desire in Doyle's groin, and he decided that there was a moment that could have been a hell of a lot worse. With a very discreet pinching of Bodie's bottom, he began the dry recitation of facts for his boss, walking over towards the car whilst Lucas and McCabe took a louring prisoner to Bodie's car, Santa's spare keys snaffled from

Cowley's glove compartment.

Doyle made a face at his partner, one which Bodie, by the miracle of rapport and shared interest, managed to decipher as meaning, 'go on, ask him. I'm in his bad books so I can't'.

"Em, sir," Bodie said as Doyle's brief report wound down but before Cowley could wind up into his usual sharp-fanged assessment of their performance. He was as bold as brass, showing off a little for Doyle. "As Doyle's given you his report, there's no need for us to come in with you, so we can finish off for the day now, right?"

Cowley smiled at him, very nicely, which was enough to put both Bodie and Doyle firmly on guard. "Why, no, you don't, Bodie, and how kind of you to do my job for me. In fact, as I'm so pleased that you've decided to help me deploy my men, I'm going to let you and Doyle here solve the problem of CID's needing their manpower back as soon as possible."

Doyle had a horrible feeling he knew what was coming next, and it wasn't going to be anywhere nearly as pleasant as coming up against a door had been.

"Sir?" Bodie asked, with an expression that showed that he knew his boss just as well as Doyle did.

"Aye, you can give CID a hand, Bodie. You and your partner in crime here can go upstairs and tell Dickinson and Richards that they can report back in to their Inspector, whilst the pair of you can cover until the shop can find themselves a new Santa and a new elf."

Doyle drew Bodie an absolute stinker of a look, but Bodie knew better than to turn round and catch it right between the eyes.

"Yes, sir," Bodie finally said, having learned from Doyle's dire mistake in arguing with their boss last week.

"Oh, and Doyle," Cowley said as he got into his car and Doyle started off towards the staff entrance, "you had best get changed before you go back to work—you've got a ladder in your tights."

"Thanks for telling me, sir!" Doyle shouted sarcastically at the departing car. "I'll just get into a new pair right away, sir, don't mind me, sir, I love poncing around like a fairy, sir—"

"Only thing is, Doyle," Bodie whispered as he fell into step immediately behind the grumbling Doyle, "I don't think he meant you had a

hole in your tights.”

“So what did he mean?” Doyle muttered, storming up the stairs, thinking of wonderful things like Cowley, instead of Christmas pud, on the platter covered in flaming brandy and prickly holly.

“I think he meant you had something long, and hard, and upright in your tights, petal,” Bodie murmured, a quick solid grope making Doyle jump to attention, and in more ways than one.

“You—” But Bodie was already passing him on the stairs, the first strains of ‘dick the balls with boys and jelly’ wafting down behind him.

On the floor of the toy department, Santa’s Grotto settled down into its manic rhythms of crying children pacified with toys and complaining parents handing over folded banknotes, and a Father Christmas who made the children laugh by making Mr. Ray the Nice Elf jump ever so high...

And, our shopping finished, or our money run out, or our patience completely exhausted, we could come back to the toy department, and smile at the nice elves and nod to the jolly Father Christmas. We would take our child’s hand, and listen abstractly as the words streamed forth, all of Santa’s expensive Christmas morning promises. We would smile then, for we had those childish dreams already hidden away at the bottom of the wardrobe, or frown, for nothing

on the child’s list of wishes had been bought.

We would go down the crowded escalator, dragging our child thoughtlessly through the minefield of shopping bags and umbrellas, passing under the dry blast of heat that was our last moment of comfort before emerging to the breath-stealing shock of winter outside. Walking head-down to the wind, wearily unseeing this time of the great shining sleigh or the glittering displays, we would struggle to the bus stop or the tube station, avoiding puddles, careless of children’s feet protected so completely by bright wellies, our minds far from the glitter of the shop we had left and thinking only about what had yet to be done, and the cooking that had yet to be started, leaving the bright lights of the shops ever farther behind us.

And after a time, as unaware of us as we would be of them, two men would also emerge from the monolith of the shop, not touching, but walking closely side by side, circling away from the busy street to where a car had been left that morning. As we would sit swaying on a crowded bus, they would reach their car, the one with the curly hair glancing disapprovingly at the one with straight hair as he jumped from yet another well-placed pinch. But still, he wouldn’t move away, until they had to get in the car, undercover costumes slung onto the back seat, Santa and elf garb tangled all up together, forgotten, the two men looking at each other with brief, knowing smiles, the future tingling between them.

SEEING IS BELIEVING *or* ALL OVER TWIST



Take one Bodie, one Doyle, put them together in a van on an overnight obbo, and stir in persistent questioning and a pinch of philosophizing on life, the universe, and everything. Result? A savory stew of unexpected revelations. Please M. Fae, may we have some more?

“So go on, tell me,” Doyle started up again, settling his bum a bit more comfortably on the plastic seat, elbow narrowly missing a stack of electronic equipment, “do you believe in anything you can’t actually see?”

“Ooh, yes,” Bodie piped in a little-boy voice, “I believe that big fat Father Christmas is going to squeeze his enormous fat arse down a tiny little chimney—and do it in modern blocks of flats as well, while he’s at it.” He shifted in his seat, stretching muscles to prevent the nagging backache that was the usual aftermath of an overnight obbo in the buggy-boo, especially when not only did he have to put up with the incipient claustrophobia of the cell-like van, but he also was incarcerated with the most pernicious of friends. “Hand us the flask, will you?”

Doyle passed the dark red flask over, handing Bodie the packet of Penguins before he could

ask for them as well. “You’ll get fat,” he said, watching in ostentatious disgust as three chocolate biscuits disappeared with alarming alacrity.

“Fat? I’ll have you know this is solid muscle!” Such declaration somewhat spoiled by the spray of chocolate-coated crumbs that landed everywhere.

Doyle wouldn’t have minded the chance to find out if it really were all solid muscle, and if a certain muscle were more solid than the rest. But instead of leaping upon his coy partner, he made a point of being fastidious, brushing himself off, drawing Bodie a dirty look.

“You’re just put out because I remembered to bring a tuck box with me and you didn’t,” Bodie muttered indistinctly due to both a mouthful of biscuits and his head being bent under the table while he rummaged around in one of his carrier bags.

“Rubbish,” Doyle lied, thinking longingly of

SEEING IS BELIEVING *OF ALL OVER TWIST*

both the stuffed condition of his fridge and the mounded condition of the bottom of his Christmas tree and how long it was going to be before Bodie came over to share it all with him, food disappearing faster than Bodie's patter of jokes appeared.

Bodie, knowing Doyle better than Doyle knew Bodie, kept on fumbling round in the dark. "Ah-ha!" he announced, goal in hand, which was more than could be said of Doyle, whose hands were decorously away from his groin. "Ta-ta-ta-ra!" With as courtly a flourish as possible when trapped between the wall and the table edge, Bodie presented Doyle with an enormous selection box, the sort that came complete with Desperate Dan's maze and assorted puzzles on the back and a dentist's nightmare within. "There you go, wouldn't forget you, would I?"

Doyle grinned delightedly, then frowned in keeping with the never-ending back-biting they both enjoyed with such verve. He produced a masterful combination of seriously aggrieved and wounded to the core with just a dash of righteous indignation. "You managed when it was my birthday!"

"Yeh, but we *were* undercover at the time, and I wasn't supposed to know you, was I?"

Doyle conceded the point grudgingly, grinning to himself as he scored one over his mate when Bodie fell for his woebegone act, hook, line, and sinker. Then movement sounded in the house they were bugging, all fun and games forgotten so that Bodie went back to listening in and Doyle leaned back in the chair until only faint smudges of lower body were visible in the scant light of the observation equipment. Face completely in shadow, he sat there munching on a Flake, and wondering. He knew so many snippets about Bodie, which was hardly surprising, living in each others' pockets as they sometimes had to. He could list Bodie's favourite books—a very long list—and the foods Bodie hated—a very, very short list indeed. Same thing when it came to music and films and television programmes. He knew the names of the men Bodie played cricket with, knew about Aunt Maggie who had moved into the house when Bodie was six and used to tell him outrageous fabrications about her past. He even, as of seven months ago, knew that Bodie was bisexual, although distinctly more inclined to-

wards the male of the species, to the point that Doyle often found himself wondering if Bodie's girlfriends were a form of self-deception rather than real desire.

He stretched a bit, wishing that either they could open a window or that the heating worked on a setting between absolutely-stifling and freeze-your-balls-off. Still, he mused, staring at Bodie's abstracted profile, it could be worse: they could be trapped in their car, and compared to that, the van was a veritable Taj Mahal.

Automatically making sure that he didn't disturb Bodie's view of the monitors, Doyle reached round and snaffled the plastic lid of the flask and then made a face as he tasted Bodie's version of tea. Disgusting as always, but it was warm and wet and something to do. He wasn't even close to being tired, the day having been spent in nothing more strenuous than putting up his Christmas tree and that last bit of shopping for perishables. Bodie was supposed to be coming over for Christmas dinner tomorrow before they went back on shift, and in over-indulgent preparation, he had a pile of food in. Be nice, he thought, spending Christmas with Bodie. In fact, it had been years since he'd bothered over much with Christmas—never seemed to be much point, not once he'd left home, it not being the same without someone to share it with. Anyway, as an unmarried, he usually landed Christmas duty, which he didn't mind, not really. Not when he was going to spend it with Bodie. Funny, he'd always loved Christmas and hadn't even noticed how much he missed making a big fuss over it until he had Bodie to cater to.

"What're you doing for Christmas then?" Bodie asked him, keeping his gaze on the array of monitors and tape devices.

"What d'you mean, what'm I doing for Christmas?" That brought Doyle up short, all his visions of domestic bliss thrown to the wind. He refused to accept Bodie's blasé attitude: he remembered too well his partner's almost-shy smile when he'd been invited over. "You'd better not've bloody forgotten that you're coming round tomorrow. You haven't, have you?"

"Course not," Bodie said offhandedly, the whole shenanigan apparently meaning less to him than to Doyle, but the expression on his

face and the timbre of his voice betrayed his super-cool façade. “But that’s not till later, and I was just wondering what you were doing up to then, you know, who you were going to spend the day with, if there was someone special you had lined up. Christ, Doyle, all I did was ask a civil question, no need for you to jump down my throat like that.”

“Yeh, well, I spent most of today running round like a chicken with my head cut off, buying grub for you,” he lied cheerfully, pleased by Bodie’s slip-ups and marking himself another point against Bodie. He sneaked a peak at his partner, calculating how far he could push Bodie this time. “Anyway, with you coming over, I’ll be slaving over the cooker all day tomorrow, won’t I?”

Bodie cast him a quick sideways glance. “You don’t have to, honest. The Chinese place round from you’ll be open, if the cooking bothers you, I could grab a take-away?”

Ending on a question, it made Doyle smile. He was the only one—apart from Cowley himself—that Bodie was ever willing to really go out of his way for, or more impressively, give up food for and it was quite a compliment to have Bodie turn down a traditional feast in favour of soggy spring rolls and limp pineapple fritters. He smiled then at Bodie, leaning forward to tap his friend affectionately on the arm, quite content now that he’d pushed Bodie into that small gesture of friendship. “Nah, you know I like cooking, an’ it’s always worth it, the way you clear your plate. Don’t you worry yourself over it, mate, you just turn up hungry.”

Bodie looked at him for a time that stretched itself out until even Doyle was a bit on edge. More for want of something to say than any real thirst, Doyle nodded at the over-sweet tea. “Can I have some more?”

Bodie nodded, ready to start in on the usual backchat, when they heard someone’s footsteps coming up the street, heels clicking wetly on the pavement. Tea and banter forgotten, heads close-pressed together, they watched as the real focus of this observation job showed up at the innocuous little house.

“So, go on, tell me,” Doyle started again, feet propped precariously on the table amidst the gadgets and the flasks and the wrappers from

the three bars of chocolate Doyle had quietly scoffed whilst slagging his partner off about Bodie’s infamous eating habits, “is there anything you believe in that you can’t actually see?”

“Oh, Christ, not that again!”

“Interesting you said ‘Christ’ though, innit?”

“That, Raymond my old son,” Bodie said patiently, swapping seats and shifts with Doyle, automatically signing the log book, “is called blasphemy, and that’s not something anyone can believe in.” He picked up the rest of his sandwich, taking a hefty bite before he added: “It’s just something you do to something you don’t believe in.”

That wasn’t quite Doyle’s definition of blasphemy, but he was willing to let it pass in the interest of getting Bodie to actually open up to him. “So you definitely don’t believe in God then?”

“I didn’t say that. I said I don’t believe in Christ.”

“But you celebrate Christmas,” sharp, pinning Bodie, hoping that he’d caught him out on something.

“And since when has Christmas been anything but an expensive over-indulgence? For your information, mate, Christmas as we know and love it was something the Victorians invented, and we all know how fucking moral that bunch of hypocrites was.”

“But,” Doyle went on, ignoring Bodie’s customary pose of cynical misanthropy, “you said you didn’t believe in Jesus, not that you didn’t believe in God. So does that mean—”

“It means,” Bodie answered him, brooking no argument and the lash of his voice warning Doyle off, “that I don’t believe in any fucking God sitting on his fucking cloud watching over his fucking flock.” He paused, eyeing Doyle with would-be contempt. “Don’t tell me you do?”

But Doyle had long since got beyond falling for Bodie’s deflectional questionings. “Not me we’re talking about, is it?”

“It’s not me either. You’re the one talking about God. Which is bloody stupid if you ask me.”

Interesting that Bodie had come over so defensive. “When it’s Christmas? It’s perfect!”

“And most important of all,” Bodie, com-

pletely changing the atmosphere, pushing back any slight approach to real intimacy, bending one of his rare, warm smiles on Doyle, “you’re bored and getting on my wick is more entertaining than picking your nose.” Bodie was turned fully towards Doyle now, his gaze remarkably soft and gentle for a hard-nosed CI5 agent who was supposedly keeping his partner at arm’s length. “Here,” he added, thumping Doyle on the nearest knee and handing him another cling-filmed sandwich, “have some more of these. You need to put some meat on your bones, else you’ll end up puncturing Susy the Inflatable Doll and I wouldn’t want you to be lonely.”

Doyle grinned back at him, cosily aware of how fond he was of Bodie, for all the other man’s faults and even more smugly aware of how fond Bodie was of him. But then Bodie looked down and away, and Doyle looked away, the thin edge of the wedge of discomfort beginning to split between them. Not easy admitting how fond you were of someone, not when it wasn’t hidden behind jokes or affectionate insults, nor when there was nowhere to run and the only distractions were the clicks and hisses of electronics and the idle chatter of a politician old enough to know better than to believe that a woman young enough to be his daughter would be so enamoured of him.

Unwilling to face his own emotionalism when it came to Bodie, Doyle let the moment pass. “Can I have some more of the ginger beer?” he said, paving the way for desultory conversation to fill the quietness that had fallen between the elder statesman and his flight of fancy, filling the empty space that had fallen between himself and Bodie and which threatened to fill with yet more of Doyle’s honesty and even less of Bodie’s. And that wasn’t what Doyle was after, not this time.

“So anyway,” Doyle said as if an hour and a half hadn’t passed and as if the idle chatter hadn’t given way to the grunting and groaning of other people having sex, “is there anything you believe in that you can’t actually see?”

“You still going on about that? Christ, are you off your rocker or something? We’ve just been sitting here listening to that bloke getting his end away, and you’re asking me philo-

sophical questions?” Bodie pulled back, looking at Doyle in mock horror. “Here, you didn’t go and have the operation without telling me, did you, flower?”

Doyle fluttered his eyelashes shamelessly and blew a couple of kisses just for good measure, although his eyes were sharp with the miasma of desire that had grown with the sounds leaching through the speakers. “Oh, petal, I’d never do *anything* without asking you first!” But that was too uncomfortably close to the truth, so he dropped it, preferring to slide into conversation that put Bodie, not himself, under the microscope. “No, but seriously, *is* there anything you believe in?”

“My Browning.”

The comment landed on them like the wet blanket it was. “I’m not asking about that sort of thing,” Doyle said very quietly, pushing to get Bodie to open up to him, to reveal some of the depths that Doyle had thus far only been allowed to glimpse. “I know what you believe in when it comes to the job—”

“Do you? Do you really?” Very sharp, cutting almost, a brightness of cynicism in Bodie’s eyes. “I seriously doubt that, Ray.” Dismissively, he went back to watching the monitors of the darkened building, an almost visible shell around him.

“So you don’t think I know that much, eh?” Doyle moved closer, the legs of his chair screeching as he dragged himself to mere inches from Bodie. “You want me to tell you what you believe in?”

Bodie laughed, but it was hollowed with wariness and echoing with his own doubt. “You can try.”

“You believe in Cowley,” Doyle said with utter certainty. “You believe in that gun of yours.” Then, not sure at all, but hoping, pushing, prodding to have something—something he hadn’t yet named to himself—put on display for them both to see. “You even believe in me, don’t you?”

“What—you planning on offering to guard the Pearly Gates or something?” Bodie was squirming now, fiddling with anything that could keep him from revealing himself to Doyle’s perceptive eyes. “I’ve got news for you, pal, they don’t take our sort up there.”

Doyle didn’t move back, but simply watched

all the more closely, this the first time Bodie had ever mentioned their shared sexuality in anything but the most jocular of tones. “That why you gave up on the Church?”

“Was never in the fucking church! My family’s not religious, never has been.” He made a couple of purely unnecessary adjustments to the surveillance gear, as if saying nothing would out-wait Doyle. Under that unblinking stare, he yielded, peeling back a single layer of his outer defences, showing more than he probably ought. “And when you get to know some of the things people are capable of, it’s hard to believe in some fat old geezer sitting on a fucking cloud twitching his harp.”

“Might not be someone like that. Might be—”

“An incredibly boring fucking conversation to go over again. You know something, Ray,” he went on, thinking about philosophers and debaters and dramatists, “you should’ve been Greek.”

“Didn’t you know?” Doyle asked him with fatuous wonder, thinking about Greeks and sex and the indulging therein. “I already am!”

And had the pleasure of seeing Bodie blush, and fumble, and suddenly become engrossed with the routine notes they were supposed to make when the target so much as farted.

Contrary to popular belief, Doyle really wasn’t a cruel and insensitive bastard: he let the subject drop, although he didn’t return his chair to the wall, sitting close enough instead that every time he swung his foot in idle boredom, his shin brushed against Bodie’s calf. Watching Bodie watching the sleeping house, Doyle indulged himself in remembering a particular evening over half a year ago. It had been one of their best nights, nothing spectacular to the casual observer: a couple of pints, home to watch the match on television, sitting up together talking until they heard the milk float clattering down the street. A lot of secrets had come out that night, but as usual there were more of Doyle’s than Bodie’s. In fact, now that he came to think about it, Bodie had refused to admit his sexual proclivities until Doyle had admitted that he enjoyed the occasional bout with a bloke. Then Bodie had spoken up, and Doyle remembered the lessons Bodie had obviously learned from the adored Aunt Maggie, because Bodie had regaled him with story upon

story of scandalous interludes, some of which may or may not have been true, but most of which had been doctored to make them funny.

Typical, that. Hide something in plain sight, make a joke of it, tell some terrible secret (I got out of Africa because the men I was working with enjoyed killing too much, Ray and I was starting to understand why...), and send everyone home happy with the notion that they’d been allowed in under Bodie’s defences to see the real man behind the bland and butch façade. Until they went over it again and realised that they’d found out more details, they’d found out more action, yet what made Bodie tick was still as obscured as ever. Like the whole thing with blokes. If he believed Bodie’s comments implicitly—and he wasn’t that stupid—then Bodie only went for fellas when there was nothing better available. But that wasn’t borne out by seven months of very careful observation. Given a stream of people walking past, it was the men’s bums Bodie looked at. Given a group of people in a pub, and Bodie would either be looking at the blokes, or he’d find some man to share a knowing wink and a smile with. Oh, yeh, given his druthers, Doyle was convinced that Bodie would rather have a man any day of the week.

Which left the question of why Bodie hadn’t so much as pinched his bum since that night. Not a pleasant situation, finding all Bodie’s casual touching stopped as if it had never started. Obvious reasons for it, of course, such as Bodie not wanting Doyle to think his virtue was at risk. But it had left Doyle with a growing loneliness, an emptiness that was very hard to fill. And, of course, he speculated as he watched Bodie stretch and rub his eyes tiredly, there was the fact that maybe Bodie thought he couldn’t get away with it any more. Maybe Bodie thought that he’d get caught at something worse than feeling his partner up. Maybe touching him up like that revealed a hell of a lot more than Bodie thought safe.

And that, that was what Doyle was interested in.

“Anyway,” Doyle said as soon as Bodie stirred from his uncomfortable doze in an even more uncomfortable chair, not bothering to acknowledge that they’d swapped turns and

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chairs and Bodie'd had two hours sleep since last Doyle had uttered a mutter, "you were going to tell me what you couldn't see that you actually believed in."

Bodie yawned, fingers scrabbling through short hair, redshot eyes focussing blearily on the flask with its reviving, if cooling, tea. "That," he finally mumbled round the edge of the plastic cup, "is a barefaced lie."

"No, it's not," Doyle responded with absolute mendacity. "You were just about to tell me when you dropped off and started snoring instead. You must be getting senile in your old age, mate, if you can't remember—"

"Doyle," and there was an edge to his voice, "I couldn't've been about to confess my all to you, because there isn't a single solitary fucking thing I believe in that I can't either see, hear, smell, touch or taste. All right? That finally sunk through your thick skull then?"

Doyle gave him a long steady look, until Bodie shuffled around guiltily and began their usual banter, distracting Ray with offers of sandwiches from the bag and soup from the other flask and a bag of Doyle's favourite violet chocolates from Harrods.

Not letting up the pressure of his gaze, Doyle refused the offers, eyes narrowing in interest as Bodie took on a hunted cast. His partner was obviously looking frantically for something to close this conversation, and so Doyle gave it to him, respite for Bodie, time enough for himself to think about what he was going to do. "Can I have some more of the crisps?" he asked. "Nah, the roast chicken ones," when Bodie went for the only flavour of crisps that Doyle hated. He noticed the tension bunching the tendons of Bodie's neck and took pity on his partner, deliberately setting out to be amusing, harking back to a conversation that had been off-and-on for days now. "Oi, d'you reckon Cowley gets himself all done up in his Highland best and stands to attention for the Queen's Speech tomorrow? Can just picture it, our George—" and he rabbitied on, lulling Bodie into a sense of ease, whilst Doyle's mind raced around nineteen to the dozen, adding together all of Bodie's reactions and comments and silences.

"So anyway," Doyle finally began again, close to the end of their shift, well into Christ-

mas Day, but still a long time before the sun would show its pallid face, always supposing it could brave the clouds and the cold, "what is there that you believe in—"

"Fucking hell, Doyle!" Bodie positively exploded, yelling loud enough to wake the dead or startle any poor passing stranger. "Will you just shut the fuck up and give me peace?"

Not even Ray Doyle would ignore Bodie in that tone of voice. Silent, Doyle shrugged as if his partner were being unreasonable, then settled back to finish putting two and two together.

"So what do you believe in that you can't see?"

Not Doyle asking this time, but Bodie, and a Bodie not looking at him, a Bodie concentrating on fiddling with a vivisected biro.

"Me?" Not often, not often at all that they either indulged in conversations like this at Bodie's instigation—too dangerous in some ways, for they could lead to confessions better left unsaid or consequences neither one of them wanted. Doyle shrugged, giving himself another second before he committed himself to an answer. Interesting that Bodie was asking him that, interesting that Bodie was the one initiating a deeper level of intimacy. And something that had to be a good sign. "I believe in a lot of things."

"Such as?" Not quite belligerent, not quite challenging, but very defensive, and Doyle wasn't entirely sure why. Oh, it could be nothing more than Bodie being awkward about trying to show Doyle that he wasn't bearing a grudge about Doyle's nagging, but it might, if they were both lucky, be because Bodie was finally willing to take their relationship another step forward.

Doyle looked at him for a long minute, long enough to make Bodie look at him, long enough for Bodie to become uncomfortable with the silence—long enough, in other words, to make Bodie vulnerable to the answer.

"You," Doyle said, unblinking in his honesty. "You."

And watched, as Bodie heard him, and took the answer in, absorbed the unspoken that lay underneath that single word.

"Me?" A fumble with a notebook, a dropping

of a pen, and then Bodie was looking at him again. "Not God, not Cowley, not yourself? Just me?"

Doyle's turn now to back off, thoughts of confession a lot cosier than the real thing. "Now who's got delusions of grandeur? Of course not just you. But you more than anyone else."

"Why me?"

Doyle watched Bodie's expression change, was convinced he saw the burden of responsibility settling upon Bodie, the weight of someone else's needs, someone else's life... Things Bodie had avoided since he was old enough to know what that all entailed.

"Who else?" Doyle shrugged as he spoke, as if it weren't important. "And anyway, I thought it was me meant to be asking what you believe in. *You* already know all the important about *me*." He leaned back in his seat, giving Bodie what little space was available, and waited for Bodie to take the plunge, or insist on leaving them circling round each other in this endless game of self-protection.

A deep sigh, a hand run through hair, a coiling of energy needing to explode, to *move*, to get out of here... And then Bodie was simply looking at him, and Doyle knew that this was the moment that would decide if he were going to truly know this man, if he were going to be granted the gift of seeing whatever Bodie believed in—the things that made Bodie the man he was. To find out if they were going to just continue being mates, or progress to something more.

"Our relief's going to be knocking on that door any minute now," Bodie said by way of a *non sequitur* that made perfect sense to Doyle, who had a slow upwelling of what would soon be joy. Bodie hadn't said that what he believed was none of Doyle's business, he hadn't said he wasn't going to talk about it. What he was saying was that there wasn't time and this wasn't the place. Which meant...

"I've got a fridgeful of food," Doyle delivered his own *non sequitur*, knowing Bodie would understand him the same way he did when they were on the job and there wasn't the time for mere words. He put on a voice that would have done a music hall announcer proud. "A Full English Breakfast," he declaimed, "complete with eggs, sausage, bacon, tomatoes, beans,

bread and butter—"

"Kippers?" Bodie added when Doyle began to wind down.

"And kippers! But they're the frozen ones, mind." He frowned theatrically, although his face was alight with this unspoken agreement they had, that Bodie would come home with him, that Bodie would let him in close to him, that—

Bodie, prosaic, breaking into Doyle's fantasy. "Have you got kidneys?"

"Course I've got fucking kidneys! But if you think I'm going to let you dig them out and fry them up just so you can have a complete breakfast, then you're mad. I'll cook for you, sweetheart," and he proved that Bodie's Bogart was bad only in the absence of Doyle's competition, "but I won't die—"

Doyle bit the words off: neither one of them was quite ready for declarations the likes of that. They both knew that they'd each one of them risked their lives for the other, and in this oddly intimate atmosphere, jokes about not being willing to die for the other were a minefield leading to denials and the trivialisation of what Doyle wanted.

And that, he finally admitted to himself in so many words after having danced round the topic for half a year, was to have Bodie. Physically, sexually, emotionally, even spiritually. With a chilling of shock and a thrilling of excitement, he finally confessed to himself that he wanted Bodie bound to him forever, with no time off for good behaviour, Bodie at his side always. He looked up then, amazement written all over his face, to catch Bodie watching him.

"Just dawned on you, has it?" Bodie asked almost casually, smiling quite indulgently at Doyle.

What was that Doyle had been thinking about—Bodie's girlfriends being a form of self-deception? How about deception of an excessively immature partner who was too stupid to know what he really wanted? And what was that about never really knowing what was going on inside Bodie's thick skull? A deeper understanding of what they were all about than Doyle himself had, obviously. That's what all the not-touching and the girlfriends dangled in front of his nose had been about: getting Doyle

to the point where he missed Bodie and admitted to himself that he wanted the other man for his own. “You’re a rotten bugger,” he said without heat, too caught up with all this newness to be angry.

“Complaining to the management before you’ve sampled the goods? Tut, tut, Raymond, shame on you.” Then a happy and for Bodie, an uncomplicated grin, this one thing that Bodie was absolutely sure about. “You won’t be calling me a rotten bugger after we’ve shagged a few times, though, I can promise you that.”

A tantalising comment, but there were other things Doyle wanted to dig into first before he got started thinking about sex and lost all brain power. “How long have you known?” he asked, really rather put out that his own great revelation should be old hat and so embarrassingly blatant to his partner.

“Since about two weeks after you confessed you liked ‘an occasional bout with a bloke’ was how you put it. Charming, Doyle, absolutely fucking charming.”

To think that all Bodie’s hesitations and doubts and holding back must have been a ploy to get Doyle to recognise what Bodie had already worked out for himself—and without the decency of informing Doyle himself. Doyle didn’t know whether to murder the smug bastard or throw him to the floor and fuck him into oblivion. “You know something, I wish that once, just fucking once, you’d let me know what was going on inside that thick skull of yours.”

Bodie grinned at him, the same grin that usually had his commanders putting him on report or relegating him to the file room. “All you had to do was ask. All right, all right!” This, as Doyle not-so-playfully went for him. Arms full of a vaguely struggling Raymond Doyle, Bodie told him. “I’ve wanted you for a long time, Ray my old china, but you—” He shook his head, and manfully resisted the temptation to kiss a Doyle who was half in his arms, ripe rump hot and luscious on his lap. “You had this idea about having a ‘bout’ with a bloke, as if it was the flu or something. Did you honestly think I was going to get involved with you when being with a man was something you described like an illness?” For all his tone was jestful, Bodie was obviously deadly serious, for all that one hand was stroking the peak of Doyle’s

nipple through the limpness of cotton. “I’m not stupid and I’m not a masochist either. Being a ‘bout’ for you would’ve ripped me apart, Ray, and I’m not about to let anyone hurt me.”

Understanding was easy now that he at least had the basic rules of the game at his disposal. “Not even me. That’s what you were going to put on the end there, wasn’t it, Bodie?”

“Fishing for compliments, Doyle?”

There was an edge to that voice, a warning that for all his outward confidence and insouciant sang-froid, Bodie was dangerously insecure about this. Doyle, for one, couldn’t blame him. He stared at Bodie, taken aback as both Bodie’s knowledge of him and his own less than flattering attitudes were pointed out to him, and quietly decided that Bodie was right—he really could be a proper bastard at times, and if he’d been in Bodie’s shoes, he wouldn’t have chanced it either. He pushed himself up and away, resettling in his own seat, Bodie immediately using the pause to annotate the log, behaving as if there wasn’t a single thing going on. Which just went to prove how nervous the poor bugger was. And how easy to misinterpret Doyle’s pulling away from him had been. There was a lot he could say, but Bodie’s too-accurate assessment of him still stung, and he doubted that the facile phrases that he’d used so frequently to so many others would work with Bodie. In fact, for all that there was so much of his partner that he didn’t know, he was well aware that the wrong words now would set them back another half-year. No heavy declarations of affection then, no comments about how he wanted to be with Bodie forever and a day, nothing that would sound pretentious and therefore, meaningless. Best to keep it light, then, to fall back on their own tried and true methods of communication. Best, if only because it protected Doyle from Bodie not needing him as much as he wanted his partner. “So are you coming over for breakfast then?”

A wary look for that, a question in Bodie’s eyes, and then Bodie, braver by far in this moment, actually put it into words. “It’s the first time I’ve ever been offered breakfast without the sex coming first. Does that mean I get to say ‘can I have some more please’ and have anything I fancy?”

Their usual rivalry rose again, and Doyle

SEEING IS BELIEVING *OF ALL OVER TWIST*

decided that if Bodie could do it, then he bloody well could as well. "You can say anything you want to, it's not going to bother me," a tacit invitation to more than just sex and far more than mere food. Anything Bodie fancied, in fact, not that either of them was sappy enough to wax lyrical over it. "Anyway, I suppose," Doyle said, balancing his chair on two legs, deliberately spreading his legs to entice Bodie with the view thus revealed, "we could always say that we were just going about the sex bit so that it would match your brain, mate."

Bodie was smiling at him now, that fatuous grin Doyle had caught on him in unexpected moments, more promise in that than all the

fancy poetry Oxford had ever published. "You mean salacious, lecherous and fucking brilliant?"

"Nah," Doyle said lazily, utterly straight-faced. "I mean backwards."

It was rather fortunate for Doyle's continued existence that their relief chose that very instant to tap quietly on the door.

"Or in your case," Bodie muttered under cover of Murphy and Jax complaining about cold and wet and ruined Christmas Days, Doyle jumping as a very proficient hand cupped his backside, "very arsy-versy."

And the closest Doyle got to complaining about that comment, was to ask for more...



BAAAH HUMBUG!

OR

BLEAK HOUSE



Here is another overnight tale, though this one's far more serious, more bleak in outlook. Not unexpectedly, the story is a 'cozy'—Bodie and Doyle almost in isolation, cut off from the world and coming to grips with redefining their relationship in the hours leading to Christmas morning. M. Fae loves the idea of confining all events—conversation or otherwise—to the bed, and Bleak House nearly qualifies. For those who delight in details, the setting of the story is real as are some of the characters. Baaah!

The silence in the car was portentous and contentious, simmering resentment ready to boil over into steaming fury.

"If it's the alternator that's gone, Bodie," Doyle finally said, voice patinaed with an ominous calm, "and I wind up being late again for Debbie and she dumps me, I'll fucking kill you."

"Can't be the alternator," Bodie muttered, trying futilely to restart the car, a vapid grumbling being the best the engine had to offer. "Had it checked before we left Derby, so it's got to be something else. So you can just pack in blaming me, all right?"

Doyle turned his head and stared, implacably, at Bodie. "Tell you what, Bodie. If it's not the alternator, I'll eat my words. If it *is* the alternator, I'll bite your head off. And are you going to just sit there twiddling the bloody key, or are you going to get up off your fat arse and have a look-see and find out just why the fucking hell we've stopped dead in the middle of nowhere?"

Bodie, wisely, held his peace, face razored shut in unsmiling sullenness. He got out from the warmth of the car, the scalpel-sharp wind cutting right through his clothes all the way to his bones. Against his fingers, the bonnet was cold, clinging to his skin with cannibalistic enthusiasm, not yet quite arctic enough to freeze him to the metal, but warning him that conditions were far from ideal. Teeth chattering, he ran his knowledgeable gaze over the moribund engine, nothing jumping up to claim responsibility for the predicament they were in. Hands shaking from increasing cold, he checked a few things, cursing volubly when the distributor cap came off in his hands, the inner casing cracked and the rotor corroded into uselessness. Not quite the alternator, but close enough that Doyle was going to murder him for his carelessness. Christ, why'd he have to get the one moronic mechanic in Derby? And why'd he have to get stuck with a spectacularly foul-tempered Doyle in the

middle of a cold snap that had OAPs scratching their heads trying to remember a worse winter?

“Bring enough of the cold in with you, did you?” Doyle snapped as Bodie finally managed to pull the door shut against the blustering gust of wind.

“Oh, it’s bitter out there, Bodie old mate, ta ever so for going out in it to check the car for both of us,” Bodie snapped right back, rubbing his hands together to stop the itching tingle of returning warmth.

“And if you’d had the car looked at proper, you wouldn’t’ve had to go out in that in the first place, so don’t you get stroppy with me, Bodie.”

“Course not, I mean, it wouldn’t do for *me* to get stroppy, would it? Only the great Raymond Doyle’s allowed to get stroppy and unreasonable, isn’t he?”

Doyle merely glowered, ignoring Bodie’s complaining completely. “What about the car?”

“Distributor and rotor are both bugged.”

“Which explains why the stupid fucking thing kept stalling on us. Told you it wasn’t up to the drive back to town, didn’t I? That’s why I said it wanted fixing, but no, you wouldn’t put the effort in, would you? Said it was fine, said it was only the battery getting past it, said you’d had a bloke give it the once over, but—”

“You calling me a liar, Doyle? And why’s it my fault, eh? You’ve got a cheek, moaning at me when you were too busy chatting up that big titted blonde to take care of your own fucking car.” He gestured, a small tight gesture of fury that still managed to encompass the gathering dark and the looming threat of snow clouds. “Was she worth it then? Eh? Good bit of cunt, worth getting us stuck out here in a blizzard?”

Doyle’s eyes were sharp, speculative, as they took in Bodie’s seething profile and clenched jaw. “Yeh, she was, actually,” he drawled, watching as the muscle in Bodie’s cheek spasmed and the throat muscles rippled as Bodie swallowed once, twice, the temper being visibly forced back down. “Anyway, you were the one who volunteered to get the car checked.”

“Yeh, but only because you were too fucking selfish to help. And while we’re on the subject of who fucked this up, who was it who said that he knew the roads round here like the back of his hand, eh? Who was it who said this would get us round the road works?”

Doyle, green eyes turned to slate, glared at him, unblinking. Challenging. Testing. Until Bodie looked away, out the window at wintery wastes far warmer than the hurtful distance of his partner.

Silence erupted again, Bodie’s mouth prissing eventighter, fists clenching on the steering wheel. He wanted, quite desperately, to hit Doyle. To hurt him, beat him, make him bleed. Make the bastard feel some of the suffering that Bodie went through every time Doyle found himself another one night stand, another woman to be used and disposed of when the element of convenience had worn off. His eyes flickered, giving him a glimpse of the tensely coiled Doyle, and he wondered, again, if Doyle even knew what he was doing to Bodie. Then common sense and cynicism reasserted themselves, reminding him that this was Ray Doyle, canny, manipulative Raymond Bloody Doyle who had been known to out-manceuvre Cowley on occasion. Oh, yeh, the little bastard knew all right. And it wouldn’t do Bodie the blindest bit of good to argue about it or complain about it: Doyle would just smile that vicious smile of his and say that Bodie had no room to talk. Bodie had, by Doyle’s lights, asked for everything that Doyle was giving him. That would appeal to Doyle’s black humour, but not half as much as the power would appeal to Doyle’s need to control.

Made uncomfortable by his thoughts, Bodie shifted in his seat, aware of the gathering temper sitting beside him. He didn’t want to look at Doyle—no, that wasn’t true. He *did* want to look at Doyle, he just didn’t want to see the expression on the face. His stomach clenched painfully, and he swallowed, damping his misery back down inside, determined that he was going to give nothing away without putting up a good fight.

“So we going to do something or d’you fancy freezing to death overnight?”

Bodie pulled himself together, plastering his customary mask on over the cracks in his façade, bitterly aware that Doyle knew every single vulnerable, aching need inside him. “And what d’you suggest? The four-star hotel in the middle of the field over there?”

Doyle paid no attention to Bodie’s heavy sarcasm, nodding not towards the barren field

but to the snaking line of hedgerows that led off to the north. “Look at that double row of hedges—as close together as that, it has to be a road leading up to a farm.”

“Unless it’s a disused track leading up to a dead monastery.” But he was getting out of the car as he said it, pulling on the gloves that had been useless for checking the engine but offered some protection for getting overnight bags out of the boot. So used to it by now, it didn’t even register upon him that the spatting fight had disappeared, the aggro subsumed into the habit of working together: subsumed, but not eradicated. The unease, the erosion of their friendship sat inside, curdled and crumpled and slowly spreading.

Doyle, arrogant in his unthinking assumption that Bodie would follow, had already started off along the road, collar turned up to meet the warmth of curls, hands stuffed into pockets, jacket pulled tight to keep his bum warm. And, perhaps, thick checked fabric pulled taut over clinging denim to emphasise the supple clench and unclench of buttock, and the sweet sway of his hips even in the unevenness of yesterday’s snow.

And Bodie watched, oh, how he watched. Breath pluming the air in rhythm with his steps, he followed Doyle, helpless desire snaking and snarling in him, demanding with a hiss of aching need to know why he was doing this to himself. But Bodie knew what he was doing, and why. Worse, Bodie knew what Doyle was doing, and why. Which made all this misery he was going through now the far lesser of two evils. Ahead of him, Doyle was disappearing into a slurry of snow blown by the gusting wind, and Bodie hurried, slogging through the grey of slush and the whiteness of snow to keep up with his partner.

Without betraying himself at all, Doyle slowed down enough to make sure that Bodie wasn’t more than five feet behind him, unwilling to risk being separated from his partner. All right, so this was England, but the green and pleasant land was suffering under a scything winter that was killing the elderly in appalling numbers. It unnerved him to see gentle land that he’d known all his childhood turned into an enemy, with deep ditches lurking under the beauty of virgin snow and ponds frozen too thinly to bear the

weight they invited with glittering snow-dappled ice. He didn’t need to glance behind himself to know that Bodie was following him: the sixth sense marked ‘Bodie’ could feel the other man’s proximity, was aware of Bodie’s mutinous glare on his back.

He turned his thoughts away from Bodie, the sight of not so distant chimney pots distracting him. No smoke from those clay pots, but in this day and age of central heating that didn’t necessarily denote disaster. Closer now, the curve of the long drive putting the hedge at his side instead of cutting across his view, Doyle could make out the largeness of house, well-tended garden draped in tonnes of picturesque snow, curtains drawn and windows firmly shut. No sound escaped the solidity of red brick and impressive green door, and all he could hear was the bruxism of his own footsteps and the sibil antswearing of Bodie coming along behind him.

The absence of life dismayed him not one bit. It would be easy enough to break in, see the night out, get the AA out to help them in the morning. Still, he didn’t much fancy a night isolated with Bodie, not with the way things were between them these days. Not that it was his, Doyle’s, fault, not in the least. It was all Bodie: Bodie’s choice, Bodie’s decision, Bodie’s bed of roses, thorns and manure and all.

Sudden, frantic barking startled him, making him stumble and turn, instinctively still, to look at Bodie. Who stared back at him with... He chose not to acknowledge the misery in Bodie’s gaze, chose instead to walk all the more briskly as the path snow shallowed out and showed some signs of fairly recent clearing. At the door the outside light had gone on, the brightness making him aware that dusk was settling earlier than it should, heavy clouds leeching the day away early. The dogs quieted to occasional shouted questions, and Doyle knew that the owner would be standing there, hand on collar, shushing the animals whilst eyeing warily the two hard cases coming up the garden path. Carefully, he pinned on his most charming and least threatening face, and lifted the heavy door knocker.

Before he could make a sound, the door opened, pulling the knocker from his grasp. The woman in the doorway was smallish and dark,

with eyes that darted like fish behind glasses too big for her face. Delicate hands held great huge golden retrievers in check, the dogs' pink tongues lolling between sharp white teeth as they strained to get at the strangers.

"Hello," Doyle smiled, "sorry to disturb you like this, but our car's broken down—"

"Ooh, I don't know," the woman said, looking askance at first Doyle and then Bodie, her accent odd and ill-defined, the voice of someone living in England for a long time but not quite long enough.

"No, really, it has," Bodie said, adding his own smile and his own charm to Doyle's, reluctantly letting the dogs sniff at him.

"And you do," Doyle swept in, suddenly noticing the small, hand-written card in the window, "have a B&B sign up."

"Yes, I know, I'm the one who put it there. But that's for summer, or even the harvest season when there's call for that kind of thing round here. But it's winter now and it's not really proper to take guests in now, is it?"

Bodie looked at Doyle and Doyle looked at Bodie. If there had been even the hint of an alternative possibility, they would've left this woman to her dogs and her oddness, but the snow was starting again, and the wind was chewing at their ears and noses.

She was looking them up and down, doubt written all over her thin-boned face. "I mean, it is Christmas, isn't it? It's not proper, not proper at all to take paying guests in at Christmas, is it?"

"No room at the Inn, eh?" Bodie asked, not quite smiling any more.

"Yes, yes, that's right. No room at the Inn. Of course, this isn't an inn, is it, not really, not an inn proper. But still, it's Christmas so I suppose..." Her eyes narrowed as she looked them over, watching them carefully as her dogs snuffled round their feet. The two dogs had expanded, joined by almost identical others, all equally large, all of equally clumsy tails and stomping paws. "But then, the dogs quite like you... Still, it *is* Christmas, and that's no time at all to be taking people in, is it? Not with the family all here, and it all so private and everything. Wouldn't be proper, would it?"

With galloping disbelief, Doyle realised that she was actually working her way up to turning them away. "But our car's broken down and it's

getting dark!"

"Not to mention it being well below freezing out here," Bodie stuck in his tuppenceworth, looking as miserably cold and waifish as he could, given his size and obvious health.

"Yes, yes, I know," the woman said, her accent drifting round from England to South Africa to Holland. "But it's Christmas and—"

An extenuated Siamese cat strolled into the hallway, meandering casually up to the figures of the Nativity Scene on display near the doorway. Delicately, it tiptoed between the greying puddles of melting snow to sniff, even more delicately at the feet of Bodie and Doyle. Evidently satisfied by whatever it found, it stretched itself up, claws digging into Doyle's jeans, a yowling meow demanding that Doyle pick it up.

"Oh, well, that's it, then, isn't it?" the woman said, suddenly all smiles, bonhomie and fraternity wreathed around her like sunshine as she gazed at the cat purring in the manger of Doyle's arms. "You'd best be coming in then, hadn't you? Well, come on then, can't have you standing on the doorstep catching cold, can we?"

Exchanging a glance, Bodie picked up their carry-alls and Doyle petted up the cat who proceeded to nuzzle, noisily and wetly, on the curl directly behind his left ear. Still, it was a small price to pay for being in out of the cold, even if they did have to suffer this strange little woman and the occasionally amorous cat.

"Double do you all right, will it? I have my family here to visit me, they're from Holland, do you know Holland? Lovely place, but my husband's all English and solid and we have to live here, you know, near where he grew up, you English are all so set in your ways, not that that's a bad thing. Like dogs, do you?"

"Oh—yes," Bodie put in, as soon as he realised the question wasn't rhetorical and was, probably, the determiner as to whether or not they were fed or sent to bed hungry for not liking dogs. "Love them, in fact," he added, avoiding Doyle's knowing look. "Especially great big ones like these."

"Do you have dogs of your own?"

"No, no. Small flat, middle of London, would be cruel to have a dog there, wouldn't it?"

Judging by the smile on her face, he'd said exactly the right thing and they'd definitely be

fed before being packed off to bed. “Oh, yes, yes, that’s why we have this place out here. For the husband, of course, but for the dogs as well. They need their space, don’t they? Not like people, we can make do with anything, but the dogs need somewhere to run, somewhere to explore.”

“Oh, couldn’t agree with you more,” Doyle smirked, being utterly charming whilst still managing to make it quite plain that he thought their hostess to be completely barmy. “You said something about a double?” This, to her back, as she started off up the stairs, dogs gallumphing around her, Bodie and Doyle following a discreet distance behind.

“Yes, yes, the double. Well, you’ll have to take it, it’s the only bed that doesn’t have someone in it. My relations, you know. So many of them, and they all need a bed to sleep in, don’t they? Can’t have them going to someone else, not that there’s anyone else round here for miles. About three miles, I think, or is it four? Well, now that the Bournes have gone away—London, I think, stupid place to go, with those two dogs of theirs. I don’t care how big they say the back garden is, London’s no place for a dog. I mean, imagine moving dogs like that into a pokey little hole just because he—that husband of hers, nasty man, nasty, nasty man, doesn’t like cats, can you imagine that?—got himself some fancy job working for the Government. MP, I think it is he is now, not that it really matters, moving to a pokey little house like that. Well, here it is.”

Without warning, she threw a door open, revealing a room bizarre in its normalcy, given the owner of the house.

“You should be quite comfy in here. Bathroom’s through there,” she pointed, obviously knowing better than to even consider turning round in so small an area with four such large dogs around her. “Best to warn me if you’re going to be using any hot water, what with the kitchen and everything. And don’t you two be staying in there all day. I’ve got my whole family needing baths, and there won’t be enough hot water for you lot as well as them in the morning. And don’t forget to put the lid down after you pee, I don’t want my poor old mum getting all cold or wet from either of you lads, do I? And I don’t want you wandering about in the all-together, either, with your willies

hanging out and scaring my sister’s children. Anyway,” she sniffed, a pointed and contemptuous sneer at Doyle’s tight denims and a nod towards the exotic cat in Doyle’s arms, “our Cleo likes to play with willies, so you’d be best keeping the toilet door shut too, otherwise she’ll have you singing soprano. Oh, you should have seen what she did to that horrible man from Birmingham! And breakfast you’ll have to fend for yourself, with it being Christmastime and my family here. And I don’t like any food in the rooms, unless it’s something I’ve brought up to you myself to keep you out of the dining room.” Another eloquent sniff and then she was shooing the dogs out of the room. Just as Doyle thought the loony had left, she turned around and gave them an uncompromisingly hard stare. “Are you two queers? I don’t allow any queer stuff going on in my rooms, you know, not with women and children around.”

She shut the door behind her with a firm click, and there it was, heavy as lead dropped between them, the quagmire of unspoken accusations and bitter acrimony. Bodie, hoisting the bags onto the divan wilfully shrugged the atmosphere off, refusing to allow it time to take root. “She’s a right one, isn’t she? ‘None of that queer stuff, not when there are women and children around’, Christ! I mean, I can see the point about the women, but I think I’d rather have a couple of queers having it away with each other and leaving the children out of it!”

“That’s not what she meant and you know it, Bodie,” Doyle muttered, scuppering Bodie’s attempts to leaven the mood between them. “You do know you’re payin’ for all this, don’t you?”

Bodie said nothing: if Doyle wasn’t going to allow him to mend some of the fences between them, then he wasn’t about to lie down and let Doyle wipe his dirty feet on him. He went over to the window, pushing the staid net curtains aside, looking out on a landscape gone dark already but for the shy glow of snow. Behind him he heard Doyle moving around: the rasp of a zip, the opening of the bag, the fabric-y noises as Doyle dug through and found whatever he was looking for. Then: water, and Doyle at the small washhand basin, splashing and gasping as the water obviously wasn’t as warm as he had expected. Still, Bodie didn’t turn around, nothing about him giving any sign that he was

anything other than completely alone. Which was, given the present company, nothing less than the bitter truth. He could feel that knowledge drift through him, as insubstantial as his breath pluming moistly against the glass, as insubstantial and just as integral a part of his being. He turned it over and over in his mind. With Doyle beside him, he was still utterly alone. It had the sonorous ring of truth to it now, especially in that moment when he heard Doyle stop moving, sensed Doyle staring at him. Then heard the door open and close, Doyle leaving him physically as surely as he had left him emotionally. A month ago, two, Doyle would have made some comment, cracked some joke or even just whinged at him, but there would have been something to link them, something to show that Doyle thought of him, that Doyle saw them as a unit. But not now. Not after what he'd said to Doyle that night...

Downstairs, one cat draped around his shoulders, another winding itself round and round his feet, Doyle charmed his hostess with negligent ease. It was something he did without effort, seduction of the world as natural as breathing. A few words, a few well-placed compliments, several well-placed scratchings on the purring cat, and he had what he wanted. Food, lots of it, and not limited to service in the dining room with the family, either.

"It's really good of you to do this, you know," he was saying to her, turning everything around to being her goodwill and her good idea, neatly side-stepping her round the truth of it all being his suggestion. "With it being Christmas, as you say, it's definitely not proper for us to barge in on you and your family. We'll be much better up in the room, out of your way."

"D'you think that's enough for the two of you?" Mrs. Langside was asking, eyeing the monolithic piles of chipolatas and steak pie and potatoes. "That friend of yours looks like the army type, and that bunch are always hungry. And the manners! Like navvies they are, all of them, not a manner between them. But are you sure—"

"No, no, this is fine," Doyle assured her before a slice of lethal-looking home-made fruit cake could be added to his haul. "And I really appreciate this, thanks."

He made his escape then, dodging around

dogs and cats with footwork that would have had Macklin sighing in ecstasy. One deft move and he was cat-free and well on his way out of the humid warmth and glaring light of the kitchen.

Several thumping kicks on the bedroom door had Bodie opening it, standing framed by the lintel for a moment before stepping aside, an almost tangible miasma of misery around him. Doyle ignored the pitiful nimbus and went to the small chest of drawers, balancing the heavy tray there, setting out the plates of food and shining cutlery, pouring the lager from silver cans into pale blue tumblers. "Grub's up," he finally said to the silent form staring out the window. "Better grab some while it's hot."

"Nice of you to bring some up for me. Thanks."

And Doyle just looked at him, saying nothing about the barely covered anger under the overly-polite words.

Silent, they ate, and silent, they restacked the plates and glasses and cutlery when they were done; Bodie took the tray downstairs without Doyle having to moan at him to do it, Doyle already safe and isolated in the shower by the time Bodie came back up stairs, neither one of them behaving as those who knew them less well would expect.

Then more silence, made heavy by words thought but not spoken, as Doyle potted around the bedroom, first towelling vigorously at heavy ringlets, then brushing his teeth at the wash-hand basin. But then the nightly ritual was done and he was finished, pyjama bottoms on, hair dried, carry-all stowed tidily in the bottom of the wardrobe. And still he said none of the words languishing between them.

"Phoned our mob when you were in the shower," Bodie said abruptly, face averted, entire body language screaming distance and aloofness while his eyes bled loneliness and sorrow. "The Cow said to stay put overnight, and he'll send one of our lot round tomorrow to give us a lift back into London."

"And the car?"

"Local garage can come out and drag it in day after Boxing Day, then we'll come back up and fetch it."

"Fine," Doyle responded, burying his nose in his book, effectively dismissing both Bodie and anything Bodie might conceivably choose to say.

Bodie unfolded the neatly striped pyjamas that were relic to his last stint in the military, put them down, and mindful of their landlady's admonition to 'not stay in the bathroom all day', picked up his own shaving kit. He lathered up without seeing his own reflection, only Doyle's. The masculine beauty of the chest drew his eyes, and his gaze lingered, caressingly, until Bodie was touching Doyle in the only way he was permitted. Achingly, he stared at the tiny pinkness of nipple peeking out from amidst the graceful swirl of hair, then his hungering gaze moved on, down to where the hair arched and disappeared under the blank indifference of blue sheet. A fierceness of desire kicked him, a hollow pit of need opening up in his belly. He could imagine himself kneeling at Doyle's feet, devouring that unseen, that wondrously hidden, cock into his throat, could imagine himself between Doyle's knees, lithe thighs clutching him close as he stabbed Doyle deeply with his cock...could imagine Doyle's viciously reasonable voice flailing him, filleting him until he was boneless, nothing but a bleeding pulp, crushed into something he wasn't and could never be. A petal of red bloomed on his jawline, and he cursed, taking care of it with his usual economy of motion, using it as an excuse to stop thinking about Doyle, about their situation, about anything at all. No more thinking, just take care of the daily details and everything else would sort itself out. Bad karma, that's what it was, to think about it too much, too deeply—or too honestly. By the time he wiped his face clean, the bleeding had stopped, but the bleakness had settled into his eyes to stay.

Turning another unread page of his book, Doyle frowned as if Kafka required all his attention, when he was, in fact, giving it none at all. Even across the professionally personable room, he could feel Bodie's fraughtness, and he revelled in it. Served Bodie right, nothing the bastard didn't deserve, given what he'd done... Given what they'd both done, he acknowledged honestly, although he simply pursed his lips and turned another page, calculatedly nonchalant in the whirlpool of Bodie's anxiety.

And Bodie exploded into movement, jumping up from the bed, not thinking, just reacting, grabbing towel and already-used shaving gear and rushing, helter-skelter, from the room, face

pallid and pinched.

Behind him, Doyle raised his eyes, watching, gargoyle impassive from the ramparts of his own defensiveness and then, as the uncommon sound of Bodie flustering around drifted through from the bathroom, Doyle smiled.

A knock on the door, and he turned away from the window, surprised that Bodie would go so far as to knock before coming in, but it was only the odd little landlady, all dogs and dinner tray and endless stream of words.

"It's only me, with a bite of supper for you. Couldn't let you go to bed without anything to eat at all," she immediately began, ignoring the enormous dinner they'd already had or perhaps simply used to enormous appetites that would be hungry for supper an hour after dinner, "but with my family being here to visit me, it didn't seem right to have you downstairs with us and I told you I've already moved all the guest tables out of the big dining room for to put the lounge and the Christmas tree and all in there, so I thought I'd bring you up a nice tray of goodies, so here it is." 'It' was plonked down on the chest of drawers with a fine lack of finesse, cups rattling and one knife, jarred, slithering down onto the carpet. Mrs. Langside made a point of not seeing it, mouth racing on at almost the same speed as the dogs' wagging tails. "So that'll be it then. You don't have to bring the plates down when you're finished, just leave all that on the chest in the top hall, I'll get that seen to later. So that's it then and I'll see you in the morning when you give me your payment, right? I take Barclaycard, but I charge extra for that, because they charge me extra for using it also, so I prefer cash, if you've got it, not that you look like you could have much in those jeans of yours. You must freeze in there—and no worry of you fathering too many bastards, is there?"

And on that, one large dog barely escaping being docked, she slammed the door shut, closing off Doyle's words before any of them could be slipped in, edgeways or otherwise. As he straightened from picking up the fallen knife, the door opened again, this time without any pretense at politeness, Bodie hoving in like thunder.

"Don't you think that's taking it a bit far, even for you?" he said, brushing past Doyle, doffing

a glance of utter contempt at the dinner knife in Doyle's left hand. "Or not far enough," he added, sitting down on the edge of the bed, head and voice muffled in a towel as hair was roughly dried, the shower having washed away his self-pity and replaced it with protective aggro. "I'd've thought it'd be the gun you'd've brought out if you were going to try to twep me. Not," and his eyes were the harshest blue of frigid winter sky, "that you'd come close, mind you."

Doyle picked a plate up, settled himself on the other side of the bed, began eating a sinful slice of yule log with the same insouciant disinterest that he had used to plague Bodie for days now. "The only reason I wouldn't come close to doing you in is that you're not worth facing one of Cowley's lectures on wasting Government resources when I tell him that I just murdered one of his 'expensively trained agents'." He looked up then, gaze penetrating, examining, finding Bodie wanting. "Are you?"

And Bodie said nothing, beetle-hard armour crushed beneath Doyle's contempt. He folded his towel with sharp-cornered neatness, mouth harshly shut, too aware that Doyle had changed the subject again, had gone back to the acrimony of two weeks ago Tuesday. Knew, gut-wrenchingly, that Doyle was right: Doyle was only repeating what Bodie had thought at the reflection in the bathroom mirror. So he got up, slow as a man of eighty, fetched supper, ate it with the mechanical precision of an army man trained to eat what was available when it was available, for once in his life unaware of some truly excellent continental baking. Still, none of it was tasted, none of it was appreciated, none of it was wanted.

He searched inside himself, for the calm certainty that had kept him going, from the final teen-aged argument with his own over-protective mother to the night, two weeks ago Tuesday. Instead of the serene, self-righteous security, there was...nothing. Dust sifted through the seeking fingers of his mind as he tried to find the philosophy that had kept him sane and whole and always at least one step away from being another Shotgun Tommy.

Abruptly, he would have killed for either a pint of brandy or his mother back again, with all her admonishments to caution, so that he wouldn't die a hero's death like his father—but

too young, so much too young. Sitting there, with Doyle calmly turning the page of one of his books—one Bodie remembered giving to him ages ago—Bodie had an overwhelming desire to know his father, to find out what it was that had driven him, what had kept *him* going in his line of speciality, even though he had the responsibility of a wife and child at home.

Lost in his frowning pondering, he jumped when Doyle got up, gathering the plates and tray, disappearing out the door; Doyle's voice rose in polite answer to some distant comment Bodie couldn't quite hear. He listened to the pleasantness in Doyle's voice, care lavished on strangers, all used up and none left for Bodie. Footsteps, and Bodie made sure he was engrossed in his notebook, reading not a word. Then Doyle, still without giving his partner, his supposed best friend, the slightest acknowledgement, put the light out, sudden darkness falling upon Bodie, suffocating, breathless airlessness, like the quilt his mother would pull up over his head every night out of fear of childhood's asthma. Beside him, there were the shushing noises of a body getting into bed, of covers being drawn up, shoved down, pillow pummelled, all the usual sounds of Doyle getting ready to sleep. Such callow contentment, to simply close his eyes and sleep when Bodie was tangled in emotional knots beside him, and most of those knots had been tied by Doyle's hands, by Doyle's words and Doyle's demands.

Without so much as a whisper of protest, Bodie simply put his notebook down and did as Doyle had done, getting in under the covers, but it was then that the differences showed themselves again. Stiff as a board, Bodie lay in the dark, staring out of windows whose curtains had yet to be drawn, Doyle fond of open windows and open views, and Bodie too wary of causing an explosion to insist upon his own preferred closing out of the world. Absently, he identified the orientation stars and listened to the sounds of the preposterous family downstairs and the barking of dogs relegated to the enclosed kennels. Songs were sung, one voice rising sweetly above the usual near-misses of family singing, but Bodie didn't know the words, recognising them only for the foreignness of their tradition, making him feel once more the exile in his own country. Not an unfamiliar

feeling by any manner of means, but never a welcome one, and never less desired than when lying not fourteen inches from Doyle, the one person he had let get really close to him after... Well, best not to think about Keller. Best to let that stay where it belonged, dead and buried, along with all the other sorrows of his life.

The actual moment unnoticed by Bodie, the party had ended, the family dispersing to wherever it was they were billeted, the dogs snuffling down into sleep. In the darkness he was a child again, alone and solitary for all the love that had surrounded him. Love, that was, that had surrounded him in childhood: he was acutely aware that there was a severe and foreboding absence of love in the person beside him. Uncomfortably aware of why everything had changed between them, Bodie shifted, perhaps unconsciously bringing him closer to Doyle, until he could feel the tantalising heat of him seeping through the bed. Bodie lay flat on his back, tidy as an ancient mummy beside the sprawled comfort of his partner, and he held himself motionless, and listened to the night surrounding him. Over in the distance there was the sound of sheep baahing away as if they fancied themselves as stars of the hymns that were being sung in churches the land over. He could hear one of the dogs growling in its sleep, and someone, somewhere in the house, was snoring.

But he couldn't hear Doyle breathing. That struck him with the force of imagined bullets piercing Doyle, all the times of gun-stoppages and ambushes amalgamating into one panicking moment when Doyle was gone, taken, turned to inanimate clay... One finger, that was all he allowed himself, the pinkie on his left hand reaching out to cover a centimetre, a scant inch of his flesh touching Doyle's, the heat and the faintest movement of breathing reassuring him that it was nothing more than the ever-whispering night-time terrors that had shown him Doyle dead. Quietly, he permitted himself the tactile comfort, fingertip stroking across the inch it could reach, stopping at the bunching elastic of waistband. And then froze, humiliated, as Doyle very deliberately moved away.

"Go to sleep, Bodie," Doyle said, voice cold, withdrawn.

Withered, Bodie lay silently, willing that Doyle should be the one to sleep, for he knew

that he himself couldn't. Sleeping requires the closing of eyes, and doing that revealed the backdrop of his mind to him, filled to overflowing with lurid images of his life. Lovers loved and lost, suffering, agony, people loving him and he, turning his back on them, needing something else, bitterness in his wake, loving eyes become quinine stilettos in his back. And beside him, Doyle, lying on his side, ever expressive back turned to Bodie. But not, eventually, asleep.

"Never get any fucking sleep with those sodding sheep going on like that. Where's the fucking wolf when you need him?" Doyle muttered, harrumphing himself over onto his back, but careful yet, refusing to allow so much as the fabric of his pyjamas to touch Bodie. The tension beside him lurched higher, betrayed by the unnatural stillness of Bodie's sleeplessness. Doyle shouldn't, he knew he shouldn't, but there was a wickedness in him that wanted to give Bodie back measure for measure, to make Bodie suffer, to rub Bodie's nose in what Bodie himself had turned down. It wasn't often Doyle offered himself to someone, usually content instead to be pursued by everyone and then select what he fancied from the menu displayed, but when he offered himself, he neither forgave nor forgot when he was turned down. Or not turned down, precisely, but it had been a rejection nonetheless.

"And hasn't that woman heard of turning the heating off at night? It's a fucking oven in here," he snapped, hissing in the dark, beginning to exact his reparation from Bodie.

And then the mattress was rocking and dipping, and Bodie felt a sinking in his heart and a tightening in his groin: Doyle was taking his pyjama trousers off, exposing long length of limb, heated skin, silken hair, lithe muscle... He needed, heartstoppingly, to get out of the bed, out of the room, away and away and away from Doyle and the invidious seduction that he could ajudge as nothing but an elaborate set-up. He could see it far more clearly than the happily-ever-after-roses-round-the-door picture postcards of happiness: that wasn't something he could ever have. But he could see himself staring as Doyle walked away from him, his spirit broken, destroyed by his need for this man disrobing provocatively beside him. Or if not

that, then it would be Doyle, who had depths kept well-hidden from everyone but Bodie himself, standing glowering to stopper the tears inside as Bodie failed him and walked away. No matter the point of view he took, he could envision only pain and hurt and disillusionment. He couldn't give Ray what Doyle wanted—no, *demand*ed, Doyle no simpering Cartland heroine—couldn't see any reason to try in the first place, especially not when it went so against the grain of his own primary survival ethos: stay cool, keep everyone at bay, don't get too involved.

Which was, he supposed, a bit like barring the stable after the horse has bolted. All down the length of his left side, he was stingingly aware of Doyle's nearby heat, and the temptation to touch, to take, was barely leashed. And, he asked himself, what would be the harm of taking it? Doyle knew the score, it wasn't as if Doyle were some shrinking violet or vapid virgin, but the man who had himself approached Bodie two weeks ago Tuesday. So why shouldn't he just reach out and take what had been offered?

"You asleep?" he asked.

Doyle reared up in the bed, annoyed face haloed by curls limned by reflected light gleaming in through open curtains. "Asleep? With you lying there like that and those fucking sheep baahing their stupid fucking heads off? Oh, yes, Bodie, I'm sound asleep." Then he threw himself down into the bed again, bad temper hoisting quilt up around his ears, sinewed hands hauling pillow down over his head, shutting Bodie out even more effectively than before.

His watch was ticking loudly, a sound he was unaccustomed to hearing, but it was there in the night, no traffic noise to mask it, no panting breath from his sex partner of the night to drown it out. The soft hissing tick of his watch, the soft whump of snow spilled from branch by owl returning with its prey, the irritating baahing of sheep carried over the preternatural stillness of the air. And overwhelming it all with its lure: Doyle's soft breathing, regular, even, but not the sound of a man sleeping. Barely disturbing the oasis of the bed, Bodie craned until he could see the faintly luminous tips of his watch hands. It was just gone two A.M., a time of night that lent itself so well to the sharing of confessions and

the making of penance.

"Ray," he said, before he had time to think about it, reacting to the oddly soothing cocoon of complete unreality that surrounded him. "I'm really sorry."

Not a sound, not even a hitch in the regular pattern of breathing.

"About that night. You know, when you—"

"Let you make a complete wanker out of me. Big of you to feel sorry for something you should feel like a prick about."

The voice was unexpected and quiet, the tone lacking the cutting edge of the words themselves.

"Yeh, but I could always say that you're the one who should feel like a right sod for putting me in that position even though you knew how I feel about getting involved with people."

"So now it's my fault you've got the maturity of a five-year-old, is it? Give you someone else to blame it on—suppose I should be glad I'm wanted for something, shouldn't I?"

"C'mon, Ray, don't be like that."

"And what the fuck *should* I be like? All concerned and understanding for poor little Bodie, so fucking wounded he's too much of a coward to even try being with someone?"

"That's not fair—"

"And what you did was?"

"Yes, actually, it fucking well was! What d'you want me to do, Ray? Lie to you? Whisper all those sweet nothings and not mean any of them? Tell you that I—"

The pause was long and icy, then Doyle fragmented it with the banked heat of his anger. "That you love me? Fat fucking chance of that, isn't there, Bodie? You've never loved anyone but your own thick hide because you're too busy burying your head in the fucking sand to even see anyone else."

The atmosphere was prickly between them, as it is when truth is spoken, or lies spoken and believed as purest truth. Bodie rolled over onto his side, facing the window, looking out at spare angled limbs covered in snow, thinking about how Ray had looked the day his gun had stopped, or the time that maniac had had a knife literally at his throat...the way he'd looked the night he'd made Bodie an offer Doyle thought could never be refused. "It's not that you're not attractive, you know that, don't you, Ray?"

"With you always copping feels, yeh, I had

got the general gist. Pity you can't get beyond the friendly mutual fuck and into the worthwhile stuff."

"For fuck's sake, Ray, you're sounding like Barbara Cartland!"

"And you're trying to sound butcher than butch. Look, Bodie, all I'm saying is that I've been on the roundabout too many times to settle for meaningless fucks when there's better on offer elsewhere."

Jealousy tore through him, frightening him and warning him of just how far down the slippery slope he was. He remembered the wedding photo of his mum and dad, her smiling like morning glory, him so full of heroic mystique it was impossible to imagine him out of uniform and grinning amongst sand castles. "But that's the problem, don't you get it? There isn't anything better elsewhere, unless we lie to ourselves and pretend that what's on offer is worth something."

"What? You trying to say that love doesn't exist?"

Bodie smiled bleakly, bitterly, thinking of the corrosive anguish he lived with every time he laid eyes on Doyle. "Oh, love exists all right, mate. I'm just saying it doesn't fucking matter, that's all."

Doyle rose up on one elbow, looking down on Bodie, at the handsome profile burnished by the faint light, the stony face shadowed by feelings and experiences Doyle could only guess at. And that, he decided, was something that was going to change. "How'd you get to be such a cynic?" Bodie blinked slowly said nothing. "Africa? Belfast?"

"Bit of both, I suppose, and a few other places besides. Not much point in believing love changes anything, not when you've served in Antrim and seen what goes on there. Love! Fat lot of good that did my mum..."

Ah. So that was where it all started, was it? "Your dad didn't love her, then?"

Bodie considered letting the whole conversation drop, and let things die in the natural course his life had always taken. But this was Doyle, and Doyle mattered more than all the others and all his precious secrets combined. "Dunno. I think he loved her—she was convinced he did. But he was in the Service, always away on some special mission, incommunicado for months at

a time. But she loved him something chronic, and all that did was turn her into an old woman with worry."

"So because your parents' marriage wasn't a stellar event, you're going to go through life without trying love yourself?"

"Don't be stupid, Ray, there's more to it than that. When was the last time you saw someone loving someone else and it making any difference? When was the last time you saw love being good for both the people involved? Go on, tell me! And for every single one you can come up with, I can give you a hundred where love's gone sour and ended up with him giving her a beating every Friday night, regular as clockwork. Or some ageing queen dabbing his eyes as his lover disappears off into the backroom with some other fella... And in our line of work—d'you honestly want someone to get to need you like that when there's always a good chance that you won't come home from work that day? No, believe me, keeping cool, that's the secret."

"Yeh? An' what're we supposed to do when your system doesn't work and you end up involved anyway?"

Bodie swallowed, Adam's apple convulsing in the moonlight. "Who says anyone's involved? Oh, right, I like to feel you up and I'd fuck you if you gave me half the chance, but that's just sex, innit?"

"You tell me."

Doyle watched intently for a few moments, slitheringly aware that this was the point of the knife: the right move would heal like a surgeon's knife, the wrong word would cut them both into tiny peices.

"It wasn't rhetorical, Bodie. Tell me—is it just sex?"

"What else could it be?"

"The one thing that you're really scared of. You're used to bullets, Christ, you're even blasé about fucking dum-dums, but love...that scares you shitless, doesn't it?"

Bodie listened to Doyle, to what he said, but more to what was being said below the normal levels of communication, down deep, in there where emotion lived and spoke and Doyle was actually given to unsettling honesty. "It's not love that scares me," he finally said, fatalism settling onto him as he recognised that Doyle would never let the subject rest, nor would he

ever let the rejection pass into forgiveness. “It’s the power you give the other person. The power I’d give you, if I was stupid enough to fall for you.”

Doyle smiled, teeth glinting wetly. “Goes to show you’re not as stupid as we all think you are, doesn’t it? And at least you know what a bastard I can be—but you’re exactly the same, Bodie, and don’t you go saying you’re not. Admit it, if I said I loved you, you’d get a smirk on you big as the Blackpool Tower and make my life miserable.”

“Tarring everyone with your own brush, Doyle? I’m not like you, you know.”

Quiet, words whispered in the dark. “You’re more like me than you want to be.”

Stark truth, lying in bed with them, joining them, unwilling Siamese twins.

“So what if I am?” Bodie snapped, all his defenses screaming alarms. “All the more reason for us not to get involved beyond the occasional fuck, right?”

“Wrong. Don’t play stupid with me, Bodie, because I can see right through you. We’re already involved—and we were four days after Cowley teamed us and you risked your neck to get me out of that sniper’s line of fire.” Doyle watched, with brittle curiosity as he played for the biggest emotional stake of his life thus far, too scared he was going to screw it all up to allow himself to admit to his own terror of what the future might bring. “And even if we tried to pretend otherwise, it’s already gone beyond just fucking, and I’m not going to let you hide behind casual sex. I’m too important to you for that, and if you think I’m going to let you treat me like one of your floozies, then you’ve got another think coming, mate.”

“And how,” Bodie asked with a bleakness of humour, “can it’ve gone beyond ‘just fucking’ when we haven’t even fucked yet?”

“You know what I mean, Bodie. You’re already involved with me, whether you like it or not, so—”

“Already involved?” Desperation now, his voice creeping back up north to Liverpool, stress decimating the bland Home Counties speech. “That’s working, Doyle, that’s trusting someone because of the job, that’s—”

“A load of crap. Oh, it is like that, but you could say that’s what you’ve got with Murphy

or one of the other ones you’ve had to partner.” He leaned over a bit closer, his weight pressing into the bed so close, so very close to Bodie, but still not allowing Bodie to touch, still keeping it all just out of Bodie’s reach. He was speaking softly when he began again, his breath skimming Bodie’s skin. “It’s different with you and me and you know it. It’s not just sex, mate, it’s love.”

Bodie let the words drift out into the dark, diaphanous and immaterial, as only the final voicing of a well-known truth can be. In the bed beside him, all heat and vibrant vitality, Doyle lay down again, a listening stillness to whom Bodie had nothing he knew how to say. In the distance, the sheep still hadn’t shut up, ovine mutterings stirring the night. No expert in the secret life of farm animals, Bodie had no idea how normal or abnormal this endless baahing was, but it served a purpose. Keeping himself deliberately very relaxed, his body in direct contrast to his mind, he counted sheep, trying to keep up with the chorus of overlapping baahs. There was one in particular he could distinguish, one he pictured as some huge ram with curving horns. It would bellow out one harsh, clipped bah!, the after-pause begging out for an equally harsh, equally clipped humbug!

He wondered, idly, the counting of sheep being no soporific for his mind, what the Spirits of Christmas would bring him, were he to play Scrooge tonight. He knew what Christmas Past would bring him: parcels posted from exotic shores, the stamps more intriguing than the presents themselves, his mother oohing and aahing over them to show his aunts and uncles and cousins how incredibly special the gifts were and how lucky he and Mum were to have a Dad serving on another hush-hush operation. Better to have amazing presents and an absent hero than stuff from the local Co-Op and a beer-bellied Dad sitting there snoring through the Queen’s Speech.

But, he admitted, remembering what it had actually been like, to go through prize-givings and sports days with no father for his searching gaze to find, he would much rather have had a boring, banal old father than that scrubbed-shiny medalled soldier who was always away for the important bits and only took all his Mum’s time when he did finally show up again, monopolising the entire house and all the rela-

tives and all the neighbours' talk until he disappeared again and life could settle back down to him being important and loved again.

He turned his head so that he could see the mountain range that was Doyle coiled under the quilt. Christmas Present would bring him visions not of sugar plums, but of sour plums, of sweetness rapidly turning acrid, of unacknowledged hopes dying before they'd drawn breath, Doyle and all he encapsulated drifting through his hands like blood, staining him forever, but leaving him with nothing.

Christmas Future? Oh, he had no wish to hear anything Christmas Future had to say. Doyle shifted, one leg briefly, fiercely, brushing against Bodie, flesh to flesh, skin to skin, heat to heat and then—the shrugging away, the increased distance, the denial of desire. But the desire was there: it wasn't its existence Doyle was denying, merely its satiation. Slowly, Bodie reached out, his hand stroking supple skin, fingers trembling at the touching, at last, of Doyle, without any of the usual camp clowning as protection.

"I've told you, mate," the voice sharp enough to cut, the words barbed enough to draw blood, "you keep your paws to yourself. Unless you're willing to give it a proper go, you can stick to wanking because I'm not willing to serve as your right hand for you. You got that?"

Bodie took his hand back, closing his fingers into his palm, cradling the memory of touching Doyle's skin. Doyle had subsided again, into another wakeful silence, and Bodie felt the tacit demand gnaw at him. He ignored it, fought it, then unwillingly, watching in horror as his lifelong defence of non-involvement crawled out of his hands, he finally started to talk.

"Did you get on well with your dad?" he asked, carefully casual, not quite sure himself of where he was leading this conversation, nor of where it was leading him.

"Still do—he's not dead, Bodie, just divorced."

"See a lot of him?"

Doyle considered shutting Bodie out with some wittily sarcastic comment, but he was curious: Bodie never asked about family, nor mentioned his own. And there was an almost subliminal melancholic longing in Bodie's dark voice that Doyle wanted to explore, bring out into the open, perhaps use as a first step to

building something decent between them. "Not any more," he answered, deciding to push it, to pry while Bodie seemed breachable. "D'you see much of your dad?"

"You trying to tell me you've never seen my service record? You know my dad was killed when I was eleven."

"Your record also claims you're intelligent, so if it's got lies like that in it, why shouldn't the stuff about your mum and dad be lies as well?"

Bodie had a one word answer for that. "Cowley."

"Cowley? Christ, the old bastard would kill the rest of us for sneezing out of turn, but the most he ever does is give you a minor moaning at. Plus, your file says you're straight, and I've seen corkscrews straighter than you."

"Well what'd you expect me to put on the form? Bisexual would've me tossed out on my ear. Anyway, Cowley knew about that already."

"Oh?" Doyle asked, not giving away a molecule of his excitement at hearing all this from Bodie, intimate history delivered for once without the undertow of deceit or embellishment.

"Why d'you think I was chipped out of the SAS?"

Doyle was suddenly sitting up cross-legged in the bed, skin uncaring of the cold air, so taken aback that he forgot his manoeuvrings and blurted his questions out. "You serious? What happened—get caught with your trousers round your ankles, did you?"

Bodie took a long time to answer but it was finally the truth that came out, despite the clawing need to run off and hide, to go back under his nice hard shell and keep himself safe. "I was having it off with one of my mates, you know, more or less on a regular basis, spending all my time with him..." he drifted away for a second, remembering more than he was willing to ever say, remembering, too, how bitter the pain when it had all ended. "Anyway, he saved my skin this time, and after that... He wanted more and more from me, kept on and on at me, no matter what I did, it wasn't enough." Vividly, he could see the sneer of curled lip and bite of disappointed voice, accusations of shallowness and libidinousness sniping at him. "Finally got to where I said we had to cool it, you know, back off a bit, because people had been talking for

ages, but it was getting to the point where the brass wouldn't be able to ignore it much longer." Funny, he thought to himself, if you'd asked him a fortnight ago, he wouldn't have been able to tell you the name of the pub they'd met in that weekend: right now, he could remember the cant of the polished brass beer pumps and the faint smell of Jimmy Keller's aftershave. And how it felt to sit there, vulnerable under threat of a public scene, Keller wilder than he, less sensible when there was the possible gain of an emotional pot of gold. His stomach clenched, as he thought of Keller, and all that agony, and of how similar Ray and Keller were when it came to demanding emotional commitment.

Finally, Doyle had to prod him, wanting Bodie to break this long pause, but not wanting to hear any comparisons between himself and this unnamed mate of Bodie's past. "And? What happened? What'd he do?"

Bodie shrugged, as if to imply that the pain was water off a duck's back, something long ago and far away and powerless to hurt him. But Doyle, who knew him, who knew him better than Bodie himself did, wasn't taken in, not for a second.

"He went to the Sergeant-Major and opened his big mouth and let his belly rumble, didn't he? And that was that. Not much the brass could do once they'd actually been told in so many words, was there? And to make matters worse, my mate claimed that he'd just been confused and so far away from his fiancée that he gave in when I'd pushed him into it. Only thing that saved me from a dishonourable was that there was an emergency situation and we had to go right into the field. He got shot—always blamed me for it, said it was because he was so fucked up because of me that even though I was a sod, he still loved me enough to take a bullet that was meant for me."

"What a rotten fucking bastard!"

Bodie gave a laugh that could easily have broken Doyle's heart. "He was a great fucking bastard—some of the best sex I've ever had."

"And d'you really think I'd do the same as he did to you?"

"Nah. I'm sure you'd be much better between the sheets."

That stung, taking it all back down to nothing more than just sex, just something Bodie could

pick up and drop on any street corner. "Are you implying that I'd be as much of a bastard out of the sheets as him?"

"Oh, don't start taking everything the wrong way and looking for digs at you, Ray. I don't want a row."

Doyle, calculatedly cruel with seduction, leaned his nakedness across Bodie, his chest hair actually brushing Bodie's nipples, his cheek feeling the sudden, startled inrush of breath. "Suppose now's not the time for a row, is it?" he murmured, blithely 'unaware' of Bodie's precipitous arousal under him. "It's gone three already—it's Christmas, Bodie."

"Fancy a few carols then?"

"Nah. Rather have..." But then he felt Bodie tense as if in anticipation of a blow, and he left the ribaldry unsaid. There was a confusion of emotion swirling through him: he wasn't truly angry at Bodie right at the moment, although he probably would be again, as soon as the memory of rejection superimposed itself upon the sight of Bodie lying in bed drowning in his own misery—his own self-inflicted misery, he reminded himself, carefully, wary of falling at Bodie's feet under the weight of his own emotion.

Bodie, for his part, was glad of the respite in the conversation, for he didn't want to know what it was Doyle wanted. He knew too many of the things that were on that list. Commitment. Promises. Affection. Closeness. Honesty. Recipe for disaster, that's what it was, and Bodie didn't want to mix with any of it. Even if he was able to pull it off, even if he was able to give Ray what Ray demanded, it would ruin them for the job, and then where would they be? He knew the old adage about love flying out the window when poverty walked in through the door.

He also, he admitted to himself as he felt Ray settle down in bed beside him, knew all about the equally old adage about being caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Bodie..."

Bodie lay very still, uneasy precognition turning his nerves to blancmange. "What?" he whispered, belatedly mindful of the sleeping house.

"If you could have one thing in the entire world—absolutely anything at all—" Doyle was asking him, with all the impersonal curiosity of

Desert Island Discs' "what would you ask for?"

He couldn't think of what to say to that, so he made it a joke, as always. "Stopped believing in Santa when I was three and a half, Ray, bit late to be asking me now, isn't it?"

"I'm not asking what you want from Santa, Bodie, I'm asking what's the one thing you want more than anything else in your entire life."

The sheep were still baahing away, the dogs were still emitting the occasional dreaming growl, and somewhere, there was a cat rearranging a Christmas tree, complete with the tinkle of falling ornaments and the rustle of tinsel being dragged from branches. The night was still dark, the stars still bright, the snow still white. It was only himself and Doyle who had changed. Or, he admitted to himself, perhaps it was only that his own attitude had changed until he felt himself afloat, nothing to bind him to his past, or to his future, only this not so silent night with the very silent Doyle lying beside him. A Doyle who was turning away, giving up on the question and, Bodie knew with all the certainty of three years partnership with this man, a Doyle who was giving up on him. It wasn't far short of miraculous that Doyle hadn't abandoned him a fortnight ago, but he'd been given that extra time, that extra chance that Doyle gave no-one.

The bed bounced once, twice, as Doyle turned over and thumped down onto the mattress, but Bodie couldn't say what needed to be said.

Too many memories, too many failures, too many times when love had led to death.

The covers shifted, caught on his foot, were tugged harder, scraped over him, hillocking over Doyle, leaving a draught all down Bodie's right side that was such bitter contrast to the heat on his left. Which was, quite unintentionally, the perfect allegory to his life: warmth and the danger of emotion, or coldness, and the security of being safely alone.

It would be so easy for him to speak the right words, the promises that Doyle demanded, to make it look as though he was really willing to try and have a proper relationship. Then it would be easier still to keep enough of a distance that he could have the sex and the camaraderie but without the agony that always came with love sooner or later. He even knew the words to say, the confessions that would garner enough

sympathy that Doyle would be patient with him, maybe even make allowances for him. Tell him about his girl in Africa, the one Krivas had gut-shot. Or tell him how close he'd come to falling apart after Keller had stabbed him in the back. Be so easy, and then he'd have it all...

Doyle lay with the covers up over his ears, biting the inside of his cheek to keep it all inside. He'd kill Bodie otherwise, he knew he would. He was so angry, so viciously angry he could strip Bodie's skin off him inch by inch and laugh while he did it. Because he knew, as he bit hard enough on his cheek that the foul metalness of blood coated his tongue, that if he didn't hurt Bodie, he'd end up in tears, grabbing at him, willing to settle for so much less than he knew they both needed if they were going to both make this work and keep them in one piece on the job. But it was so unfair, so fucking unfair that he should finally fall in love, and that for the first time in his life, the person should love him back just as much but yet still be unable to reciprocate, preferring to keep a safe distance.

The right combination of words and the carefully measured out smidgin of revelation worked out in his mind, Bodie rolled over to settle this whole situation in the only way that he thought he could ever be comfortable with. And stopped, arrested by the pained tenseness in Doyle's huddled form. Appalled, he realised that he'd been so concerned with himself and how this was going to affect him that it hadn't even crossed his mind how Doyle must be feeling. Christ, his hedgehog of a partner had even used the *verboden* 'I' word, actually saying that what they had between them was love.

"Christ, Ray, I'm sorry," he said again, apologising more to this man than he had in his entire life before. "I never thought—"

"You never do, so it's not exactly a surprise, is it? What hadn't you thought about this time?"

"You."

Doyle closed his eyes very tightly, bringing his hand up to cover them, pushing his face into the pillow.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded. What I'm saying is I've been thinking about you, but, well, only how you affected me. I never thought about what I was doing to you or how you'd be feeling."

No reaction, but for Doyle wiping his face,

reaching for a hankie and blowing his nose, his back turned to Bodie the entire time.

“Look, Ray,” Bodie began, “I know what you want—”

“Even though you haven’t been thinking about me? Fucking clever, that. You’ll be on *Top of the Form* next.” Sharp words, but the voice was blunt, the strength in it forced.

Bodie ploughed on, hit hard enough by both guilt and his own disowned feelings for this man that he was saying things he would never say if it weren’t quiet and dark and in the dead of night. “I can’t be what you want me to be, Ray, honest. I’m not husband material—”

And the covers were a flurry of movement, Doyle half-way bolted from the bed before Bodie caught him, skin burning on bare skin, making Bodie let go, making Doyle sink back onto the bed.

“Is that what you think I am? Some shrieking fairy who wants a nice big butch husband to take care of him? You idiot, you stupid fucking—”

“Will you shut up and listen?”

Hammering on the door, irate voice shrieking through the wood. “If you both don’t shut up, I’ll have my husband throw you out. And don’t think I won’t, and I’ve got the dogs also. So shut up, both of you and let the rest of us sleep.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Langside,” Doyle called. “Had a nightmare. I’ll be all right now.”

“A nightmare? With two voices? First schizophrenic nightmare I’ve ever heard. Any more noise and you’re out, both of you.”

“We’ll keep the noise down, sorry,” Bodie said, breathing deeply, calming himself down, using the landlady’s presence as a means of getting Doyle back into bed, covering them both up warmly, for despite Doyle’s earlier complaints, the heating wasn’t on all that high and the air was cool. But most of all, he wanted Ray back where Doyle would at least listen to him.

They lay side by side, not touching, a mile apart, listening to the landlady’s receding footsteps and diminishing mutter. It was very quiet again, an uneasy truce.

“You’d better start talking, Bodie, if you want me to still be here when you wake up in the morning, because I’m telling you, I’ve had it up to fucking here with all this.”

“See? This’s exactly what I’ve been talking about. Get emotionally involved and it turns

into a total sodding disaster. Which is what we’ve got right now, isn’t it, Doyle?”

“Not from my point of view. The way I look at it, it’s because you won’t admit we’re already hooked on each other that there’s a problem in the first place.” He made sure he sounded calm, reasonable, that there would be no blame laid at his door if they didn’t get this sorted out. He’d do his part: as far as he was concerned, it was up to Bodie to be willing to do his share now.

“D’you have any idea how easy it would be for me to walk away from all this?” Bodie asked, meaning it.

“D’you have any idea how big a liar you are—especially to yourself?” Doyle snapped back, also meaning it, convinced of the love that Bodie was so terrified of.

“So it’s the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, is that it, Ray? You want it all and you want it now, but you had the brass neck to call Keller a rotten bastard? Just goes to show,” nasty now, sneering in self-defence, “it does take one to know one.”

“You—” A deep breath, a refusal to let Bodie win by turning his temper on full blast. “You’re just trying to wind me up,” he finally said, making a display of his calmness. “Won’t work, Bodie. I’m not going to jump up and start shouting at you. You’re going to have to talk, mate, or else I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Bodie whispered, smooth as cream. “Or you’ll tell my Sergeant-Major that I made a pass at you? Sorry, you’re a bit late for that. Keller already did the blackmail bit and he failed as well.”

There were hot words, oh, wonderfully cutting words, phrases to destroy, barbs to poison, but Doyle bit them back, because he was damned if he was going to give Bodie the satisfaction of seeing him lose his temper. Then he listened, properly, to what Bodie had said. And realised that Bodie was right: he was doing another Keller on him. Bodie was partly in the wrong, but there was no villain here, only two people with faults each his own.

“Okay,” Doyle said, surprising Bodie. “You’ve got a point there, mate. You want a fling, a bit of friendly sex, and I want something that’s going to last past the next pretty arse that twitches in your direction. Fair enough, and you’re dead on—I’ve got no right to force you

into something you don't want." He hesitated, giving Bodie a chance to deny it, to leap in with a heartfelt 'of course I want to stay with you!'. But nothing was forthcoming, so he gritted his teeth and went on. "Better get your head down if we're going to be ready for whatever poor bastard has to spoil his Christmas to come and get us."

Propped up on one elbow, Bodie looked down at Doyle, seeing the jaw muscle jumping, seeing the frown burying itself between Doyle's closed eyes. "Will you still be here in the morning?"

"Without a car, where the hell could I go?"

"That's not what I really meant. If we let this whole thing drop, if I don't give in to you, will you still be my partner or will you be in Cowley's office asking for a re-team?"

It was there, for both of them to hear, in the tentativeness of Bodie's voice: he needed Doyle, even if he couldn't admit it. Needed him enough to make him run scared.

"Course I will. I'm not another Keller, Bodie. I'm not going to blackmail you, I'm not going to give you any trouble. Just don't expect me to be all over you all matesy, all right? I'm not a fucking martyr. Now shut up and get some sleep, will you?"

Bodie lay down beside him, shut up but a long way from sleep, as far away from rest and peace and contentment as Doyle was. He thought about it all, but mainly about how much his friend must hurt right now, and how poor a friend he'd been to Doyle this fortnight past. "Ray, it's not you, you know that, don't you?"

Silence was the loud answer. But then, Bodie thought to himself, he should have expected that, given Ray's guilt complex. "I mean it. There's nothing wrong with you, it's me."

"It's both of us, Bodie, let's leave it at that before we bugger everything up even more royally than we already have, okay?"

"But it isn't your fault, not this time." Nothing was said, but there was no mistaking Doyle's disbelief. Nor, really, his misery. Nice Christmas present, Bodie told himself, angry with himself. Nice way for Ray to spend Christmas. "My dad..." he surprised himself by saying, "well, let's just say that he was the first in a long line of relationships that've been disasters. You've got to understand something, Ray. Everyone I ever get involved with ends up either hurt or dead."

"Bit over-dramatic, don't you think, Bodie? What is it—you've got your own personal psychopathic cupid following you around topping people when your back's turned?"

"Thought you wanted me to talk to you?"

"Sorry. Carry on."

Bodie paid no attention to the sarcasm, not even really hearing it. "Every time I get involved with someone, something goes wrong. Every single fucking time and—"

"And you think that makes you different from the rest of us?" Doyle interrupted, unable to hold his tongue at such incredible self-pitying excuse making. "What d'you think it's like for everyone else, eh, Bodie? Leaving out that we're all in CI fucking 5 with hours that kill any relationship, how many people d'you know who haven't had things go wrong?"

"Exactly! You don't get it, do you? In fact, you don't *want* to get it." He stared at the ceiling, at the fantastical shapes made there by reflected light from the snow outside and the faint movement of curtains in the draught breathing in through the window jamb. "I mean, we're both lying here agreeing that it always goes wrong, but the difference is, I'm not wearing rose tinted glasses. If it's all going to go wrong no matter what, then where's the point in trying? Where's the point in going through all the shit again and again when you know you're going to end up miserable anyway?"

"So that's life, is it? You get hurt, you sit around moping with your head in the fucking sand and then you die? Oh, nice, Bodie, very nice." Doyle shook his head in complete disapprobation, softening his voice when he saw just how tightly Bodie's jaw was clenched and the tenuousness of the other man's composure. "You know something, Bodie my old mate," he whispered, doubling the thin pillow under his head, rolling over onto his side so that he could see Bodie's profile against the lighter dark of the window, "you're probably more miserable right now than you would be if we got together and then broke it off later."

Bodie half looked at him without turning his head, still protecting himself from the perspicacity of Doyle's gaze. "That what you think, Doyle?"

"That," Doyle said, sliding one hand under the covers until it met warm smooth flesh, "is

what I know.”

It was something he had thought he wanted, this flesh on flesh, Doyle reaching out to him, but the singeing pain behind his eyes was warning him that the price was too high for so much as a single kiss. He moved away, restless, the corded rim of the mattress pressing into his shoulder blade, the cool air crawling down his right side. Sorrow, not anger, and a bitterness of confusion in him as he felt the lure of Doyle’s limber body warm in the bed. But he’d been through it before, the loving and the losing, and he never wanted to even come close to it again. Especially not when even keeping his distance still had him caring more about Doyle than anyone else in his entire life. “You really think that I’m worse off fancying you and not having you than getting involved and then seeing you get your brains blown out? And that’s what you really think? Christ, but you’re a fucking fool, Doyle.”

“And you’re a fucking moron if you’re going to spend your life worrying about being dead!”

“Oh, it’s not me I’m worried about.” As soon as the words left his mouth, he wished them back, wanting to erase them, make them never exist. More, wanting to make the reason for them null and void, gone, never even born.

“Me?” Doyle said, a slow uncurling of warmth in his mind, an involuntary smile slowly uncurling his frown. “Jesus, Bodie, you pick a hell of a way of telling a bloke you’re daft on him.”

“That’s not the way I meant it, and you know it.” But it was hollow, an unconvincing hologram of a protest.

“Oh yeh? So what’ve you gone all red for?”

“I don’t fucking believe you! We’re talking about you dying and you think it’s something to flirt over? Christ, you’re a nutter, Doyle.”

“What else d’you expect me to do, cry my eyes out? Oh, no, sorry, course not. You’d expect me to go running away, screaming like a bloody banshee and try to forget I ever cared about anyone and they ever even noticed me. Bodie’s plan for a full and fulfilling life, bugger them silly, fuck them rigid, and then run away like a little boy at the Ghost Train.” He hefted a breath, ran his fingers through his hair, grabbed hold of his bedraggled temper. “You’re not making this easy, are you, you bastard you. But I’m not going to give in, Bodie. We’re the only chance at

some kind of love and happiness either one of us is likely to have, and I’m not going to let you fuck that up just cos you’re too scared that it’ll blow up in your face.”

Bodie bolted upright in the bed, coming up onto his knees, fists clenched with the overflow of rollercoastering emotions. “What d’you want from me, Ray? Me on my knees at your sodding grave with a fucking black armband on? Or you leaning on Murphy’s shoulder, the poor little widow in weeds? Or is that what you fancy me in? Oh, no, I know,” he went on, thundering train of words clattering on in a small, tight voice, quiet enough not to disturb the people in the rest of the house, and so quiet that it shook Doyle. “You want us to go out together, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Well, *sunshine*, I don’t go for that sort of crap. You get involved, you start putting your mate first, and then you wind up making mistakes and one or both of you get killed. Not for me, mate, not for fucking me, and you get that through your thick skull. I don’t plan on dying—”

“Only because you don’t plan on fucking living! Can’t you see what you’re doing with your life? It’s nothing, Bodie, a big fat zero. Nothing counts, nothing’s important and if anything starts mattering to you, you just cut it out like it’s cancer. So what about me, eh, Bodie?” He was inches away from Bodie now, up on his own knees, eyes flashing in the faint light, low voice bludgeoning into Bodie. “How long before you’re in Cowley’s office asking for a new partner? Well? How fucking long? Because I matter to you, Bodie, and more than just for a bit of sex.”

He should deny it, should cut Doyle off, cut him out the way Doyle said he would. Bodie knew he should do that, was achingly aware that he should have done it weeks ago. But face to face, with the honesty in Doyle’s face, with the gnawing memory of Doyle asking him to make love... Not sex, nothing so simply uncomplicated, but love, that lurking menace.

“Bodie,” Doyle was saying, his hands resting lightly on Bodie’s shoulders, fingers moving gently, small reassuring caresses. “It’s already too late for either one of us to walk away from this. What’s the point in pretending, eh? Come on, when’ve we ever lied to each other—about the important stuff, at any rate. We’re already in

right over our heads, and all you're doing is making both of us suffer for nothing."

"You'll thank me in the end, Ray, honest, you will." He meant it, fervently, knowing from experience how true it was, able only too easily to picture Doyle when it all went sour.

"And how the hell could I do that? How can I thank you for trying to turn what I feel into something I could get in any cottage I walk into?"

"Because it's better than watching someone you love die with their guts hanging from their belly."

The stark brutality of that stopped Doyle, gave him pause. It was obviously something Bodie had seen, and made Doyle think what Bodie would go through if something happened to him, Doyle, on the job. What would happen if that bomb disarming he'd done a month ago had gone wrong, if he'd cut the wrong wire. What would it have done to Bodie to pick up the pieces from that? And what would Doyle himself have done if it had been Bodie smithereened?

"Oh, Bodie," he whispered, stroking the knotted muscles in the nape of Bodie's neck, his eyes wide with understanding. "I never really looked at it from your point of view, have I? I'm just so sure that it'll be worth it, even if one of us does cop it."

"There's no 'if' involved, Ray. No point in pretending it's anything but a matter of time. And if we're lucky, it'll mean invaliding out. But if we're not..." He closed his eyes, too scared to look at Doyle as he accepted the one searing truth that he had tried so hard to suffocate. "I can't lose you, Ray. I just can't."

"But if we don't at least try this thing between us, then you'll've lost me anyway, won't you?"

Bodie swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing painfully as the long-denied knowledge wept through him. He was in love: hopelessly, helplessly, painfully, in love, God help him. "That your final word? Give in to what you want or get a new partner?"

"Never said that, did I?" Bodie didn't answer, simply knelt in front of Doyle like some sacrificial victim awaiting the stab of the knife. "Did I?" Doyle asked again, more of himself than Bodie. "All I'm saying is that if you want sex from me—and a blind man could see that, Bodie—then it has to be everything. Spending time together,

being close, working problems out instead of flying off the handle and flouncing off in a huff to the next bed-mate."

"And what if I'm not willing?"

"Then we can get back under the covers and lie here for the rest of the fucking night, go back into town tomorrow as if nothing happened—cos it won't have, bar the shouting—and go back to being just Cowley's top team. Off the job, you go your way, I go mine."

"So I get to watch you fuck your way through half the women in London?"

"And half the men, if I can get away with it. I'd done a pretty good job of forgetting how much I enjoy fucking men, Bodie, till you started feeling my bum up all the time." He allowed his left hand to slip, slowly, down the curving strength of Bodie's spine, following the line to the sweet rise of buttock, feathering in to the dark, secret cleft. "You've got a thing about my arse, haven't you?" he whispered, feeling the heavy pulse beat in Bodie's cock, nothing but a fineness of cotton between himself and his partner. He smiled, unseen by Bodie, at this proof of desire, at this evidence of need. He knew how to seduce Bodie, had done so more than once, Doyle the one to stop the seduction before Bodie had been rewarded with sex. "So bold, you are," he said, leaning forward until Bodie's nipples brushed his chest hair and every deep breath tingled hard peak of nipple across his own flushed sensitivity. "Right there in public, in front of fucking Cowley, Christ, the day you pinched my bum in Cowley's office, I nearly died. Turns you on, doesn't it, touching me up in public. Fancy doing me in public, is that it? Can you just picture yourself," his cheek was pressed against the leaping pulse in the side of Bodie's neck, his lips kissing, lightly as he spoke, the elegant sweep of shoulder, "your prick up my arse, the wet sound of you fucking me, somewhere that someone could see us? Bet that's your way of fantasising about making a public declaration for someone. Fucking them in a car, or in Cowley's office, or on a stakeout. Be nice that, the two of us in Cowley's office. You could have me across the Cow's desk." He bit, hard, Bodie groaning in pleased pain at the unexpected stimulus. Slowly, Doyle licked the red mark, tongue tip flickering across the outline of where his own mouth on Bodie's

white skin. "Face down, you leaning over me, fucking me rigid. Or I could sit in Cowley's chair. Would you like that, Bodie?"

Bodie groaned, ensnared by Doyle's seductive web of words, unsure of when he'd lost control, even less certain of when he'd yielded to Doyle's demand for a proper relationship in return for the sex. But it never crossed his mind to pull back, to reject Doyle again: there was nothing in him but Doyle and the simmering pleasure of voice and mouth and hands, and there, low against his belly, Doyle's sharp heat pressing into him, a touch of moisture catching in the thin line of his belly hair, making him slick enough for Doyle to rub against him, long, unhurried movements, driving him insane with the desire for it to be harder and deeper and inside him. He knew he should say something, but he couldn't think. His hands were filled with Doyle, soft skin, fat curls of heavy hair, the finer down in the small of Doyle's back. And then, oh, his heart tripped over his love and his lust, his hands were on Doyle's bare buttocks, the arse he had wanted for so desperately long was his to caress and knead and open. Impatient to finally touch that most intimate part, he pressed his finger to the muscular pucker, and was sucked in, hot flesh encasing him, dry satin clutching him close, Doyle rotating his hips, stirring himself with Bodie's passion.

"Oh, that's nice," Doyle murmured, mouth open, head falling back, eyes drifting closed even as Bodie's opened. "Like that. Oh, yeh, just there, put it in a bit deeper..."

"Christ, Ray," Bodie gulped, "let me have you, oh, for fuck's sake, let me have you!"

In the faint reflected light drifting in through the window, Bodie could see misty green eyes staring at him with limpid heat, their gaze devouring him, hypnotising him as Doyle eased forward, his cock pressed hard against Bodie's, Bodie's finger slipping from him. "Haven't got anything to use and it's been too long since I was fucked to do it on spit and a prayer. But next time, Bodie, we'll be at my house, and I've got everything we could need there. I'll let you fuck me then, Bodie, if you're willing to give it a go."

"Ray—" An agony of waiting, when all he wanted to do was throw Doyle to the mattress and fuck him hard, regardless of the delicacy of human tissue. "Don't do this to me, don't stop

now. I swear, you stop now and I'll probably go off the deep end."

"And rape me? No chance of that, love. We're going to do it, Bodie," he was staring into Bodie's eyes, allowing no escape, his cock scraping against Bodie's belly. "We're going to make love right now. And if you want to walk away from me after that, then you can, and we'll just pretend this was a wet dream." Every pore of his body was exhilarated with the certainty that Bodie would never be able to say no again: once they'd made love, Bodie would be as addicted as he himself already was. Giddily, he decided that he could spend the rest of his life contentedly in bed with Bodie. He licked, once, shiveringly, Bodie's right nipple, smiled at the sucked-in breath and the trembling in the hands that were still on his arse. He grinned, teeth gleaming and white in the darkness, as they fastened onto the pinkness of nipple and bit, hard enough to make Bodie's back arch and his cock leap up to trap itself between pyjama elastic and flat stomach. Doyle touched the coyly peeping head, fingering the slit, pushing striped fabric down out of the way, half laughing as Bodie fell over trying to get rid of the last of his clothing.

"Anxious, are we?" he whispered, kneeling astride the recumbent Bodie, his knees pressing into Bodie's outer thighs. "We shall have to do something about that then, shan't we?"

Bodie was too frantic to kiss every available inch of Doyle to answer. He was inundated with desire: touch and taste and smell. Doyle, surrounding him, arching over him, hot flesh pressing into him. The heaviness of Doyle's balls where they were cradled on his belly, the hard thrust of Doyle's cock against his skin, the nipping sting of teeth on nipple, all of it was a surfeit of sensation driving him to the brink. Arm muscles bunching, he lifted Ray up, just enough that he could open his legs and bring Ray to lie flat between them, groin to groin, cock on cock, all the heat and the hardness grinding and shoving and pushing in a wildness of need, his hands flat on the redoubtable rump, adding his strength to Doyle's power, as if he could make them a single being by brute force and sex alone.

But he couldn't, and he knew it, knew that Ray would never let him away with that, knew

that he was already too deeply involved for it to be more than a self-deluding lie. So he clasped his legs around Ray's hips, Doyle's cock pounding against him, and wrapped his arms around the undulating back, pulling Ray in even closer, until he was, at last, close enough to kiss. Bodie opened his mouth, letting Ray plunder it, demanding more, and melting inside as he was given more love than he could contain. Pleasure rippling through him, he pressed up, back arching, breaking the kiss even as Ray thrust down.

Doyle was saying things to him, incredible things, wonderful things, love and passion and forever all mixed into a terrifyingly fulfilling whole. The words, the flesh, the feeling, were enough for him, cock rubbing so sweetly hard against his own, Doyle all around him, soft skin and coarse hair, the musky smell of him, the unwavering strength of him. Fingers twisting his nipples, cock fucking his, words flooding his brain, he came, hot semen bursting onto Doyle, his own wordless cry of adulation erupting from him.

Transfixed, body coiled in the endless moment before orgasm, Doyle stared down into the transformation of Bodie's face, and saw more love and pleasure there than he had thought could exist even in Bodie's reticent depths. "That's it, love," he murmured, his whole body on fire as he felt the shuddering of climax rack Bodie, and as the first spurt of Bodie's orgasm made him slick. "Come for me, let me see it all, give it to me, Bodie." His hand was quick and hard on Bodie's cock, pumping him, draining him, greedy for Bodie to have the best, the most devastatingly good orgasm of his life. "Oh, yeh, that's it, that's it. Give it to me, love."

And then it was over, and he was lying flat on his back, seed spent, limbs limp and trembling in the aftermath. Doyle was still on him, hard cock held motionless, digging into the pit of Bodie's stomach, Doyle a miasma of unfulfilled desire, hot, burning eyes staring down at Bodie, taking possession of so much more than just his body. Fighting his body's demand to sleep, Bodie kept one hand on Ray's arse, slid the other round to claim Doyle's cock, a moment given over to memorising the fluidity of skin over the tracery of engorged veins and taut sex. He fell into Doyle's rhythm, hand a tight tunnel, almost

as tight as his own arse would have been, and the finger of his other hand pressed home again, into the sanctity of Doyle's body. As his finger delved inside, Ray shuddered against him, teeth marking Bodie's neck, hands leaving bruises to be found later. Fucking Ray with his finger, Doyle fucked his fist, thrusting down into one and up onto the other, Bodie matching the movement, Bodie's heart still thundering so fast and cacophonous.

An inarticulate moan, mutterings of what might have been words, and then Doyle was rigid over him, streams of come splashing Bodie's fist and his belly, spasming muscle clenching round his deep-buried finger. A moment, two, three, then the shuddering was replaced by a sighing softening, Doyle dissolving on top of him, collapsing down onto Bodie's waiting stolidity, the two of them tangling together as tightly as they could manage.

Sleep, inexorable, blanketed them, defeating the most profound need to talk, to discuss, to sort out what had happened and where they were going, making them oblivious to the cold and to the shifting sounds of a stirring house. A knock on the door, imperious, and the barking of insistent dogs, and the bleating of sheep, a combination that opened Doyle's eyes, made Bodie turn in his sleep, somnolent arms searching for bedcovers that were a tangled, stained mess under them.

Doyle cleared his throat, rubbed at his eyes, tried to get his brain functioning. "Yeh?" he called to the hammering at the door, suddenly only half-aware of the answering voice, for beside him, Bodie was shuffling awake.

"It's time for you to be up. There's a man here looking for you. Trouble, that's what I call him, all big and brawny, he looks like a policeman or a thug, not that there's much difference these days, is there? I didn't want to let him come straight upstairs to get you, I don't want any trouble, not in my home, not with the family here and everything. But you'd best get downstairs so you can settle your payment with me and get on your way with this friend of yours."

"All right, Mrs. Langside," Doyle shouted back, dragging himself up from the bed, part of him dreading looking at Bodie—he really ought to feel ashamed of himself for seducing Bodie so unfairly like that, he thought to himself without

a trace of either guilt or regret—but most of him glowing with a growing elation as it dawned on him that he finally had Bodie where they both needed to be.

“Oh, and happy Christmas,” the disembodied voice added, the dogs barking in descant chorus behind her.

“It is, isn’t it, love?” Doyle grinned down at the sleep-sodden lump in the bed. “Happiest Christmas we either of us has ever had, right?”

Bodie, tangled in sheets, uncomfortably aware of the smell of sex and the dried semen crusting his belly, only stared, as he took in the sight of a truly joyous Doyle. Beautiful, yes, his Ray had always been that, in Bodie’s eyes at least, but this was...perhaps too much. There was so much responsibility for Bodie in that unadulterated happiness, the weight and pressure of keeping Doyle that way, of never letting him down, of always being there when Ray needed him and far more difficult than that, in the way that Ray needed him. Fear, colder than his feet, slithered up him, making him swallow hard, making him want to crawl under the covers and hide for a year, until Ray had got over all this and forgotten it.

But Doyle wasn’t about to have any of that. He crept into bed beside Bodie once more, his skin deliciously warm on the chill of Bodie’s flesh. “I told you last night, Bodie,” he murmured, parted lips breathing equally warmly against Bodie’s, “you can walk away from me now, if you want to, and we’ll pretend that none of this ever happened.” But even as his words let Bodie go free, his body pressed down, reminding Bodie irresistably of how wonderful it had been to not be alone and to be, unstintingly, loved. “That what you want?” he asked, kissing Bodie lightly on the lips, and again, there, on his neck where the pulse beat so unsteadily. “Call it a wet dream, go back to being just partners and leave it at that.”

“Yeh,” Bodie managed, horrified at the breathlessness of his own voice. “Call it quits and get back to normal. Best thing, Ray.” He closed his eyes, praying fervently to no-one in particular that Doyle would believe him, take him at face value and set him free.

“Fair enough,” and a hand was cradling Bodie’s cock, and then Doyle’s cock was snuggled in with it, both of them held in the palm of Doyle’s hand. “Always providing you

can look me straight in the eye when you say it.”

Bodie opened his eyes, blue stare meeting green. He opened his mouth, had the words ready in his mind. And couldn’t say them. He closed his eyes again, miserable in a sea of love, and curved away from Ray, furling himself into the reassurance of foetal curl. “I can’t say it, Ray. Christ, I can’t fucking say it! Okay, mate, you win. You’ve got me, and God help us both, because it’s going to be the end of us, one way or the other.”

But Doyle’s presence was all around him, and he was turned back over, gentled into position.

“Look at me, Bodie.” A pause, six heartbeats long. “Go on, Bodie, look at me. I don’t bite.” Quick feline baring of teeth. “Unless you like that sort of thing. Come on, love, look at me.”

Reluctantly facing not just Doyle but the transmutation of his life, Bodie did as he was bidden.

“That’s better. Now you get the cotton wool out of your skull and you listen to me, Bodie.” He was quiet now, fiercely intense, conviction beating from him like a pulsar. “It’s not going to be the end of us. It’s going to the best thing that ever happened to us. It’ll give us an edge, an extra something to fight for, and something to live for, and you know that’s the hardest thing to find in our jobs. Yeh, I’ve got you now, but that means you’ve got *me* as well. We’ve always been a team, haven’t we, mate, right from the word go.”

Bodie nodded, lips tight, accepting a truth that he had always wanted to deny. Safer if he could deny it. But not, perhaps, truly better.

“Only difference is that now we’re not wasting any of our energy fighting off the feelings that’ve been there from the start as well. Come on, Bodie, don’t look at me like that. I thought you were the one who didn’t believe in thinking about all the rotten shite that can happen.”

“Bad medicine. But I thought you were the one who didn’t want me burying my head in the sand?”

Doyle bit his lower lip, laving the small sting with a lingering caress of his tongue. “That was when you wouldn’t see sense.”

“You mean when I wouldn’t agree with you.”

“Yeh, you could say that,” Doyle admitted, the beginnings of worry stirring in him. He

hadn't expected Bodie to react like this, not really. A bit of a protest, well, that was to be expected, but there was a distancing going on here that scared him with its implications that maybe, just maybe, this could all blow up in both their faces, and it would be his fault if it did. "But what's the point in crying over spilt milk?"

"And what's the point in trying to sort this out when all we're doing is spouting fucking clichés at each other? Get off me, Doyle." He heaved himself upward, dislodging Ray, and began getting his clothes on, whilst his body and his heart bleated as loudly as the sheep in the field that it was Ray on the bed behind him, Ray, whom he loved deeper and better and more terrifyingly than anyone else, ever. "One of the blokes is waiting downstairs, and as we're fucking up his Christmas—I mean, d'you honestly expect Cowley to deplete his forces sending one of the active blokes up to get us?—and he's not going to be best pleased if we fatarse half the morning away, is he?"

"We're not going anywhere until we get this straightened out, Bodie."

Bodie laughed with the bleakest of humour. "Straightened out? Oh, that's rich, considering what we were doing in that bed last night. Later, Ray, all right?"

"You mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Promise? Word of honour?"

"Jesus Christ, Doyle!" Trousers on, shirt in hand, he whirled round to face the still-naked Doyle. "Cross my fucking heart and hope to die! Yes, I sodding well mean it!" And then stopped, stricken suddenly by the whirlpool of emotion he felt for this man against his better judgement. There was a malignant sadness growing in Doyle's eyes, and that meant guilt and melancholy, and Ray suffering. Not something Bodie could ever bear, but even less so, now that he had admitted to himself, if not his partner, just how far in love he was. "Oh, Ray, don't. Look, we'll talk about this when we get back to your flat." Where the stuff was, that undermining voice of unreason whispered in

his mind, replaying Doyle's sultry promise of before. "It'll be all right," he heard himself saying, finding that he meant it, that he was willing to try, just so that Ray wouldn't be unhappy, even if all he could do was stave off what he saw as the inevitable agony of loss.

"I'd better get dressed then, hadn't I?" Doyle said, leaping off the bed with an energy that exhausted Bodie just to see. Quickly, clothes were pulled on, a few odds and ends stuffed into overnight bags, Bodie's wallet pulled out of his leather jacket and tossed at him. "You'd better get down and pay the old bat her money, while I make the bed up."

Bodie looked at the twisted ruin. "Waste of time, that."

"Not," Doyle grinned at him, all imp and suggestiveness, "if she decides to pop upstairs before you pay to make sure we didn't damage anything, right?"

The shudder wasn't entirely theatrical: he didn't much fancy a scene with their landlady over them having 'queer' sex when there were women and children in the house. "Okay, you get on with it, and I'll deal with Lady Macbeth downstairs."

He was at the door, juggling the two overnight bags and the reluctant door handle, just managing to get himself out onto the landing when Doyle shouted at him. Dumping everything on the blue carpeted floor, he poked his head around the door. "Now what?"

Doyle was looking closely at him, a very serious expression on his face, a wealth of love in his eyes. "We'll work it out and it'll be all right, Bodie. Honest."

Bodie didn't answer, turning away to deal with the realities of daily life instead. But, and it frightened him to the bastioned core of his being, he found himself believing Ray, and believing in him. It could all work out for the best. He could have found someone he could stay with, and someone who'd stay with him. It would be all right, Ray had said. Bodie squared his shoulders and stalked down the stairs. It *would* be all right. He'd fucking well make sure of it.



JINGLE BALLS

OR

HARD TIMES



So what does a Scotsman wear under his kilt? Or more to the point, what does Bodie wear under Cowley's kilt and how will Doyle gain access to it? Here's a little piece that brings together the traditional CI5 Christmas party, a bit of congenial drinking and singing, and...jingle balls? Oh well, for a hard time, call...

Susan Fischer had, or so Murphy who knew everything claimed, been known to forget to pick up her salary cheque until Betty chased her down. Susan Fischer, or so rumour—and Murphy—had it, had been known to not bother filing for expenses for three whole months in a row. Susan Fischer, obviously, had another source of income. And as long as Cowley didn't seem worried about it, the rest of CI5 was more than happy to sit back and enjoy either the fruits of her unspecified labours or the wastrelling of her family fortunes. Whichever it was, she had a three-storey house in a very pleasant London suburb, an enormous garden with a solid stone wall around it to keep the masses out—or when it came time for CI5's annual Christmas party, an extremely high wall to keep the plebs in.

The date of the party was always somewhat flexible, beginning on whichever January night the Christmas bomb season finally ended for them and finishing whenever all members of CI5 had succumbed irrevocably to the copious amounts of liquid refreshment served. This year,

the party had started at 2.30 P.M. on the first Thursday of the New Year, and by 4 P.M., the house was draped with equal tawdriness in Christmas and New Year gilt and CI5 agents in various stages of relaxation.

By midnight, the first shift was well over the eight and the second shift was already half-way under the table. Or, to be specific, Bodie was several over the eight and Doyle was under the table. Doyle was, despite all appearances to the contrary, working very hard. It wasn't easy to get absolutely paralytic when you had his capacity to hold his booze, but he working on it, staring up in rapt enthusiasm at the table above him, the table in question being of steel and glass and strewn with bottles and cans and crisps and half-eaten Christmas cake, the icing and marzipan gone, only the leaden weight of fruit cake left. The table was also strewn with something else. Or someone else, to be accurate. And that singing and dancing and thoroughly pickled someone was Bodie. In the hungover sanity of morning, those few whose memories were even vaguely intact would be enormously

grateful that Cowley was absent, their boss' temper being somewhat uncertain when it came to the taking of certain things in vain. Such as his kilt...

How Bodie had managed to get his hands on it, no-one knew and no-one was particularly keen to ask. In fact, for all they knew, Bodie's convoluted tale of purloined security keys and falsified phone messages calling Cowley half-way across London could be the gospel truth. Or he could have borrowed the thing from one of his military cronies and this could be another one of Bodie's jokes, the egg being on the face of whomever he blackmailed into returning 'Cowley's' kilt, stuck trying to explain to his boss why he was in said boss' bedroom stuffing a kilt into the aforementioned boss'—or imminently ex-boss'—wardrobe. Still, it was a good joke, even if it stopped here with Bodie doing his Harry Lauder. Doyle giggled to himself, muttering something to his left shoulder about how typical it was that Bodie, even for a stupid joke, would do things properly.

"Still don't know what a Scotsman wears under his kilt," Doyle snickered to the glass in his hand, some part of his fuddled mind trying to work out how to get another mouthful of his gin without getting it right in the face instead. Something about sitting up, he thought, then remembered what he'd been telling the sadly limp slice of lemon in his glass. "Oh, yeh, don't know what a Scotsman wears under his kilt," he lied, so that he could tell his lemon the punchline, "but I know what a Scouseman wears under his!"

This striking him as being hysterically funny, he collapsed into giggles, dissolving into the plush pile of carpeting, controlling himself only when he realised that his drink was laughing: it was dripping. Onto his nose. Stickily. That stopped him long enough for him to wipe his face, somewhat haphazardly and severely inefficiently—it is, after all, extremely difficult to find the nose on your face when the hand on the end of your arm doesn't seem to know where your face is—and to lie back and gaze, ponderingly, at the sight that was prancing above him, ponderously.

Dimly, he was aware that there was a loud chorus of 'Donald where's yer troosers' going on, although some people seemed to be having

trouble with both the Donald and the troosers, but he dismissed all that to lie there, watching Bodie from this exceedingly interesting angle. He was half cross-eyed by now, and the rest of him was entirely pickled, but even so, he could still appreciate the view above him. It wasn't only Bodie's kilt that was swinging and swaying with such masculine aplomb. Bodie's dangly bits were dangling beautifully, and Doyle grinned up at them with seraphic delight. A warm glow suffused him: he *liked* Bodie. He'd always liked Bodie. Course, he didn't go about saying stuff like that, couldn't do, could he, but still, he liked Bodie.

He swung his glass in a vague approximation of the strangulated chorus being warbled with such enthusiasm and inaccuracy, and kept on smiling up at Bodie. He really did like Bodie. Really, really liked him. Thought the world of him, really. But not that he'd ever say a thing like that, of course. He frowned then, trying to work out why it was that he'd never told Bodie that he really liked him, honest, he really did. He frowned all the harder and worried at this complicated problem. Seriously, why'd he never told Bodie he honestly liked him, really? Lots of blokes liked other blokes, told them all the time. In fact, and the tip of his tongue stuck out as he tried to catch a few drops from his rather sloppy attempt at another drink, he'd told Murphy, that was it, Murphy, told him just the other day that he liked him. His brow furrowed again. Had he told Murph that he liked Bodie, or that he liked Murphy? Or was it that he'd told Murphy that Murphy liked Bodie? Everyone liked Bodie, even Cowley. Christ, and he giggled again, half choking, Cowley'd even been flirting with Bodie the other day. Well, almost nearly just about flirting. All right, he finally sorted out for himself, if it'd been him saying to Bodie what Cowley had said to Bodie, then he'd've been flirting with Bodie. He thought...

Now that was worth thinking about, he decided, glazed eyes focussing with sudden brightness on the bizarre Highland fling being executed—without benefit of Counsel at that—over his head. Did he fancy Bodie? As well as really liking him? Well, of course he fancied Bodie, stood to reason, didn't it, the way his prick stood to attention every time he saw Bodie. He reran the thought through his mind and

decided he liked the pun. “Stands to reason,” he said out loud to himself because it warranted repeating, “I fancy him because my prick stands to attention.” The chuckle was its usual filthy self, and thereby ignored by the listing crowd around him. He wasn’t surprised, which was hardly unexpected, considering he was well aware of his feelings for Bodie, and simply went through this every time he got drunk and disorderly. In fact, sometimes he got so drunk and so disorderly, he’d even been known to chance his arm with Bodie. Chance his other bits with Bodie, too, for that matter. Now, he wondered quite quietly, when was the last time he’d tried it on with Bodie? He pondered this as best he could, while he tried to fish the spilled slice of lemon from the general vicinity of his curls.

The drawback of getting drunk enough to drop all inhibitions was that the memory tended to go as well. “Oi, Bodie,” he shouted, thumping rather dangerously on the underside of the table, “when was the last time I tried to get up your bum?”

Bodie, obviously quite carried away with his novel rendition of ‘Westering Home’ and even more novel wording of what had once been a perfectly clean and decent song, didn’t hear Doyle. The ubiquitous Murphy, however, was a horse of an entirely different colour.

“My birthday party,” he said, sprawling on the floor beside Doyle.

“Tis not your birthday party,” Doyle retorted, sharp as a marshmallow. “It’s a Christmas party. And a New Year’s party.” He frowned again, something he did even more often drunk than sober. “Suppose you could argue it’s Jesus’ birthday though. Your middle name Jesus or something?”

Murphy gazed into green eyes that were about as clear and steady as pond scum. “Joseph.”

“No, not Joseph, you great wally, *Jesus*,” Doyle repeated with the infinite patience of the truly sozzled.

“No it’s not Jesus, it’s Joseph,” Murphy slurred right back, not quite sure why Doyle was arguing with him about what his middle name was. “What’s yours?”

Doyle’s grin was beatific. “Mine’s a gin and tonic, thanks,” he said, delighted that Murphy was back to making sense again. “And make it

a double while you’re at it.” He contemplated his sodden shirt front and added, slowly, as an afterthought to Murphy’s confused and retreating back, “And a new glass. This one’s got a hole in it.”

Afloat on the sweet anticipation of a nice new drink—where had the other one gone?, he wondered, looking around vaguely, then decided to blame that Murphy. He’d said something about a drink, probably stolen it, the bastard—Doyle’s wandering eyes found something to focus on. Bodie. Doyle grinned again, gazing in hazy adoration at the display going on above him, glowering when it dawned on him that Bodie was clambering down from the now decidedly shaky table. “Oi,” he said again, then decided not to bother, squirming out from under the table to regain the view that had been so inconsiderately taken from him. A few sinuous squiggles of his hips on the floor, and he was grinning happily again, flat on his back, head between Bodie’s widely planted feet, Bodie’s genitals on Northern display in glorious splendour.

Some song was winding to an end, and that made Doyle suddenly, profoundly, sad. Wasn’t right to have a party without a good knees-up. As his knees weren’t capable of getting him up anywhere, he settled instead for a good singsong.

“Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,” he began, a drunken bacchanal instantly joining him, mangling the words into dum-de-dums as lyrics were forgotten or tongues simply gave up the ghost.

The carpet was tickling his ear, so he gave himself a good scratch, and as his hand swung back in the general direction of his side, he chuckled again. It was tempting. Too, too tempting. But he shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t. Not in front of everyone. But everyone knew he liked Bodie, didn’t they? Cept Bodie of course, but Bodie wasn’t meant to know. He wasn’t sure *why* Bodie wasn’t supposed to know, but it made sense, he thought, bemused. But everyone knew he liked Bodie, and it was all right to let Bodie know when they were drunk, wasn’t that the rule?

But still, something in him said he really, really shouldn’t.

So of course, he really, really did. He reached his hand up, and his fingertips began tapping

Bodie's dangling balls in time with Doyle's singing.

"Jingle Balls, jingle balls, jingle all the way," he bellowed, blissfully unaware of the guffawing reaction all around him and Bodie's spectacularly shocked face. "Oh what fun it is to ride a big-pricked Bodie-ay, hey! Jingle balls, jingle balls..."

Bodie was looking at him. "You look dead weird upside down like that," Doyle said, more or less coherently.

"Am not upside down. Balls are supposed to be under the cock, not the other way around, so will you stop bashing me like that?"

"Aaah," Doyle lisped, despite the lack of esses, "don't you like it? Rather have me bonk you?"

It was a measure of how many measures of alcohol they had both imbibed that Bodie was perfectly content to stand there in front of all his colleagues with Doyle between his legs and Doyle's hand up his kilt. "Bonk?" he said, thinking about it.

"Yeh," and Doyle filled the room with his infamous laugh, "you know, *bonk*. It means," he winked conspiratorially and whispered loud enough to wake the dead, "fucking. D'you fancy a nice fuck then, Bodie?" And as Bodie appeared to hesitate, Doyle grabbed him by the cock and squeezed. Nicely.

"Not here."

Now this was extremely puzzling to Doyle. As far as he was concerned, a man needed it to be 'here'—i.e. his prick, because if his prick wasn't here, then he'd lost it, hadn't he, and then how would he be able to fuck a bloke. But, and his mind was slowly spiralling off, it'd be different if Bodie meant he didn't want it here—and he simply had to fondle the prick in question, a happy grin sliding over his face—then maybe it was because Bodie wanted it *there*. And his grin grew even lewder as his fingers fumbled between Bodie's buttocks. He was chuckling happily to himself: Bodie always *did* come up with good ideas, didn't he? "Fair enough, I'll fuck you instead. Course, I really fancied you fucking me, but if you don't want *it* here, well, that's okay by me." He stopped again, then erupted in hysterics. "That's good, innit? Okay *bi* me."

He was still laughing when Bodie had pulled

him to his feet and started leading them—both men, not just Doyle's feet—towards one of the numerous bedrooms.

"You bi?" Doyle asked as he fumbled up the stairs behind an equally wobbly Bodie. In fact, if that lurid yellow tartan didn't stop wiggling soon, he was liable to add to its colour scheme in a somewhat projectile manner. Bravely, he closed his eyes against the nausea of Buchanan tartan and sank to his knees, one hand on the hem of Bodie's kilt to keep him going in the right direction. Funnily enough, it was easier now that he had his eyes shut—the inner red haze was so much less distracting than the wavering walls and strobing stairs.

It took him to the top of the stairs to realise that Bodie hadn't answered his question. Then it took him to the bedroom to remember what the question had been. "You bi?" he asked again, eyes open now and quite happy to take in the sight of Susan and Stewart having it off in the middle of the huge bed.

"What?" Bodie asked, obviously more distracted by the display going on than Doyle was.

"You bi?" Doyle shouted, poking Bodie in the chest for emphasis.

"Come on, you, there's no room in there, we'll try the bedroom up the hall."

Squiffy, Doyle followed on behind, peripherally aware that it was supposed to be him doing the leading, although he wasn't quite sure why. Just as he wasn't quite sure why it was so important that he get an answer out of Bodie. Struggling to get his shirt buttons undone in the welcomingly empty bedroom, he asked again. "Are you bi, Bodie?"

"By what?" Bodie asked back, his own shirt shed, the kilt still well and truly buckled into place.

"Bish...bizzesh...bisszhule."

"You what?" as Bodie began to get rid of the one sock that was all that remained of the footwear Doyle had arrived at the party in.

"Bizhale..."

Doyle's trousers were going the way of his sock, and his underwear was following rapidly, making it even more difficult for Doyle to concentrate on both the question and getting his tongue around such difficult consonants. "D'you like fucking men?"

"Like fucking you," Bodie muttered, in the

near vicinity of Doyle's left nipple.

"Tha's mice. I mean," he stopped, gathered his last sober wit, "that's nice. Tha' you like fuckin' me." Giggling, he tried again. "Fuckin' me. I like you fuckin' me too. Wazz goin' t'tell you, Bodie. Like you." He made a wildly expansive gesture with both arms, almost knocking both of them over, until Bodie grabbed him and pulled them safely down onto the bed.

"So you like me, do you?" Bodie whispered in a suspiciously soft voice, one Doyle would have noticed had he been an ounce less drunk.

"Lotsh. Lots an' lots an' lots an' lots. Bestest friend I've ever 'ad in my whole life. In fact," Doyle wagged a finger in Bodie's face, intent with the serious honesty of the sublimely drunk, "sh'mtimes, I even fink—think—I love you. Better'n me mum or anyone."

"Do you, Ray?" Bodie said quietly, fingertips caressing Doyle's hair, a grin quirking his mouth as he pulled the lost lemon slice out of its nest and got rid of it.

"Mmhm," Doyle mumbled into Bodie's bare shoulder, licking at the satin skin. "An' then I fink—sink—*think* you're in love with me. Head over heels, always touchin' me up, always ready for a good fuck at a party. Bodie an' Doyle's gettin' married! But tha's sstupid, innit? Mean, mates don' fall in love wiz matezz, do they? An' blokes don' fall in love with otter—" a pause for another sodden giggle, "wi-with *other* blokes, so can't 'ave been fallin' in love, can I? 'As to be somefing else, right? Anyway's I like you. Really, Bodiemate. Really," an enormous yawn, showing the only filling Doyle had in his entire mouth, "really," a suckling kiss on the side of Bodie's neck, "really like you, best of anyone..."

Doyle woke, leaden eyed and leaden limbed, to the blasting sound of a song that was both ironically appropriate—considering what his bruised brain insisted on telling him he had tried to get up to the night before—and appallingly loud. If his head hadn't been threatening to fall off, he'd have yelled at the top of his lungs, but as it was, he satisfied himself with a virulent sibillance hissed into Bodie's collarbone.

"Who the fucking hell is playing the Buzzcocks at this time of the morning?"

"Susan, I should think," Bodie replied, much

to Doyle's surprise, for he had assumed himself to be the only person alive in the entire world—apart, of course, from the sadistic bastard who was playing punk right in the middle of his hangover. "Anyroad," Bodie was going on, blessedly keeping his voice relatively quiet over the thump of bass and the scream of singing, "it's not morning, it's afternoon."

"What?" Doyle sat bolt upright, quickly, then lay down again, very, very slowly and with infinite care. "Oh Christ," he groaned, "who put the boot in?"

"You, sunshine," Bodie said with head-bursting cheerfulness. "And it wasn't the boot, it was g&t's till they were coming out your ears." The laughter thrummed in Bodie's chest, shivering against Doyle's ear. "Well, at least until you had lemons in your hair."

Lemons in his hair? Shite, it wasn't some terrible alcohol induced nightmare, he really had been that drunk.

Again. It was, he unhappily admitted, getting to be a bit of a habit. How many times was that recently? He tried to count, but that made the veins in his temples pound like a bass drum, and the music downstairs had moved on with unbelievable venom to the Sex Pistols. Someone, somewhere, had a sick sense of humour when it came to the appropriate songs to play after a typical CI5 party/orgy. Not to mention a vicious streak a mile wide.

"You know," Doyle whispered in an oasis of silence, "you're right, it has to be Susan. One of these days," he vowed, "I'm going to find a way to make her suffer hangovers like the rest of us. Then maybe she wouldn't be so keen to torture the dying like this."

"Have to get her drunk for that, Ray, and that's a frightening thought. I mean to say, can you imagine our Susan any less inhibited than she already is?"

Doyle found the strength to laugh after all. "She'd nab Cowley in the corridors and have him swinging from the chandeliers."

"No need to be disgusting, Doyle. Here, let me up a minute."

Reluctantly, Doyle slid to the side, and only the loss of the physical contact made him realise just how pleasantly intimate he and Bodie had been. Had they? he wondered. He couldn't remember last night, and he never asked the next

morning, the subject strictly taboo and *verboten*. Flustered, he busied himself with sorting the pillows out and grimacing at the clock for showing such a dreadfully late hour. Almost half his leave gone now, and nothing to show for it but a hangover and the hope that he had fucked Bodie. And to go with that, the hope that he'd done no such thing. One of these days, Bodie was going to pin him for this, was going to put him up against the nearest wall and demand an accounting. And Doyle had no idea what the hell he would say. It all depended, he supposed, on whether or not Bodie was going to rip his face off for it or ask him to get married and go live in a rose-covered cottage. He snorted at that—the image of him and Bodie living together like two maiden aunts in a cottage with rug in front of the fire and horse brasses over the mantelpiece made him laugh. Or would have, if his head hadn't made so little progress down the road of recovery.

“Here.”

“Oi, Bodie, watch what you're doing. And what the fuck is *that*?”

“*That* is the old Bodie family cure for everything that ails you. Get yourself round the outside of that, mate, and you'll be right as rain in no time.”

Doyle took a very cautious sniff and turned his away. “Strewth, Bodie, what's in it? It smells foul. And look at it!”

“Nothing in there that shouldn't be. Two eggs, dash of Worcestershire sauce, orange juice, two Askits. So drink it up before it separates out, Ray. If you think it's bad now, you try it then.”

“Is this going to kill me?” Doyle asked, pain-narrowed eyes fixed on Bodie.

“Don't be a prat, just drink the fucking drink, will you? Go on, hold your nose and get it down you.”

Propped up on one elbow, Doyle stared at Bodie in suspicion as he forced the vile concoction down, stomach heaving ominously as the first taste of it registered on his brain. By the time the last drop had been swallowed, he wasn't sure how long it would stay down. “God, Bodie, that's *awful*. And I think I'm going to be—”

“No you're not. Here, lie down, let your stomach settle. Have a bit of this bread, that'll help.”

Doyle merely glared.

“All right, all right, so don't have a bit of bread. But don't blame me when you're sick. If you don't want to help yourself, if you want to make your life miserable and mine besides, fine, go right ahead...”

And somewhere in the middle of the affectionate diatribe, Doyle found himself with a mouthful of bread soaking up the sourness of the night's over-indulgence and himself lying flat on his back.

Just like the night before.

Jingle Balls? He winced, trying to remember what else he'd done. Unexpectedly, because they were usually very careful to be distant with each other after one of their nights, he felt Bodie's hand on his forehead, stroking his hair back, the movement a soothing rhythm.

“You poor bastard,” Bodie said and Doyle couldn't quite fathom why Bodie's ebullience had faded into this serious expression. “Is it really that bad? Go on, Ray, tell me. Is it really so awful that the only way you can bring yourself to do it is to get yourself plastered and then walk around like the living dead the next day?”

“You what?” Doyle asked as intelligently as possible, given that his head was spinning and his stomach heaving, although at least his arms and legs belonged to him again and the Army Special Manœuvres had gone back to Salisbury Plain where they belonged.

“You and me,” Bodie said, obviously thinking he was explaining himself more clearly.

Doyle considered saying ‘you what?’ again, but it hardly seemed worth the effort. He could feel the effects of his hangover slowly recede and another bite of the bread helped, sopping up more of the acrid aftermath. Instead of speaking, he gave Bodie one of his patented looks, the one that Bodie still hadn't discovered meant that Doyle was completely at sea. The hand strayed from his forehead to smooth a line across his broken cheek.

“Listen, Ray,” Bodie was saying, his voice far soberer than anything else in the house that day, “I appreciate what you've done for me. Christ knows, it's been wonderful, but all the same...”

Doyle was still somewhere at sea, but at least now it was the English Channel instead of the Atlantic. There was, he thought, as the Askits burned through his system and began working magic on his headache, some glimmer as to

what the hell Bodie was talking about. Fake it, he thought, give him a bit of the pop-psychology crap and he'll let on what the hell he's going on about. "You're my partner, Bodie, and I owe you—and you'd do the same for me. Anycase," he swallowed, discovering that he really wasn't half as hungover as his waking moments had claimed, and that Bodie's magic potion was sweeping it out ever more quickly, "You're a life saver," he went on, talking about the hangover and the cure, "and I asked for it anyway."

Bodie smiled ruefully. "Christ, you really would blame yourself for gunpowder if you got the chance, wouldn't you?"

Eh? What the fuck was Bodie going on about? Christ, maybe Bodie had had even more than Doyle himself had and was still completely pissed.

"Don't be a wally, Bodie," he said, covering himself with a suitably flexible phrase. Let Bodie take that whatever way he wanted: at least it gave Doyle breathing space before he had to actually say something pertinent to this peculiar conversation.

"No, I mean it, Ray. You'd blame yourself for me, just because we're friends."

Now why the fucking hell was Bodie—Jesus Christ, *Bodie!*—blushing? Flummoxed, Doyle concentrated on eating his bread and letting the hangover disappear under Bodie's magic cure.

"Means a lot to me, you know," Bodie all but whispered, so that Doyle barely caught the words, the music downstairs having started up again. In amongst the bellowing 'Hit me with your rhythm stick'—trust Susan to come up with *that*—he heard Bodie mutter on, something about how important it all was to him, how precious...

Precious? Bodie saying he was precious? Now this he *had* to hear. "Hang on a tick, okay?" he said, scrambling out the bed, half way to the door before it dawned on him that he was stark staring naked and once he shut that door, he was going to have to walk back to the bed again. Naked. In front of Bodie. Naked and sober and under Bodie's watchful eye, he was going to have to cross a bedroom that was suddenly the size of Wembley, and then get into bed beside Bodie. Needless to say, he took an inordinately long time to shut the bedroom door, the music fading away to a thrumping mutter vibrating

against the floor. Of course, it occurred to him that he could stay where he was, or casually drape himself across the bedroom chair, but he'd be blue in seconds if he did that. Plus, he didn't think he had either the brass neck or the balls to sit nonchalantly naked in front of Bodie, who was beautiful from top to toe. Not an ugly or unappealing inch on his body, which was enough to intimidate Doyle into shrivelling up to nothing.

Course, there were always his clothes... Which rather begged the question of where the hell his clothes *were*. Going on past nights, they could be anywhere from here to under the Christmas tree. Or that time his underpants had ended up in Cowley's top drawer...

"Ray? You all right?"

"Yeh, course. Just trying to work out what Susan's playing now."

"Oh. How's the hangover?"

Such formal politeness! They weren't even like this when they'd had a dust-up, which meant... They had, they must've. Fucked, that is. Last night, he thought to himself. I must've done it to him again last night. So...what the fuck was Bodie going on about a minute ago? Curiosity, if nothing else at this point, aroused, Doyle walked quickly back to the bed, appallingly self-conscious of the narrowness of his hips, of the knobiness of his knees, of the hairiness of his thighs. He always felt so ugly in daylight, especially when he was with someone as beautiful as Bodie. All of which conspired to make him walk across that room looking to the rest of the world as if he owned the Universe and expected the entire human race to pay homage to his glory. Brass neck, his mother had called it. Putting a good face on it, he called it himself, unable to stop himself from touching his battered cheek.

"Christ, your feet are fucking freezing!"

"What d'you expect? It's cold out there."

"Yeh, I know. I went down to the kitchen to get your remedy, didn't I?"

"Oh, yeh. Well, thanks."

"Don't overwhelm me with your gratitude, Doyle."

"Pardon me! If you wait until the banks're open, I'll pay you for your trouble."

"Oh, that's nice. Do something for a mate and he—" Bodie stopped mid-sentence, lying down,

turning away from the blossoming argument and Doyle took a deep breath, determined that they weren't going to end up having a row just because they were both obviously feeling as insecure as hell. "I'm not going to start, not this time, Ray. It's not worth it, so let's just give it a rest, all right? You've done your bit, more than anyone'd ever expect at that, so let's just call it even stevens."

He was going on about it again, whatever 'it' was. "Bodie..."

"No, I mean it, Ray. Just leave it out."

He would, honest he would. If he knew what 'it' was that he was to leave out. "Bodie—"

"Just give it a by, Ray."

Give it a by. Give it a bi? Oh Christ, he'd said that last night, hadn't he? But if Bodie wanted him to pack in the sex stuff, then why the hell was the dozy bastard making it sound as if he, Doyle, was the hero and Bodie the parasite?

"This...you and me you were talking about..."

The embarrassment flooding from Bodie was almost tangible, but if Doyle had reached out, he would have actually been able to feel Bodie's pain: the long back muscles were bunched and knotted, a patent reflection of the inner suffering.

"Are you talking about the sex thing, Bodie?" Doyle asked, surprising himself with the gentleness of his voice, and his calmness. He'd always thought that any talking that would be done about the sex thing would be explosive, an enormous argument with Bodie hurling accusations and hurtful epithets like fairy at him. Anything, really, but this peculiarly tender scene, with him playing Randolph Scott to Bodie's Heathcliffe.

Bodie, by now, wasn't talking at all.

"C'mon, Bodie, don't come the deb with me. Since when has there ever been something we can't talk about?"

"How about since the day we met?"

Doyle decided that perhaps he just might have preferred Bodie doing his petulant deb routine. At least that way, he wouldn't have heard that one comment rip all his fond delusions away. So much for their famous rapport, and for their much-valued honesty, and for their much-envied friendship. From the first day? Christ...

"What is it you can't talk to me about?" he

heard himself ask, still in that oddly gentle voice, his hand stroking soothing circles on Bodie's shoulder.

"Same thing you can't talk to me about."

"Oh, that's a big help, that is, Bodie." Sarcastic as hell, but his hand neither slowed nor stilled, keeping up the endless caress.

"Now who's doing the deb routine? Get off it, Doyle, you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. The 'sex thing' as you so coyly put it."

"Oh. That. Well, suppose I do owe you an apology for that..."

A huge sigh, heavy enough to interrupt the glide of Doyle's fingers. "Look, you tried, you honestly tried. I mean, you even say all the right words when you're pickled. And it's not as if it's your fault or anything, is it? You can't help it if the thought of fucking me and loving me's so disgusting you have to get drunk to do it."

And that landed like the proverbial lead balloon, whack, right in the middle of Doyle's thick head. "You...you mean..."

"Yeh, yeh, I mean it. I've known for a long time, but it was nice being able to pretend. You know, when it was happening, and in the morning till you really woke up and realised what was going on..."

Until his brain was in gear? Dead bloody right—that was when it usually dawned on him that he was cuddling up to his wonderfully indulgent partner and that Bodie would end up thumping him one if he didn't stop before Bodie realised that the sexual feelings were still there. But Bodie thought—

"I'll give you credit where it's due, Ray, you did a good job of covering up how sick it must've made you feel, but once I was sober, it was hard to pretend that someone wants you when they have to get so drunk they need help standing up before they can bring themselves to touch you. But you did try, so don't you go using this as an excuse for going all guilty on me." Bodie's movements were clumsy, distracted, as he struggled to disentangle himself from both the emotions of the moment and the blankets. "I don't want your fucking pity, I just want you to let this go as if it'd never happened."

Doyle actually found it in him to feel intense gratitude for Macklin—recovering almost instantly from hangovers was one of the really welcome perks of Macklin's obsessive fitness

training. “C’mon, Bodie, it’s not that bad. And this’s been going on for ages, why’d you pick today to put paid to it?”

There was a long silence and utter stillness from Bodie, the blankets clustered round his hips, a once-discarded shirt clenched in his hands.

Doyle sighed, impatience rising. “Sitting there like the bloody Sphinx isn’t going to get us anywhere, is it? Why’re you suddenly getting so fucking moral on me, eh?”

“You watch who you’re calling moral, mate!” But the quip was flat, unfunny, undermined by the misery in the voice.

“So if it’s not an attack of ethics, what the bloody hell is it?”

A shrug.

“Oh, that’s helpful, that’s really going to give me deep and meaningful insight into what’s going on in that thick skull of yours.”

“Look, Ray, I’ve told you, just let it rest. You’ve done your share, you’ve done your Thousandth Man bit, so why don’t you just be grateful that you don’t have to actually do anything so disgusting as touch me.”

Perhaps he wasn’t going to be able to get away with putting it all on Bodie’s plate after all. He might, Doyle conceded with a wry smile, have to actually make a clean breast of it himself. “Bodie... No, you get back here right now, pal!” He was on his feet, nakedness forgotten, hand clenched in the crumpled wool of Bodie’s drooping kilt.

“So I can make an even bigger fool of myself? Oh, I can hardly wait.”

“You can wait for this, you stupid bugger. Will you turn round and look at me, Bodie?” Mulish obstinance, averted face and that tell-tale tension in the pallor of the nape. “Look at me, Bodie,” Doyle said in his best ‘shut up, Bodie’ voice. Bodie, the very picture of reluctance, looked, albeit over his shoulder and with an expression that was wary in the extreme.

“What?” Bodie said, making it quite clear that he didn’t want to hear any of this, that this staying was done out of friendship and other, deeper things he didn’t care to confess to.

Doyle felt the old commitment flourish between them and bolstered by the courage from that, he let go of Bodie, stepping back, running his hands through his hair. He looked sideways

at Bodie for a second, saw the way Bodie was standing there, willing to take whatever was coming, typical Bodie loyalty, but the rarest kind, given only to Doyle himself and Cowley. Loyalty Doyle was well aware he took for granted, took as his due—and knew he’d keep right on doing that, given his nature and given Bodie’s. But he wasn’t a complete prick when it came to relationships: he had stopped being a giver mainly because he’d learned that there was no-one he could trust enough to be that vulnerable with. Apart, it seemed, from Bodie...

“What did I do to deserve someone like you?” he asked, hastening on when he saw the telling glitter of anger in Bodie’s eyes. “That was meant to be a compliment, Bodie. You know, what did I do in a former life to be landed with someone like you...”

So much for compliments of the metaphysical sort.

“Bodie, you walk out that door and I’ll come after you and break both your legs and make you listen to Barry Manilow, d’you hear me?”

“Oh, that’s nice, that is. I’ve got a choice, have I? Either take my lumps now or get them later? Well, for you information, Doyle, I’m not into masochism, so you can take your sadistic little games and shove them! I’m not—”

“Getting the right idea at all. Bodie, I meant that you’re someone I’m lucky to have. That Valentine’sy enough for you?”

It was Bodie’s turn to say the brilliant and incisive: “You what?”

“I think,” Doyle said, climbing back under the covers, “you’d better sit down for this one, mate.”

That disquieting comment had Bodie perched, uneasy, on the very edge of the bed, staring at Doyle in a commingling of distrust and wary interest. “What’ve you been up to, Ray?”

“Let’s put it this way, mate, if Cowley knew what complete fucking morons we’d been about this, he’d give us the sack so quick our heads would spin.”

Doyle winced inwardly as he saw Bodie’s quick mind begin to put two and two together and come up with let’s hang Ray. “It wasn’t so much that I had to get drunk to bring myself to touch you, Bodie,” the condemned man said heartily. “It was more that I had to get drunk to have enough balls to try it on...”

Bodie spluttered. Literally, sat there on the edge of the bed and spluttered, words spraying around inside his mind and not one of them coming out of his mouth coherently. Any other day of the week, Doyle would have thoroughly enjoyed the sight, but then, he wasn't quite entirely sure what Bodie was going to do next.

"See, I didn't know you fancied me. I mean, if I'd've known that, if you hadn't been such a wally and kept your mouth shut about it..."

Judging by the look in Bodie's eyes, that worthy was not about to take the blame this time. Metaphorically speaking, Doyle ducked, waiting for the explosion.

"You trying to tell me that you like sleeping with me?"

No explosion? Well, Doyle was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Why else would I have had it off with you every chance I got?"

"But you didn't. You only did it when you got completely plastered."

"Which *I* thought was every chance I got. I only did it when I had a good enough excuse that you wouldn't remove my head from my shoulders. Remember that first time we did it? When you wouldn't talk about it the next day..."

"When *I* wouldn't talk about it? You were the one who—"

"Me? You were the one who suddenly went running off to town to see his girlfriend! You went so butch on me you looked like a fucking gorilla."

"Gorilla? All I was doing was covering myself from your snide fucking comments..."

They stopped and looked at each other, both of them running through the infamous morning after the even more infamous night before. "Christ, Bodie, how could we have been so stupid?"

Bodie shrugged again. "Don't know about you, but I was too scared to think about anything apart from making sure you didn't blow your top and shoot me."

"And that's what I thought you'd do to me 'cos I was the one that started it."

"You never started it. I did."

"Oh, yeh? And how d'you work that out, Einstein?"

"I was the one who suggested booking a room at the pub that night in the first place."

"But I was the one who fiddled it so the

landlord gave us a double bed."

"No, I was the one that did that. Cost me a tenner."

"The bastard! He got a fiver out of me as well!"

"A fiver? It was only worth a fiver to you?" But the humour was there, along with a glittering glow in the blue eyes that made Doyle begin to hope that maybe everything was going to be wonderful after all.

Doyle grinned at him, salacious and seductive. "Ah, but that was before I'd had you, wasn't it?"

"Give more than that now, would you?"

Doyle pulled the covers back, inviting Bodie in, responding to the cautious welcome in the other man's voice. "Course I'd give more now. What with inflation an' all, I'd give, oh, a good £5.75 for you now."

"I'd give everything for you, Ray."

Doyle sat there and stared, flabbergasted. But then, he thought to himself, he should expect stuff like that from a man whose little black book was actually a notebook of self-penned poems. "Small wonder you didn't get it when I paid you that compliment, Bodie. Everything?"

"Well," Bodie drew back a bit, edging a bit of humour in, "cept my pin-up of our George, of course."

"Oh, yeh, of course. Wouldn't want you to give the old man up. But," and now it was Doyle, pushing in closer, eliminating humour, going for the jugular, "it really means that much to you? And no I'm not talking about your stupid fucking picture of Cowley. You and me, Bodie, is it that important to you?"

The honesty in Bodie's gaze shook Doyle. "It was important enough for me to give up the sex to keep the friendship and all the other stuff."

"Such as me respecting you in the morning?"

A tense little smile. "Something like that."

Doyle shook his head, hand going out to touch Bodie's chilled skin, to pull the other man down into his own heat. "What'd I ever do to deserve you, eh?"

"D'you think you could manage to come up with something a bit more flattering?"

"Such as?" Doyle asked him, wrapping his arms around Bodie, luxuriating in holding this man when they were both stone cold sober, with none of the befuddlement and blurring of booze.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe something along

the lines of how I'm the most gorgeous, wonderful man you've ever met, best lover, most handsome—"

"Modest to a fault..." But he declined to banter, opening his mouth instead to Bodie's kisses, falling back onto the pillows, Bodie coming to lie, wonderfully heavy, on top of him. Sharp thrust of hip pressing against the heated warmth of wool, a hint of matching hardness against his own cock. He knew, somewhere, where his mind wasn't obsessed with the delight of making love with Bodie, that he was going to regret not taking this time slowly. It was, to all extents and purposes, the first time, for they'd always had the bastions of booze between them before, they'd always been able to hide behind lies of their own making. But today, there was nothing between them but honesty and love. And Bodie's bloody kilt, which was severely hampering Doyle's efforts to get to know Bodie much, much better.

His inarticulate mutterings into Bodie's mouth must have made sense of some sort, for Bodie then demonstrated at least one of the reasons why Scotsmen wear kilts: easy access. A quick movement of one hand, and the kilt was up out of the way, Bodie's heat exposed to Doyle's, hands flowing over flesh, cock kissing cock. It wasn't going to take long, not with the way sensation was flooding him, making him soar on the passion of Bodie's caresses. Hands frantic to fill themselves with Bodie's flesh, mouth devouring Bodie's, he arched his back, rubbing his cock hard and sweet against Bodie's.

"Oh, no you don't," Bodie whispered to him, turning them until it was Bodie lying on his back, Doyle coiled over him. "You passed out on me last night before we got to the good bits. And I've been lying here waiting an hour for you to wake up, thinking about what I wanted to do with you, when I could get you drunk again. But seeing as how you fancy me sober as well..." A tender kiss, a flicker of tongue, a lick of desire jolting through Doyle's cock. "I want you to fuck me."

"I think," Doyle said, hands busy rampaging over Bodie's cock and nipples, "I could just about manage that."

There was a fine balance threading through them: they had done this before, so they knew each other, and Doyle knew that Bodie had the

experience to take him inside easily, but there was a shimmering excitement, for this was fresh and new, sober and in the daylight, wide-eyed and gazing at each other, all truth and passion revealed.

And as Bodie began to get on to his knees, Doyle stopped him, thinking about making it special and meaningful, thinking about letting Bodie see his face as he sank into Bodie's arse and made love to him.

"Next time, Ray. Like it best from behind..." Bodie muttered, rolling over, getting up on his knees, rump in the air, head pillowed on arms. Voice marginally muffled, he was saying, deep and low and sexy, "Go on, Ray, do it. Want you inside me, love, go on..."

Experienced Bodie undoubtedly was, but they'd still need something. Doyle caressed Bodie's buttocks, then knelt, his tongue rimming delicate flesh, then pressing inside, fucking Bodie with his tongue, making his mate wet enough to take him. He spat on his hand, rubbed his cock, his own precum helping to slick him smooth and satiny. He fisted his hand in the ruffled, pushed-up kilt, steadying himself and then his cock was teasing at the wet hole, and Bodie was spreading, opening to take him in. Bodie thrust up at him, and then he was inside, surrounded by Bodie, encapsulated by him, enveloped by heat. Ray wrapped his arms around Bodie's broad chest, his arms rubbing against Bodie's nipples, his face rubbing against the side of Bodie's neck, coarse wool against his belly, sweat-damp skin against his chest.

"I love you," he whispered, needing to say it, knowing that Bodie needed to hear it without the deceptiveness of booze. "Love you so fucking much..."

It didn't last long, Doyle thrusting fast and hard, Bodie pushing back to get him in deeper. He grabbed Bodie's cock to pump him, his flesh squeezing Bodie's flesh just as Bodie's flesh was squeezing tight around his cock. Convulsive pleasure, and he was there, orgasming in streams inside Bodie, Bodie's words streaming inside him. Love, so much love...

And then he was on his back again, with Bodie above him, devouring kisses consuming his mouth, his hand grabbed and wrapped around Bodie's cock, Bodie fucking his fist and his mouth, and then, finally, stillness, and hot

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slickness on his hand, droplets on his belly, and Bodie’s lush sigh in his mouth.

He knew he had fallen asleep—he always did—but as he fumbled his way up through the layers of slumber, there was something different. Something, something... He checked, running through the sensations, establishing where he was. In bed, after sex, with Bodie. Considering they’d been at a party, nothing weird in that. But there was still something strange... And then he realised. There was no lingering fuzziness of alcohol, no pounding reminder that he’d been drunk the night before and had got Bodie so well-oiled his partner had let him...

Oh. Bodie. And the conversation, and the sex, and the everything...

“You awake down there?” he heard.

Strange, to feel almost shy with Bodie of all

people. But then Bodie was kissing him, gently, softly tracing his deformed cheek with tip of tongue, making him feel wanted, and beautiful, and loved.

Downstairs, very faintly, he could hear that the party was in full swing again, but upstairs, dusk was seeping into their room, and Bodie’s heat was seeping inside his bones.

“D’you want to go down there and join the rest of them?” Bodie asked, a long, deep kiss insuring that Doyle would want nothing of the sort.

“Nah. Rather stay up here. Don’t need a drink for what we have in mind, do we?”

And his filthy chuckled drowned out the even filthier chorus of ‘Rudolf the red-pricked reindeer’ coming from downstairs.



PANTING FOR IT OR THE ARTFUL ROGER



M. Fae swears that the circumstances for this story really did exist some years ago, but she cautions that in the interest of salacious fun, a certain career change has been moved back in time to fit into the Professionals Universe. Heavens! Does this mean that time has been ‘bent’, that we have ‘screwed’ with our setting, and ‘rogered’ our reality? Hmm, this begins to ‘prick’ our interest...

“Funny sort of place, innit, Bodie?” Doyle murmured, leaning back in to the shadows, looking askance at the world promenading past him.

“Funny sort of people an’ all,” Bodie replied, neatly side-stepping a moustachioed giant of a man in a hooped frock and rather fetching hat.

“Funny sort of informer you’ve got as well. You sure he said this was where you were supposed to meet him?” He pressed himself a little harder against the wall, none too keen on the way the man in the blue dress, blonde Tammy Wynette wig and Havana cigar was looking at him, but on the principle that better safe than sorry, he was keeping his back to the wall. Mainly because that meant his bum was safely to the wall as well, which he deemed was a good preventative security measure.

“Listen, Dougie said to meet him here, and he’s never given me a bum tip before, has he?”

Judging by the more...esoteric elements of the horde, Doyle wasn’t too sure of that, not if the way that bloke was ogling Bodie was anything to go by. “Into all this, is he?” he asked, casually.

“Suppose so. Said he’d often thought he might be a bit this way inclined, and then when he got involved with one of those avant-garde actor types, that was when he was still at school, mind, a bit previous is our Dougie Paul, well, he said that that was it.” He trailed off, mouth agape like a guppy as two visions of profound loveliness wafted past—and closer inspection showed that the prettier one wasn’t wearing a fox stole after all. It was a hairy—an exceedingly hairy—chest. “Em, yeh, well,” he stammered,

then recovered manfully, hell bent and bloody determined that he wasn't going to let his 'seen it all before' record be ruined in front of Doyle, of all people. So he chuckled, in a worldly sort of way, raised an eyebrow in a cosmopolitan kind of way, and smirked, so very Continental, Doyle half expected to hear him say 'ooh la la'.

"And?" Doyle asked, singularly unimpressed by Bodie's display of BBC2-ish sophistication. "You were rabbitting on about this Dougie Paul fella realising he was one of this lot, and—?"

It took Bodie a second to gather his thoughts, which was hardly surprising considering the vista parading in front of them. "Oh, yeh, it dawned on him one day and then he got involved in it himself. Well, the thing is, it's a slippery slope, all this alternative and esoteric lifestyle choice," Bodie said, doing quite a good Robin Day, "and once he'd got hooked on all of it, he says he just kept on getting more and more involved, in deeper, you know the kind of thing I mean—started out as something he did occasionally and before he knew it, he was obsessed and—well, that was it. Hooked, couldn't get back out."

"Tried, did he?" Doyle asked, sliding neatly in behind Bodie as the roving hand of Bodie's handsome passing man in tights, body glitter and satin slippers made contact with his unprotected front portion.

"More than once, or so he says. Although I think he likes all this, myself. Think he really gets off on it all—he claims it's glamorous. Can't see it myself," he added, as a wraith of a man in a footman's satin livery minced past, pausing long enough to bat his outrageously long false eyelashes at Bodie, who, being a polite and well-brought up young man, smiled pleasantly in return and nodded. Which is when the pallid, fey young thing came waltzing back, eyelashes going nineteen to the dozen and glossed lips pursing seductively. Bodie swallowed, audibly. Doyle sniggered, filthily. The young man simpered, delicately.

"Hello, sailor," he whispered, draping one long-fingered hand on Bodie's sober-suited shoulder. "Or is it 'hello there, soldier'?" He leaned in a bit closer to Bodie's frozen expression, fruity cologne drifting up into Bodie's nostrils. Eyelashes were batted once again, lips pouted to an absurd degree, and a very confident hand

was placed in a very intimate place. Bodie squawked, and the limpid young man whispered, meaningfully, "Or should that be, hi there, Guardsman?"

Bodie didn't know what the hell to do. If he brought his knee up and gelded this vision of loveliness, then Cowley would have his guts for garters. If he didn't bring his knee up and geld the aforementioned vision, then the amorous suitor was going to have Bodie wearing garters before the night was out. And if he said anything that caused a fuss, Cowley would kill him for making a spectacle out of himself—'And why did you enter into a slanging match, Bodie?' Because he was feeling me up, sir. What else was I supposed to do? 'Lie back and think of England—and keep your eyes peeled while you were at it.'—but if he didn't...

"Sorry, mate," and blessedly, Doyle was there, saving him like the proverbial bell. Bodie sighed in relief, and then choked, vulgarly. Doyle, eyes gleaming with wicked wait-till-I-tell-the-Squad humour, was draping one arm casually across Bodie's shoulder, his other hand coming round to pluck, delicately, Bodie's admirer away from that which was so very admirable. Doyle let both the long-lashed lovely and Bodie go, and Bodie heaved another sigh of relief. Then choked again, a strangled cry of utter shock sticking in his throat.

"You see," Doyle was positively lisping, "he's already taken." And Bodie was. Taken, in another slender, long-fingered grasp, while Doyle simpered sweetly at his side, left hand on Bodie's rump, right hand on his front. "Aren't you, darling?" Doyle murmured, gazing limpidly up into Bodie's blue eyes.

"Um, eh, uh..."

There was no other way to describe it: Doyle giggled, girlish and high. "Oh, he just gets so tongue-tied!" He pursed his lips, Clara Bow in tight jeans, and whispered, ever so conspiratorially, "Don't you simply *adore* the strong, silent type?"

"The best ones are always fucking taken," lovely-lash snapped, too annoyed to remember to play the primping nancy. "Don't tell me you're exclusive?" he added, eternally hopeful.

"Um, eh, er..." Well, what else could Bodie say, considering that his butch partner was lisping, feeling him up and blowing in his ear,

all at the same time, which is no mean feat, if you think about it.

“Shit,” the once ardent suitor muttered feelingly, turning on his heel and stomping off, a wind of invective trailing behind.

“Gerroff, Doyle!” Bodie hissed, squirming.

“Keep this up,” Doyle squeezed Bodie right where he was most sensitive, “and it’ll be *you* getting off, won’t it, mate?”

Bodie groaned inwardly: he knew he should never have confessed all. Ever since the infamous Confession Doyle had never missed a chance, not once, not ever, to get a dig in or set him up royally, and the toad would just get worse and worse if Bodie gave him an inch. (Although Doyle was in the process of taking about seven inches...) He could always throw a fit, come over all hurt and upset, but Doyle usually laughed like a stopped drain when he did that, so Bodie decided instead to stand on his dignity, a performance that was marred by the fact that there was a lull in the stream of bustle in front of him and that his audience consisted of Doyle alone, who had never thought Bodie had enough dignity to spit on, never mind stand on.

Bodie tried again to dislodge his tormentor, but without making it look in the process that he was holding Doyle’s hand in encouragement. A luscious idea, but he didn’t think Cowley would be best pleased if he got reports of Doyle wanking his partner in public—even in a den of sin like this one. “Ought to be ashamed of yourself, doing that to me in public—”

“Why? ’D you rather I did it in private then?” And the evil little sod flickered his tongue out to delve briefly, but efficiently, into Bodie’s ear.

“Stop it, Ray, before someone comes! And I didn’t mean it like that,” he added, with undignified haste, seeing exactly what Doyle could do with a malapropism like that.

Doyle shrugged, his attention wandering already, the joke gone stale, and went back to propping the wall up, the sole of one boot flat against the shiny painted surface. “Wish he’d hurry up, your pigeon.”

“Not half as much as I do.” Heartfelt, fed by that unnerving fluttering in his stomach, the one that was always put there by Doyle and his easy, meaningless flirtations. “Not half as fucking much as I do.”

Doyle was examining his nails, a tiny ragged

edge gnawed off by sharp white teeth, even so carnivorous a sight hitting poor Bodie somewhere decidedly below the belt. Doyle exuded sex, even smelled of it half the time. It wasn’t that he came to work unbathed or anything so clatty, but more that Doyle was always on the rise, his musk lingering round him, more erotic than any expensive shop-bought scent. Bodie would describe it as less shop-bought and more shop-worn, harmonising so well with Doyle’s debauched-angel hair and pop-star jeans. Trying hard not to pant with unbridled lust, Bodie looked away, thinking boring thoughts, imagining revolting sights, like Cowley in the bathtub or Maggie Thatcher posing for *Playboy*, anything but the sight of that mouth sucking on so phallic a finger, or those jeans, hugging so phallic a bulge, or that hair—

And he was getting ridiculous, and if he didn’t get his mind out of the groin, Doyle would kick him into the nearest gutter and leave him there for Cowley to find in the morning. So he turned his mind to lofty thoughts, reciting favoured poems, doing quite well until he noticed how delectably erotic some of the sonnets were, and weren’t they the ones Shakespeare had written to his ‘Dark Lady’, the handsome—now who was it? Essex? Sussex? Sex? Oh God, all right, so he wouldn’t think Shakespeare. He’d think... Doyle’s arse, rubbing up and down against the wall, wriggling away. “What the fuck are you doing?” he hissed, not quite willing to actually let Doyle see him looking.

“Got an itchy bum,” Doyle replied, very reasonably, he thought, especially when you compared it to Bodie’s half-hysterical squeak. “Why?” Then he added, glinting, unable to resist the temptation, “Getting you going, is it?”

“Who, me? A skinny little arse like yours? Told you, sweetie, you’re not my type.” And he had told him, bare weeks into their partnering, standing there like a sergeant-major at parade rest, barking the truth out, daring Doyle to comment on the magazine he’d found stuffed under the sofa cushion: so I like blokes as well. You going to make something of it? Doyle, faintly smiling, flicking through the gay porno mag, glancing up at him through untidy hair, saying, I might. One of these days, mate, I just might at that. And if I decide to, you’ll be the first to know. Then Bodie, stung, fearful of mockery,

fearful of loving and being laughed at: Sorry, mate, you're not my type. Too scrawny by half. Doyle merely smiling at him, with an unnerving edge of utter disbelief, looking from Bodie back to the Dutch magazine overflowing with men sucking men, men fucking men, men kissing—

But Doyle wasn't in the past with him, he was firmly in the present, and half-smiling at him again, the way he had the night of The Confession. "And 'im?" he asked, nodding at a tattooed navvy in pink tutu. "Is 'e your type, eh, Bodie? Get your blood going, does he?"

Friendly, being quite nice about it, and Bodie could never resist Doyle when he was like that, which always led Bodie into making more confessions, telling Doyle another juicy little titbit about his sexuality. No, he could never resist Doyle when Doyle had that gentle Three Musketeer smile to him, all for one, one for all, you and me together, mate... And not only that: best not to ignore Bodie's secret, hoarded pleasure at being able to talk to Doyle about it, about his liking for men, as if by talking about it, he drew Doyle in almost close enough for Doyle to share his desires. Throwing caution and common sense to the winds, he jumped into the joke feet first. "Ohh, yes!" he piped, flapping at the wrist. "Such a nice big boy!"

Doyle grinned at him, pushing off from the wall, ready to saunter over towards the fairy on steroids. "Straight up? In that case, I'm sure he'll be thrilled to know."

Bodie thought he'd die then and there with embarrassment, or shortly thereafter if Doyle landed him in it with the navvy. "Ray!" he hissed, half-reaching out to halt his partner, who shrugged him off; Bodie's heart thumped nervously.

Then, predictably, Doyle stopped, glancing over his shoulder, face alight with mischief, and Bodie wasn't sure quite how far Doyle was going to play this game. "Ray, you wouldn't..."

Doyle's smile widened and he took another step forward, towards the navvy who seemed to have found a fairy wand and was doing a Zorro with it.

"Ray, you wouldn't, would you?"

Doyle winked at him, took another step.

Bodie was beginning to panic: Doyle had a wild streak, a sense of humour that sometimes went so far beyond the limits that it was haz-

ardous to the health. If Doyle set him up with that great bruiser over there, Bodie didn't much fancy his chances of getting out of it with both face and virtue intact. There was a vibration of genuine dismay in his voice. "Christ, Ray—"

Doyle looked at him again, still over the arch of his shoulder, eyes impish. "Changed your mind already? Oh, tut, tut, tut. You always this fickle, Bodie?" He was still teasing, but he was walking back to Bodie now, well-pleased with himself that he'd been able to get his boastfully cool partner visibly sweating. "And you've got the cheek to say I'm the one who ought to be ashamed of himself, you tart. Five minutes a fella, is that it?"

"I was only joking about him."

Doyle gave him a sharp look, the edge in Bodie's voice unusual, even when Bodie'd come off worse in one of their endless game of one-upmanship. "And I wasn't? Christ, you can be a right pillock sometimes, Bodie, did you know that?"

Still not mollified, heart still chundering with the close call with betrayal. "I'd have to be deaf not to. You tell me often enough."

"Yeh, well, my mum always said virtue should be rewarded." His pose against the wall looked bored, but his eyes were sharp and bright with every glance cast in Bodie's direction: each and every glance that was redolent with speculation and oozing reckless try-anything-once curiosity.

Bodie was doing everything in his power not to notice Doyle noticing him. He didn't want to get his hopes up, didn't want to start dreaming that his partner was willing this time, maybe, to try a walk on the wild side. Didn't do to think about it; all that happened then was disappointment and a raining misery that could last weeks until he could accept once again that Doyle was only flirting, just teasing, playing around with Bodie's attraction to him. It lasted an entire second, until all his good intentions went flying out the window as Doyle slid a hand—the very one that had grabbed Bodie earlier—in between his own shirt buttons, and Bodie could see the movement of fingers as Doyle scratched himself. In fact, he'd have sworn he could hear the fragile whisper of chest hair being rubbed. Dry-mouthed, Bodie made himself look away. Trying frantically to ignore the

erotic poem standing beside him, he opted to go back to reciting poetry to himself. But not Byron: too dangerous by half was that randy old sod. So... Sassoon, yes, he'd run through Siegfried. A good war poem, that would get his mind off Doyle... 'I listen for him through the rain...' Well, that put paid to pondering the beautiful horror of war. All right, so that was Sassoon out there with Byron. How about Donne? No, Donne always struck him as queer, and he was trying to forget all that. Tennyson? No, because then he'd start going through 'In memoriam', and all that did was make him want to hug Doyle close and never let him go, in case Death got him before Bodie had a chance to love him properly. Whitman was, naturally, completely out of the question. Mishima as well... Wilfred Owen—no, he did that poem about Hercules wrestling in the nude. Goethe, Genet, Ginsberg, no, all the 'G's were out. Same with Hopkins. And Lawrence, Come on, come on, he half-muttered to himself, there has to be *someone* who wasn't queer... But because he needed so much to think only macho, hetero thoughts, all he could remember were the poems he'd shivered with amorphous desire over, too young to understand why they made him feel so warm and restless inside. At his side, Doyle was fidgeting, a wriggling of his hips in jeans that could be seized by the Vice Squad any second now.

Wordsworth. Bodie latched on to images of daffodils and clouds and wandering and oh, Christ, now Doyle was watching him, bright-eyed and inquisitive, obviously on the verge of asking something risqué.

"So if you don't fancy our friend in the tutu," Doyle asked him, as if there hadn't been a break in their conversation, "what *do* you fancy?"

"A pint?" Bodie answered with faint hope of derailing Doyle's line of questioning. One thing to joke about sex, one thing to bandy about dodgy comments and subtle digs, but quite something else to talk about who and what he liked when everything he wanted was standing right beside him, a pitfall waiting to swallow him up.

"Can't, can we, not until your bloody pigeon turns up. Go on, Bodie, what d'you fancy?" Still that sparrow-bright gaze, nothing escaping the beady eyes.

For an instant of sweet insanity, Bodie con-

sidered saying, simply, 'you'. But then there would be the expression on Doyle's face, and his reaction, followed swiftly by disapproval and revulsion and rejection. Oh, Doyle was broad-minded enough to joke with him about it, wicked enough to tease him about trying it—'one of these days, I just might at that', God, he'd never forget Doyle saying that—but all that was sex in the abstract, and a far cry from being on the receiving end of a *grande passion* from his very large and very male partner. "D'you seriously want to know? Here?"

Doyle swept a hand round to display how alone they were for now, riotous noise and gales of hysterical laughter coming through from the main hall, a cluster of be-denimed men rustling back and forth across the far doorway, but their own backwater was solitary and still, deserted for whatever fun was going on up ahead. "No-one but me and the mice to hear, is there? Go on, I'm dead curious. What do you fancy?"

Doyle had never betrayed him, never so much as let him down. Even if the bugger's idea of rescue could make life a bit awkward—'he's already taken'—Doyle was always there like the RNLI, come hell or high water. So what if Doyle wanted to wade through his private wants and needs, browsing at a jumble sale of Bodie's secrets? It was all part and parcel of their friendship, every intimacy shared except sex. And if Doyle wanted to start *really* talking about sex... It might backfire and burn them both, but if it didn't, then Bodie would have some tantalising new memories to take to bed.

"Yoo-hoo, anyone home?" Doyle, of course, waving his hand in front of Bodie's face.

"Just thinking. Trying to think what I like."

"Christ, your age and you still don't know? I'd that all worked out by the time I was thirteen." A sly, slanting look and then: "Although I've come up with a few new ideas in the past four months."

Bodie could feel the slow blush crawling up his face. Doyle didn't need to say another word: Bodie was used to this teasing flirtatiousness by now, and usually handled it better than this stifled embarrassment. But staying cool was hard, when he wanted Ray so much that it had to be written all over his face—or pointing out from his trousers. Sure enough, that infamous near-telepathy of theirs worked again, and Doyle

was looking down at him, one eyebrow rising to match the rise of Bodie's arousal.

"Like that, is it?" Doyle asked with sympathy rather than the more frequent amusement. "Sorry, mate. Don't suppose it's fair of me to be having a go at you when you've got all these blokes round you." A slight pause, Doyle surveying a forlorn cobweb clinging to the cornice, time enough for Bodie to get himself pulled together. "Does it really get you going, just looking at fellas like that?"

Bodie hesitated, again tempted by the lemming words on the tip of his tongue. It would be so easy to say that it was Doyle himself who'd got him going this time round, as per bloody usual. "What d'you think? It's not as if it's any different from watching birds waltz past, is it?"

That expression was back again, and with it, Doyle's question, softly, softly whispered. "What do fancy, Bodie?"

There wasn't a trace of condemnation in the green eyes, not a hint of sneer to the slightly parted lips. Just curiosity—copper's nose, Doyle always called it. Bodie shrugged, settling into this next level of closeness with Ray, smiling inwardly to himself at how uncommon this friendship of theirs was. He'd never had a friend like Doyle before, not a male friend anyway. Not that he was complaining, not by a long chalk. But for all the pluses of talking to Doyle like this, there was still the itchy discomfort of actually saying the words out loud, making himself that vulnerable to Doyle's curious stare. "Nothing kinky, if that's what you're after. Just..." he thought about it, taking the time to consciously list what it was that turned him on, what it was that attracted him in the first place. "I dunno. I like a good arse, but I suppose the first thing I notice is if he's quick. Can't stand stupidity, gets right up my nose."

"Never!" Doyle declaimed in mock astonishment. "What a surprise that is."

No different, then, talking about sex or football. Doyle was going to be his usual snotty self, and Bodie found himself grinning, and warming to the subject. "Yeh, must make you wonder how I've put up with you for five and three-quarters months solid, mustn't it?"

Doyle gave him a very old-fashioned look. "You're not getting out of it that easily, Bodie. You were baring your all, mate."

Bodie, never one to resist a bad joke, surveyed his neat navy suit with an astonished eye. "Baring my all? Nah. Too cold, innit? Ouch! Oi, you, that hurt. All right, all right," this, as Doyle started pummelling him, half-fun punches egging him on, "I'll confess. I like a bloke who can move well, you know, really fit and...not so much graceful, no fairy stuff or anything like that. But, athletic, economical the way he moves, light on his feet, supple... Good sense of humour, a good laugh, but not one of these Sloane Ranger twits. He has to know how to be quiet as well, and understand about the job."

Doyle had gone very quiet now, listening intently, and neither one of them was quite sure when this had gone from a frivolous list of things Bodie fancied to a description of someone Bodie could love.

Bodie was sombre now, made all the more so in contrast to the crescendoing laughter from the main hall. "Goes without saying, doesn't it, that he'd have to understand about the killing."

"That's the worst of it, isn't it, mate?" Doyle agreed, too many bitter memories matching Bodie's, drawing them closer together. "Finding someone who doesn't run a mile when they find out you kill people for a living. But it's worse when they get turned on thinking about it."

"Christ, yeh. That happened to you and all?"

Doyle nodded at him, absently fiddling with the sit of Bodie's collar, automatically smoothing the crisp whiteness to lie properly. "There've been a few. One girl was dead keen to have me fuck her with my shooter."

"And you're not talking about the one between your legs either." He couldn't help it: he looked down between Doyle's legs, at the luxuriant swell of sex there. And looked up, only to meet Doyle's very knowing eyes.

"I turn you on, don't I?" Doyle said, very flat, betraying no reaction.

At least he didn't punch me, Bodie thought, stepping back to show Doyle that there'd be no uninvited passes made between them, a tacit reminder that Doyle could always trust Bodie. He fully intended to be very matter of fact about it, but it came out as mournful whisper, the pain of not-having ambushing him. "Yes. Oh, God, yes, Ray, I'm sorry."

Doyle shrugged at him. "Not as if it's something I didn't already know. You've always

fancied me, haven't you?"

What could he say, but the truth? It was already far too late to lie, so he spread his hands in unconscious supplication, terribly near to begging Doyle to forgive him, stay with him, let them still be friends even though he was going to confess the unignorable to a straight friend. "From the second I laid eyes on you. I can't help wanting you."

"Gathered that, from the way you feel me up at every verse end." But still, there was no accusation, only that bright-eyed interest, Bodie's every breath noticed. "Funny thing is, it's never bothered me."

Bodie gulped in a breath, suddenly suffocating under the pressure of possibility, Doyle looking at him like that, not minding that Bodie wanted him. Coiled curiosity, Doyle was standing not a foot from him, and Bodie knew that he'd do it: no matter the cost, no matter the bleakness of morning. If Ray wanted to have a go at gay sex, then Bodie would do it, and never let his friend see the longing for love in him. "Glad to hear that, mate. You know, if you ever want to, you know, sort of, well..."

Doyle's eyes creased with amusement, and then his hand went out to soothe Bodie's reaction away, petting him as one would a frightened dog. "It's all right, Bodie, I'm not laughing at you. Can't be easy for you, can it? Fancying your partner, communal showers after the gym, workouts with me..."

And he was telling him, needing to let this sympathy hear it all. "Worse in the car sometimes, the way you sit, and you're always rubbing up against me. And when you let me touch you, Christ, Ray—" He broke off then, turning away, pressing his hot forehead to the cold wall, hiding away from Doyle, from the aching need that was too much, sometimes, to bear.

After a moment: Doyle's hands on Bodie's shoulder, Doyle's voice, roughly gentle, an odd crack of nervousness threading through it. "You never heard of the old saying, mate?"

Bodie, wordless, murmured a question into the blank wall.

"If you can't beat 'em..."

Slowly, very slowly, Bodie turned round, eyes searching out Doyle's, heartbeat tripping faster and faster at what he saw there. "Join 'em?" he whispered, beginning to hope, to be

sure that this time Doyle was going to let him, and maybe for more than one night's experiment. "D'you mean it?"

Doyle, his turn to be embarrassed, scratched the side of his nose, glance flickering away from Bodie, coming back to him, a rueful grin lifting his mouth. "No, I'm fucking lying. Course I mean it, Bodie. Took long enough to think about it, didn't I?"

Joy, champagne bubble bursting inside him. Half shy, a tiny wariness still that Doyle might be setting him up after all, he reached out, brushed his knuckles gently across Doyle's battered cheek in a clumsy gesture of sweet affection. "What's got into you, mate?"

Doyle, all limp wrist and hard cock was pressing up against Bodie, lispng, "Nothing yet. Thought you were going to do something about that, sailor?"

And plummeting, leaden, into the jocularity: "Don't mess me about, Ray."

"Oh, give me some credit, Bodie. I mean, I'm a bastard, but I'm not fucking Cowley!"

"No, but you'll be fucking me, won't you?" Dizzy now, getting high on the promise, knowing that Doyle meant it, wanted to make it with him, wanted to let him love him.

Doyle's eyes went dark, all black pupil and endless depths. "That's what got me thinking about getting into this with you in the first place," he admitted, tongue-tip moistening lips gone dry with arousal and the desire to kiss. "Once I knew you were into all that, I couldn't stop thinking about fucking you. Didn't worry me, least, not that bit." He was closer now, hands sliding warm and strong round Bodie's waist, pulling his friend in nearer to him until their bodies were pressed hard together, only fabric keeping them apart. "It was the being fucked that gave me a few dodgy moments. Wasn't sure if I fancied it, then I wasn't sure if I could let anyone that close to me, didn't know if I could trust anyone that much, not even you."

Hands trembling, Bodie cradled Doyle's face, finally free to run his fingers through Doyle's hair in something other than matey good fun. "What changed your mind?" he asked, as his sight was filled with the perfection of Doyle's mouth, waiting, just waiting, for Bodie's kiss.

"Wednesday, the 23rd of December, 9.15 A.M."

Delighted, Bodie couldn't help but laugh.

“Christ, d’you think you could be a bit more specific?”

“Was when I was sticking my neck on the block for Cowley to chop off because of a hunch you had that you hadn’t even told me about yet. Thought that if I was stupid enough to trust you like that, then getting ploughed by you wasn’t a big deal.”

Bodie rubbed his groin against Doyle’s. “That a big enough deal for you?”

Doyle’s head dropped back, long neck exposed to Bodie’s sucking kisses, lithe back held tightly by Bodie’s strong arms. His eyes opened, focussing blurrily on the dark head bent so vampirically over him, and then he groaned, shoving Bodie off, heaving great breaths and running a shaking hand over his face. “Not here, Bodie,” he managed, struggling to control the unexpectedly devastating course of arousal through his body. “Can’t have it off in a public corridor.”

Bodie, cut off from him, standing desperately alone, fighting to keep his hands off Doyle, swallowing hard, expression mutinous.

“Don’t look at me like that, Bodie. We can’t go round fucking in public, you know that! Christ, blokes’re still getting arrested for kissing, so what d’you think Cowley’s going to do if we get nicked for having sex in public? Well?”

Then the harsh demanding was gone, replaced by concern in the dilated eyes, as what he was seeing percolated through the passion into Doyle’s mind. “Bodie? What the fuck’s the matter?”

Bodie, big, strong, brave Bodie, who always had prided himself on being so cool, so imperturbable, so invulnerable. On the verge of tears, or rape, hands clenched into fists, jaw jumping with fragilely leashed tension. “But if we stop, you won’t let me try again. If we don’t do it now, you’ll get cold feet or go off the idea, and that’ll be that, and I’ll never have you, I’m—”

“Bodie, Bodie,” and Doyle was touching him again, a safe, reassuring stroking of hand across hand, then a fleeting caress of finger to parted lips. “Why’d do think I took my time before I said anything to you, eh? The night I found that fuck-mag in your flat, I knew right then and there that you’d let me do anything I wanted to—and you wouldn’t expect me to let you do the same thing back. Fucking hell, Bodie, it was

written all over you that you’d let me use you as trade and then walk away once I’d satisfied my curiosity.” Abstractedly, his fingers were tracing the puckered bump of nipple through fine cotton, Bodie’s eyes closing, an inarticulate moan escaping him; Doyle recognised that if he didn’t step back now, if he didn’t stop touching Bodie this very instant, then the insistent demand of his cock would have them up against the wall, prey to any passing stranger. So he stopped touching, went back to talking, trying frantically to get himself back under control. “Problem with that was I already liked you. Not often I’ll put someone else before what I want, but you—” He sighed, shaking his head, not quite understanding his own reactions to Bodie himself. “Don’t ask me why, but I didn’t much fancy doing anything that’d end up hurting you, so I left it.”

“Shouldn’t’ve. We could’ve been fucking for months already, and you’re going to wind up leaving me anyway, so—”

“Am I?” Quick as a bullet, and striking just as hard, Bodie’s eyes flying open under the impact. Doyle took a step back, forcing his hands into his pockets where they couldn’t touch Bodie and land them both in hot water. “But that’s just it, Bodie. I don’t think I’m going to leave you at all. You don’t get it, do you?” Wry affection, and the almost uncontrollable desire to ruffle Bodie’s hair, to continue the intimacy now that it had finally started. “You’ve always liked fellas, Bodie,” a quickly incisive glance, and another of Bodie’s secrets was laid bare, “in fact, I think you like blokes a lot more than you like women. But I’ve never fancied a fella in my life before. But you, oh, you rotten bastard, you got to me. Made me curious, made me care about you...”

Bodie found his voice, albeit shakily. “Inevitable was it, then?” Heart stopping, waiting to hear if Doyle was going to say what he hoped, oh, God, how he hoped, Doyle was going to say.

“Suppose it was. Got very fond of you, and after that—”

There was, unexpectedly, a riot going on up ahead. Blistering roar, feet stamping and hundreds of hands clapping, and then a tsunami of men running or strolling down the corridor, every single one of them talking or laughing or shouting to someone else. Doyle stepped back, pushed into the wall by the rippling river of

sweating men in hooped dresses and plumed hats, with make-up running, wigs being hauled off, hairy chests being scratched.

“Here, isn’t that your informer?”

Unfortunately, Doyle was right. Bodie groaned in frustration, this being the last thing he needed. He’d forgotten why they were here, had forgotten everything but Doyle, and him, and the sliding sweetness of touching Doyle.

“Bodie!” Dougie Paul was striding up to them, bodice half-unbuttoned, one big hand picking his beauty spot off. “What are you doing back here, darling?” he boomed, coming up to Bodie, bold as brass, and enveloping Bodie in a bear hug and puce ball gown.

“Waiting for you, Dougie,” Bodie answered, not quite brave enough to look at Ray. He had a sneaking feeling that Doyle might not be quite ready for the sight of his partner—and soon-to-be lover?—being kissed and cuddled by a tall man in a dress and full make-up.

“Here in the bowels?” Archly delivered, with another smacking kiss on Bodie’s lips and a quick but all-encompassing grope of Bodie’s buttocks. “So to speak, darling. Now, who is *this* luscious beauty?”

If looks could kill, Dougie Paul would never have even been born. “My partner,” Bodie said, a strong warning in his voice.

Paul heard it, snapped a glance off at Bodie and asked, *sotto voce*: “Straight?”

“Yes, bloody straight—”

“Actually,” Doyle said, continuing the soft undertow of seduction between them, “only temporarily. Right, Bodie?”

And it was worth it, to see Bodie blush. Red-faced and gaping, then the glowing realisation. “Straight, for the time being,” he said to Dougie, positively beaming with pride.

“Talk about the luck of the fucking Irish?” Dougie muttered, looking from Bodie to Doyle and back again in comic disgust. “But enough of your sex life, Bodie, before I grow so jealous I fuck your friend just to annoy you. Why are you wasting away here in the nether regions?”

“Because, Dougie,” Bodie answered, neatly intercepting Paul’s investigating hand, “you told me to. Be here at 7 P.M., Christmas Eve, that was the message you left.”

Dougie Paul tut-tutted, but before he could make another comment, he was accosted by the

handsome young man in false eyelashes and tights. “Eddie, darling, I was looking for you! Just thought I’d ask these handsome young darlings—”

“Don’t bother,” the young man they now knew was ‘Eddie’ said, slipping an affectionate arm round Paul’s waist. “They’re both already taken.”

“Strictly speaking, that’s not quite true—yet, anyway, although judging by my dear friend here—” a very swift, but telling, squeeze of Bodie’s prick, mere trousers not nearly enough to keep Dougie Paul from his goal, “it won’t be for very much longer at all. But you,” he turned his full attention to his cohort, “were absolutely wonderful, darling, truly divine.”

“Do you really think so? I was so dreadfully nervous, the old ticker going—”

“No, no, darling, you really were quite superb.”

Somewhere in all of this, Doyle’s face had taken on a very interestingly peculiar expression, somewhat like that of a child catching Mummy and Daddy going at it in bed. Bodie surveyed him with sinking heart. If Doyle was turned off by all this, if Doyle thought that they were going to end up like this...

“Bodie, darling, I really must run. I’ve got to get this silly frock off and get my face cleaned. So I’ll give you a ring, shall I?”

“Give me a ring?” Bodie, outraged, suddenly furious that Dougie Paul should have dragged them all this way on Christmas Eve for God’s sake, and then put Doyle off by his drag queen impersonation and now was trying to palm him off without a word of info? Fat chance. “Not bloody likely, mate. You can tell me what you brought me here for or—”

Dougie Paul was looking at him strangely, but not half as oddly as Doyle was looking at the prematurely balding Eddie. “Bodie, what the blazes do you think I brought you here for, darling?”

“Information,” Bodie said succinctly, biting the word out, teeth snapping shut on it. “Fucking information, the same as you always do—”

“Information?” A shake of the head, a ostentatiously patient sigh. “You obviously didn’t get the entire message then, did you, darling? You were supposed to be here at seven, but not in this dingy corridor. Out front, darling, with

all the other revellers.”

Bodie was just staring at him as the flood of men slowed to a trickle and Dougie Paul and his friend made as if to join the departing.

“I left tickets at the booking office for you, lovey. I thought you’d rather enjoy seeing me do the Wicked Stepmother in ‘Cinderella’.”

“No info?” Bodie asked, beginning to feel a complete and total fool.

“No, darling. Just a pantomime for Christmas, because you’re such a child at heart.”

He was no longer beginning to feel a fool: he had reached that horrible state, and with bells on. “Oh. Right. Well.”

Dougie leaned over, kissed him lightly on the lips, patted him paternally on the cheeks, squeezed him suggestively on his nether cheeks. “Don’t be sad, darling. I’ll leave tickets for you, Boxing Day matinée all right? And bring your lovely friend, do.”

“Oh, yes,” added Eddie, smiling coyly. “We would so enjoy that.”

A flutter of goodbyes, and then they were gone, and Bodie and Doyle were left alone in the corridor again, the far doorway going dark as the last of the stage lights were turned off, the last of the stragglers disappearing through doors that shut firmly.

Bodie looked at Doyle, waiting for whatever reaction was heralded by that most peculiar expression; he was resigned to whatever Fate had in store for him. He’d been so sure, so absolutely fucking certain, that Doyle was going to make love to him tonight, but looking at that stunned and bemused face, he wasn’t so positive now.

“Bodie... Those blokes...”

Oh, God, here it came. The ‘I don’t want to be like that’... “They’re *actors*, Ray, what else do you fucking expect? All right, so they’re queers as well, but they’re in a fucking panto, that’s why they were in dresses and tights and make-up and all that crap. And all the lavender stuff? Christ, Doyle, everyone knows actors are fairies, but that’s not because they’re queer, I mean, even the straight ones ponce around like nancy boys, and Dougie’s just flamboyant, he kisses everyone, didn’t mean anything...” He trailed off, drying up under Doyle’s steady gaze.

“I do know all that, Bodie,” Doyle said with a cutting edge of sarcasm. “I did gather that, you

know. Nah, that’s not what’s getting me, is it?”

“Look, Ray, I’m not into the theatre crowd. It’s just that I’ve known Dougie since school, and don’t ask me how, but he comes up with some good info on all kinds of stuff—”

“I’m not fucking talking about your pigeon, Bodie! Christ, you’re a proper thickhead, aren’t you? Hasn’t it dawned on you yet?” Bodie looked at him, blankly defensive. “Eddie,” Doyle added, waiting for the penny to drop. “Your friend’s Eddie.”

“So he was a bit on the precious side—” He cut himself off, not wanting to get into all this, wishing only that they’d left without waiting for Dougie Paul to show up, long before the panto had ended, while Doyle was still willing to be loved.

“Bodie,” Doyle said, taking Bodie by the hand, leading him along the deserted corridor until he found an unlocked door that opened onto a prop room filled with chaises longues and Victorian tables, “think Eddie.”

Bodie, shutting the door firmly behind himself and blindly seeking Doyle’s warmth in the dark, wasn’t up to thinking about anything other than the fact that Doyle hadn’t changed his mind. God, his heart was soaring, Ray had been telling the truth when he said he’d thought this all through, that it was all about how much he trusted Bodie, and how he cared—

“I said, Bodie,” Doyle slid comfortably into the circle of Bodie’s arms, “think Eddie.”

“I’m thinking Eddie, I’m thinking Eddie,” Bodie lied, feverishly undoing Doyle’s shirt buttons, Ray’s more nimble fingers returning the favour.

“Now think corgis.”

“Don’t be disgusting, Ray!” Then, a breath before he could kiss Doyle, realisation hit him over the head with a mallet. “You mean—”

“Yep.”

“But you can’t mean—”

“Oh, yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t. That Eddie could never be—”

“He,” and the word was underlined by Doyle’s voice, “works in the theatre, doesn’t He?”

“Yeh, but—”

“And Dougie’s Eddie is young, and he’s going bald, and he’s about that height.”

“Yeh, but—”

“And with all that make-up on, it’s hardly surprising we didn’t recognise him.”

“But he made a pass at me!”

“Even Royals are allowed to have good taste once in a while, mate.”

“Fucking hell! Small wonder you had that funny look on your face. Thought it was because seeing Dougie in his costume was giving you some funny ideas about me, especially when he kissed me like that.”

“Only funny ideas it gave me was about how I hadn’t had a chance to kiss you properly yet. You going to do something about that?”

Bodie was, and did, his mouth opening against Ray’s soft lips, his tongue easing past hard teeth to find the limber tongue within. He wrapped his arms around Ray, felt the answering tightness of Doyle enveloping him, and decided that the world could end right now and he’d still be happy.

“Love you,” he murmured against Ray’s throat, “love you so fucking much.” And stopped, dead, cursing himself for saying it too soon, for having the moon on a silver platter and then asking for the stars as well like a greedy brat.

“Course you do,” Doyle said, sucking on Bodie’s earlobe, moving down to mark the side of Bodie’s throat and then lower still, to fasten on a peaked nipple. A swathing lick across Bodie’s chest, then he was back for a kiss, hands holding Bodie’s head tightly steady, while his tongue plundered wet warmth, taking possession of what had been so freely given. “That’s cos you’ve got good taste, mate,” he whispered, letting go only long enough to shove his own shirt out of the way, hugging him close, finally skin to naked skin.

Bodie was arching against him, fever-hot, hands fumbling at trouser buttons and zips, stumbling over elastic waistbands, hurting Doyle in his haste. “Slow down, slow down, come on, Bodie, let me do it. Like that, oh, yeh, that’s it...”

Dreamy voiced as he got his first feel of Bodie’s cock, the very first touch of his hand on another man, and Doyle loved it, all that hardness under silk skin sliding so delicately over the swollen head. He knew how that felt, knew every minute sensation Bodie was going through, knew precisely how to move, how hard to press, where to stroke his finger softly.

He was giddy with excitement, alight with Bodie’s shuddering passion and with the breathless words whispered in his ear. The last few faint reservations that had held him back for too long disappeared in the face of delectable reality: he loved the way Bodie felt against him, was thrilled by the rigid weight of another man’s cock in his hand, mouth watering at the thought of having Bodie, this precious part of Bodie, inside him, fucking him hard.

“I want you to fuck me,” he said, and Bodie went very still in his arms.

“You mean that?” Voice quivering, cock straining, arms hugging Ray very tight. “D’you really mean it, Ray?”

“Course I fucking do, you moron. And I want it now, Bodie, do me now...”

They stumbled together to a red plush chaise longue, neither one of them *compos mentis* enough to notice whether it was a prefab prop or the genuine article rescued from the fireplace to deck up the stage. For them, it was simply something soft enough to lie on, and large enough that Bodie could spread Doyle out on it, and then cover that hard heated length with his own body. Between them, they managed to get off the worst of their clothes, until Bodie tired of such practicalities and devoured Ray with kisses, from the tip of his nose to the hollow of his breastbone, to the dip of his navel, to the arrowing hair that led unerringly to Ray’s arching sex, pulsing so headily under Bodie’s tongue. Overflowing with love for this man, Bodie took Ray in his mouth, sucking on him, running his tongue under the tight slipperiness of foreskin, teasing and tasting, bringing Doyle close to the edge of his endurance.

“Gerrup here, Bodie. No, not like that. Turn round, want to suck you...”

Bodie shuddered, in danger of losing it just because of the husky passion in that dark voice. He twisted, half falling off the old furniture, a cloud of dust making him sneeze, so that he came worryingly close to biting Ray in a singularly deflating manner. Instead, he pulled back, and poised, a bridge over Ray’s body, holding himself still, save for the merest flicker of his tongue on the seeping head of Ray’s cock. He waited, not pushing it, glad of the time to bring himself back from the brink, letting Doyle set the pace. Then Doyle’s hands were on his

rump, and only then did he lower himself, taking Doyle inside as Ray absorbed him.

Doyle wasn't sure that he'd be able to do this: Bodie loomed large and thick and long over him, so close that he could see the pulse in the vein. But he had been thinking about it for a long time, all his intellectual questions about life-change answered, and now all he had to conquer was his own fear of inadequacy. Tentatively, he licked at Bodie, grinning in simple delight as that made his partner shiver and sigh. He reached up, hands filling with the lush bounty of Bodie's arse, drawing Bodie down nearer and nearer until the snub head was pushing at him, wet as Bodie's tongue had been earlier, pressing past his lips like a kiss. He opened himself up to it, his own cock being sucked into Bodie's mouth as he sucked Bodie into himself. Bodie thrust, choking him, and he shoved upwards, controlling Bodie's movements, easing him back down when he was ready once more. Better prepared, familiar now with the feel and the smell of a man inside his mouth, he could take more of Bodie in. He was kneading Bodie's arse, sliding his hands over the ripe rump, adoring all this heat covering him with such taut passion.

And then he let back his head and screamed, Bodie slipping farther into his throat as Doyle was washed by waves upon waves of indescribable pleasure from that most intimate touch of Bodie's moistened finger. No-one had ever been inside him before, apart from the horrible violation of doctors removing bullets or appendix. Never had there been anyone inside him with this terrible, devastating tenderness, making him no longer alone, no longer separate. Bodie's finger was gentle in him, respectful of his virgin arse, finding and exulting his prostate. Unique sensation, commingling with the ecstasy of being inside Bodie and having Bodie inside him, equal partners in this, as in everything else, as it had to be for them. He was keening, deep in his throat, and could feel the vibration echo through Bodie. He was going to come, couldn't hold back, was coming and coming...

Bodie flexed his finger, his mind aswirl with the exquisite knowledge that this was Doyle he was inside, that this was Ray's first time with this, that no-one else had ever been trusted enough or loved enough to be allowed this. Ray was taut as a bow under him, swallowing him,

sucking on him hard, doing wonderful things with his mouth and throat. Bodie pressed his finger home again, and was rewarded with the splashing heat of Doyle's essence on the back of his throat, Ray thrusting up helplessly, clenching Bodie's finger inside him, spilling himself into the haven of Bodie's mouth. Bodie nuzzled him caressingly, gentling Doyle back down from orgasm, holding the softening cock safe in his mouth until Ray was back with him, hands scrabbling at him, trying to get him to turn.

"C'mere, you, come on. Want to taste myself on you. Get up here, let me kiss, come on, love, move!"

Then Doyle was kissing him, laving the inside of his mouth, sharing the taste, stealing every last droplet for himself. Ray's hands were busy on him too, pulling him down to lie flat on top, hands on his arse encouraging him to rub himself against the moist laxness and soft belly; Doyle pushed up against him and Bodie's hardness caught between them, stroked by the coarseness of Doyle's pubic hair, squeezed hard by their close-pressed bellies. With Doyle's tongue in his mouth, with Doyle's hands on his arse, with Doyle surrounding him with heat and demanding hunger, Bodie came, his seed erupting whitely on his belly and Doyle's; Ray's hand slid immediately between them, capturing some of the shimmering semen, bringing it up to lap with his tongue, then kissing Bodie deeply. And it was the most exciting, most tender thing Bodie had ever done, sharing the taste of himself with someone he loved as fiercely as he loved Ray.

They kissed for a long time, slowing down to small butterfly kisses pressed to damp foreheads, quiescent nipples explored in the leisure of the afterglow, occasional words whispering their pleasure at this, and this, and how much each pleased the other with his beauty.

But it was growing cold, and discomfort burst their bubble of happiness.

"Jesus, but I need a pee," Doyle announced, putting paid to the romance of the moment, neither one of them into golden showers. He clambered out from under Bodie, laughing gleefully as his partner tumbled in an undignified heap onto the liberally dusted floor.

Bodie lay there for a moment, unwilling to get up, for then he would have to chat normally,

beginning the slow withdrawal from ultimate intimacy back to the normal distance of daily life. He didn't want to admit reality yet, wanted to hold on for a few more minutes to his dream of Doyle loving him. So easy to convince himself of that in the magic of love making, but so hard to believe when Doyle was pulling underwear and jeans and socks on, for all the world as if they'd never been closer than workmates. If he opened his eyes, only the location would mark any difference between what was happening now and what had happened a thousand times after a workout or a training session. And he simply wasn't ready for that, not yet. Just another minute, that's all he was asking for, just another minute of pretending that Doyle loved him, that pillow talk was truth, that Ray would still love him once they walked out that door and back into the real world. Just another minute...

"You going to lie there all night, or are you coming home with me, mate?"

That snapped Bodie's eyes open, in time to see his trousers come flying at him.

"Get a move on, Bodie, we don't want to end up getting locked in this mausoleum, do we? Not when I've got a nice big bed at home, and a Christmas tree, *and* Christmas pud for tomorrow." Now fully dressed, he stood with hands on hips, watching as Bodie struggled into clothing, the attempt suffering from the way Bodie couldn't take his eyes off him. "Christ, mate, were you still prat enough to think I was only satisfying my curiosity? Trying on a bit of the queer? Don't be daft, Bodie. D'you think I'm going to risk my career for the sake of a quick tumble when I could borrow one of your video nasties if all I was was nosey?" He handed Bodie his jacket, watching while it was shrugged on,

never once letting his flow of comments slow. "Just goes to show how much I love you. Have to, to put up with—"

Bodie's face lit up with a delighted grin and he looked as if he felt ten feet tall. "Well," he said, vaulting neatly over the chaise longue to land at Doyle's feet, dropping a kiss on the curve of the broken cheekbone, "that's all right then, isn't it?" He was bursting with it, ecstatic and elated and suddenly conceited, for surely he had to be the second most wonderful person in the world if Ray Doyle loved him? With a flourish, he opened the door, bowing Ray through it, the palatial gesture popping a thought into his mind. "Here, if that Eddie bloke really was you-know-who, and he was chatting me up about being a Guardsman, d'you think that means all the rumours about that lot are true?"

Doyle, eyes gleaming, started singing 'Half a Sixpence', and then his filthy, overripe chuckle billowed down the corridor behind him. Bodie followed on, watching Doyle's back, eyes addicted to the clench and flex of buttock, a spring to his step as he went home with Ray. Sleepy night-watchman locking the door behind him, Bodie and Doyle walked past the gaudy posters advertising *Cinderella: a Pantomime for children of all ages!*, too enraptured in each other to even notice any good pseudonyms plastered there in fake gold. Freezing rain dotting the street in the first threat of yet another stormy night, Bodie didn't even feel it as he slung his arm around Ray's shoulder, looking for all the world to see like two young blokes who'd had one drink too many. Together, they wandered slowly off to the car, and then, at last, finally home.



A NIGHT AT THE OPERA *or* THE PRICKWICK PAPERS



Yes, it's time for Nanny's Teddy Tales. In this tale (number five in the series), Doyle discovers that Bodie possesses some very interesting—and should we say 'sophisticated' and 'refined'?—tastes. The questions to be answered are: will Bodie ask Doyle to participate in his pursuits? Will Doyle want to share in Bodie's passions? And how will M. Fae bring teddy bears into it?

Bodie started guiltily, then covered it with a layer of his usual suave aplomb. “You never heard of knocking?”

“As in knocking shops?” Doyle answered, meandering into Bodie's bedroom, sharp eyes missing nothing as Bodie locked the metal box and put it back in the wardrobe. “Me? Nah. Never had to pay for it, have I? Women just can't resist my manly charms.”

“Yeh, well you shouldn't go flashing your bracelet round like that, one of your birds might half-inch it.”

Keeping up their patter, Doyle looked down at where his jeans swelled in carefully arranged fullness. “Half inch? You'd do better if you measured it in feet, mate.”

Bodie, feeding Doyle's naturally suspicious nature, let him away with that one, not a single disparaging remark about Doyle's size and not so much as a raised eyebrow at Bodie's own generous endowment. Interrestingk, as they said on the telly, verry interrestingk. Mind you, he was even more interested in the fact that Bodie was blushing as he stuffed the metal box ever so casually behind a pile of bits and pieces on the top shelf of the wardrobe. Everyone in the world would have been convinced by the Academy Award performance of insouciance Bodie was putting on as he interred that mysterious box. Which meant, Doyle thought, curiosity twitching, the need to know beginning to chew on him, that Bodie was hiding something.

Which meant that there was more in that military box than bank balances and safety deposit keys, both of which Doyle had managed to uncover weeks before. And it couldn't be his Christmas present: Bodie hadn't bought that yet, according to the letter from the motorbike parts supplier that had landed so conveniently at Doyle's feet and had equally conveniently fallen open.

"You're a bit on the early side," Bodie was saying, shrugging his jacket on, absently picking up loose change and keys, stuffing them into pockets. Which was another interesting thing, to Doyle's way of looking at things. Bodie never willingly put keys and money in his jacket pocket for the very simple fact that they would either a) rip the pocket lining or b) weigh his jacket down by a minute fraction of a second when he went for his gun, and even though this was going to be a social occasion, old habits died hard. So what was in that box that had Bodie so distracted then, eh? That's what Doyle wanted to know.

Being a surreptitious little bastard, however, he made sure that his expression remained blank and nothing at all betrayed just how consumed he was by the most prurient of curiosities. "Thought we could have a pint before we picked the girls up," he said, handing Bodie the slim black notecase from the chest of drawers.

Bodie's eyes crinkled in the smallest of smiles. "Dutch courage, eh?"

"What d'you think? If we're going to sit through an entire evening of fucking Wagner, I'll need all the help I can get."

"No class, that's your problem, Doyle. I dunno, where would you be without me?"

"At 'ome watching *Pot Black* on the telly with a takeaway from the Indian place and very 'appy, thanks very much."

"Oh, touchy tonight, are we?" Bodie was smirking now, every inch the Romantic Hero in his dinner jacket and black silk cummerbund. Beside him, Doyle felt positively scruffy, despite the fact that he'd gone to the extreme length of wearing a bow tie and his jacket even matched his trousers.

"Never mind, sunshine," Bodie said as he cupped Doyle's groin so swiftly his hand was gone before Ray had a chance to really experience it, "I'm sure Sarah will make sure there's not a twitch in you by the end of the night."

"Chance'd be a fine thing," Doyle muttered as he followed Bodie out into the living room, busy appreciating the way the centre light gleamed on dark hair and annoyed at the way the dinner jacket hid the lush lines of Bodie's bum.

"Isn't she coming across?" Bodie glanced sharply over his shoulder, almost catching a look of tomcat lust on Doyle's face. There was genuine concern there in Bodie: despite his very best intentions, Bodie had been appalled one day to discover that he actually liked his sod of a partner.

"Not much, no."

"Ray my old son," Bodie slung a fatherly arm around Doyle's shoulders then slid it down and patted his bum, "I don't know how to break this to you, but coming across is like being pregnant. You can't do it piecemeal."

"You'd best have a word with Sarah then!"

Into the car, on their way, tyres shushing over wet roads, and Bodie brought the subject up again. "She being a pricktease, then?"

"That's one way of putting it. Here, you're f'ing interested in my sex life all of a sudden, mate." Doyle made sure he sounded suitably offended, waiting for Bodie to get that hunted, guilty look of which Ray was so very fond. "Be fair, Bodie. I'll tell you about Sarah, if you tell me about Beatrix."

Bodie shrugged, his jacket whispering silkenly. "Not much to tell. I make a move, she giggles, I make another move, she's on me like a rutting bull. End of story. What about your Sarah?"

"My Sarah," Doyle began expansively, settling down to make Bodie feel suitably sorry for him, "wiggles it in front of me, makes lewd and libidinous remarks, your Honour, leans forward so's I can see down her dress, and then, just when I'm positive I'm going to burst out at the seams, she goes all prim and proper on me and says she's not that kind of a girl. End of story."

"Aw, da shame, poor 'ittle diddums." A quick frown of distraction, then the lorry was overtaken and the road ahead was relatively clear. "So why're you still going out with her then?"

"Because, you stupid bastard, you came up with the brilliant idea of the four of us going on this double date to get out of spending Christmas at Sarah's house in the country, that's why!"

“Oh, yeh, right,” Bodie muttered, wincing at the thought of Sarah’s parents, very much a part of the horsey set. In fact, Sarah’s mum bore a fairly strong resemblance to the winner of the Grand National, the rank outsider he’d lost a fortune because of. And, he was loathe to admit, it had been *his* big mouth that had roped them into going to the country in the first place, and Wagner hadn’t seemed to high a price to pay to get out of it. Well, not for him, anyway. Unlike Doyle, he not only liked opera, he even liked Wagner. Torture, for his philistine partner.

“Anyway, we’d already paid for the tickets before I realised that she wasn’t just playing hard to get, but what’s the point of creating a fuss at this stage? Easier this way, in the long run.”

“Money’s going to charity,” Bodie said, as if that were going to make skinflint Doyle feel any better.

“Oh, cheers, mate, thanks, that makes it all sunshine and roses.”

When Doyle got that tone of voice, Bodie usually had the sense to keep very, very quiet. Which was just as well, because Doyle wasn’t paying attention to him any more. All thought of the soon-to-be-dismissed Sarah gone from his mind, he was too busy speculating on what the hell Bodie had in that box. Not that he would ask: Bodie would only lie to him by joking about it and then race home to hide the incriminating evidence. One elegantly shod foot propped up on the dashboard in his usual urchinesque sprawl, Doyle spent a happy twenty minutes chewing the problem over, methodically working through the possibilities of what could be so terribly incriminating that Bodie would keep it locked away and hidden—but not so dangerous that Bodie could risk keeping it within easy access at home, instead of in one of those rather severely private banks the ex-merc frequented.

“Yoo-hoo, anyone home?”

“Oh, yeh, right,” he said, clambering out the car, not noticing that he’d got melting slush onto his polished shoes and round the hem of his good trousers. So, he was thinking, following Bodie blindly into the pub, it was something Bodie needed to be able to get at readily, but it wasn’t cash, because Doyle knew all about the fake book where Bodie kept his cash, so—

“Doyle! Christ, you’re a dozy bastard tonight, aren’t you. Here, wrap yourself around this, give yourself an excuse for acting as if you’re sloshed.”

Doyle blinked, finally noticing that Bodie had come back from the bar and had a pint sitting in front of him. The juke box was blasting away with the third in what was threatening to be an endless stream of past and present Christmas hits. At least they hadn’t had to endure a Cliff Richard one yet, so he ought to be grateful for small mercies, although Bing Crosby and David Bowie together was sick enough for anyone. “Ta, mate,” he said absently, eyeing Bodie with a speculative gaze that made the other man singularly uncomfortable. He may have missed coming into the pub and all the rest of it, but Doyle noticed every minute change of expression on Bodie’s supposedly blank face, and was even more determined to find out what it was that could make Bodie, of all people, look guilty.

Never one to waste time when on an investigation, even if it were fuelled by base nosiness and not the safety of the realm, Doyle brushed a droplet of beer off Bodie’s lapel. “Best take that off if you don’t want it smelling like a brewer’s cart, mate,” he said, mocking as usual, nothing to show that he was up to anything but making fun of Bodie’s infamous sartorial pickiness.

Bodie, too concerned with the unnerving way Doyle was looking at him—there were certain secrets he wasn’t quite ready for his ferret of a partner to uncover yet—took the jacket off, draping it carefully across the back of his chair. He jumped as a coin landed in his lap. “This’ll never cover the cost of a pint,” he said, holding the silver coin up to the light.

“Not meant to—first round’s always yours. That’s for the jukebox. If we’ve got to listen to fucking Christmas hits, then at least it can be something I like. Stick ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ on for me, there’s a good mate.”

Bodie was getting to his feet even as he was muttering about some people being lazy bastards.

By the time the closest thing to opera that Ray Doyle liked was spilling through the pub, Bodie was back in his seat, drinking his bitter, blissfully unaware that his wickedly funny friend had already gone through his pocket and palmed

the key to the one box that Bodie had no desire at all for Ray Doyle to unlock. Laughing at yet another pithy comment about the man propping up the bar, Bodie slung his jacket on and was out of the pub without even realising that not only had he managed to buy three rounds and all Doyle had done was give him ten pence for the jukebox, but that he'd also had his pocket picked. Ignorance, as the saying goes, is bliss, because Bodie was happy, all the way to the flat Beatrix and Sarah shared, where they discovered that Beatrix had come down with gastroenteritis and was a very indelicate shade of green. Which left Bodie, Doyle and the simpering Sarah.

"Listen," Bodie whispered into an ear inundated by curls, "I'll slope off, and you can have the Divine Sarah all to yourself, okay?"

Doyle grabbed Bodie by the cummerbund, hauling him in close. "Not a fucking chance, sunshine," he whispered viciously, refusing to allow his rather clever little plan to be spoiled by Bodie's idea of either romanticism or cruelty, whichever had inspired this latest bout of self-sacrificing. "I don't even like fucking Wagner, and you and her do, so if I have to sit through that crap, then you can sit there and enjoy yourself—and keep Sarah off me."

"Thought you said she wasn't coming across?" Bodie hissed as Sarah settled herself in the back seat of the car, ignoring the annoyed look of disapproval she gave them.

"She's not, but she likes to pretend that she's going to, and by the time I realise that this time is the same as all the other times, she's got my balls in knots and a happy little grin on her face. So you can distract her for me, all right? Seeing as how tonight was your idea in the first fucking place."

Smiling sweetly, he plonked himself down in the passenger seat, made some inane comment to Sarah, and then drifted off into his own speculative world, leaving Bodie to cover for him.

By the time they'd got to the concert hall, Sarah was fuming at him, enchanted with Bodie, and Doyle had got as far as wondering if maybe it was something really embarrassing, like an old teddy bear or something else really pathetic that Bodie had locked away.

By the time the first act was half over, Doyle had managed to outrage everyone for five rows

with his endless fidgeting, shifting, coughing and sneezing—all of it falsified evidence of course.

"Will you shut up?" Bodie hissed. "We're at a good bit!"

"Never!" Doyle said in totally unfeigned amazement. It all sounded the same to him, the only difference in whether the cats being tortured were male or female. Not, he thought, looking at a blonde behemoth and a pretty tenor, that it was all that easy to tell sometimes. With a final scratch at his bum, he gave the *coup de grâce*: an enormous sneeze that ruffled not only the young man in front of him, but the man's hair as well. "Sorry!" he whispered remarkably loudly, earning him foul looks from all around and a murderous glare from Bodie.

"What the fuck's the matter with you?" his partner demanded, too furious to remain silent.

"Allergic," Doyle said.

"Since when've you been fucking allergic?" Bodie hissed at him.

"Since you dragged me to the fucking opera!" Doyle hissed right back.

"Will you *please* be quiet!" a blue rinsed matron pealed from behind them, hitting a hapless Doyle over the head with her beaded evening bag which, judging by the resounding thump it made, was filled with several bricks.

"Quiet?" Doyle shouted, drowning out both orchestra and two of the finest stars in the operatic world. "Quiet? I'll do you for assault and battery! Grievous bodily harm—"

"I'll grievous bodily harm *you*, if you don't shut up and sit—" a hefty tug and Doyle sat, not comfortably, "—down. No, don't say anything, you, just keep your trap shut." Bodie turned, smiled sweetly enough to cause instant tooth decay, and charmed the bosomy lady behind them. "I'm so terribly sorry," he apologised in his best Belgravian, "but I'm afraid he's just come back from a tour of duty." He winked and popped a few more marbles into his mouth, continued with a conspiratorial, "One of those dreadfully hush-hush little numbers out in one of the colonies, you know."

"Oh," the dame replied, subsiding amidst a mountain of taffeta and lace and clouds of cloying perfume. "Oh, well, in that case, I suppose one really must forgive him?"

She didn't sound too sure about that, and

Bodie wished he could sit on Doyle to shut his partner up before Doyle could land them both flat out cold from the swinging evening bag.

“Hmm, yes,” he said, eyeing his partner warningly, lowering his voice to the merest whisper of sound. “I’m sure he’ll be quiet now. He usually is once the worst of the fit has passed.”

“Fit?” Doyle was snarling into his ear before he had time to turn round fully. “Fit? The only fit going on here is me fitting you for a fucking grave! Fit?”

And the penny finally dropped. Bodie faced his partner, going up close enough that he could breathe the heady, sexy scent that always seemed to cling to Doyle. “Listen, Ray,” he murmured, getting closer than was strictly necessary, lips a millimetre from Doyle’s ear, “if you hate it that much, then why don’t you just bugger off home and leave those of us with good taste here to enjoy the opera in peace?”

“Thought you’d never ask!” Whispering again, but this time Doyle was actually being quiet, for now that his goal was achieved, he could afford to be generous. “Right. See you tomorrow then?”

“Christmas Eve? Don’t you have other stuff arranged?”

“What other stuff? Oh, you mean family and the like? Course I have, but not till later, and they wouldn’t mind if I brought you with me.” He caught the moment of unguarded delight then, saw honest pleasure blossom in Bodie’s eyes. Course, he thought, Bodie’s family all buggered off to Rhodesia when he was thirteen... “In fact,” Doyle added, making it up as he went along, but knowing that his gregarious family would simply open their arms and welcome a new member, “my mum and dad both said they were expecting you to come and eat them out of house and home.”

“You never said—”

Doyle wasn’t about to tell him it was because his parents didn’t know yet, not when Bodie looked so shyly flattered. “Haven’t had time, have I? Anyway, I’ll come round tomorrow about eleven and pick you up then, shall I?” A nod, barely visible in the near dark, and then Doyle was on his feet, beginning the satisfying task of disturbing everyone in their row as he left, careful to tread on as many uppercrust or highbrow toes as he could. Down the stairs,

across the lobby with its contingent of liveried lackeys, and he was flagging down a taxi. As the amber light approached through the light drizzle, he realised that he had completely forgotten about Sarah. Oh, well, he decided, climbing into the big black car with its redolence of leather, cigarettes and damp coats, Bodie would take care of her.

“Oi!”

Startled, Doyle looked up at the driver, who was glowering at him through the glass partition.

“I said, where to, guv?”

Doyle leant back in the seat, and confident of Bodie’s entrapment for a good few hours to come, he grinned and then gave the driver Bodie’s address. Bow tie unfurled, drooping ends nibbled on by white teeth as his mind chewed on something else, Doyle had a lovely trip over to Bodie’s house, trying to deduce what the hell was in that metal box. Not drugs—Bodie was contemptuous of drugs and only kept a few uppers on hand for when the job demanded them, and those were in the flour cannister in the kitchen. Couldn’t be dirty magazines, because most of them were on permanent loan over at Doyle’s flat. Secrets from the past? Not many of those, most of the family photos and such like back on the farm in Rhodesia. Zimbabwe, he corrected himself abstractedly, not really paying much attention, because now he was wondering if all the gen on Bodie’s CI5 file was bunkum and the metal box held the truth... Nah, Bodie wasn’t close to his family, but there were three ‘Across the Miles at Christmastime’ cards on Bodie’s mantelpiece, and they’d been printed by some company with an African name. So it wasn’t that...

He suddenly sat bolt upright. It had to be something blackmailable, which meant that it was something that put Bodie at risk. Which meant, Doyle conceded, in a burst of loyalty and decency, that it was his sworn duty to help his mate—by finding out what the secret was and keeping his mouth shut about it. Problem shared is a problem halved, he told himself piously, hoping that whatever was in the box wasn’t truly blackmail material, but perhaps only something sentimental and silly, something that would make Bodie blush the way he had earlier on. Sighing over the mental image of a blushing Bodie, Doyle didn’t even mind that the driver

was taking him the scenic route to Bodie's flat: it was worth it. Especially since he'd played the latest round of one-upmanship and lifted a tenner from Bodie's wallet when he'd handed Bodie his jacket in the pub.

So if it wasn't something genuinely blackmailable—and he couldn't picture his partner being stupid enough not to destroy anything like that, not to mention the fact that he couldn't come up with anything worse than what was already in Bodie's file—then it had to be something embarrassing. Giggling as he went up the stairs and unlocked Bodie's door, Doyle was running down a list of bashful shamefulness, beginning with baby pictures and ending with teddy bears. Finally, he was inside Bodie's domain and, being Raymond Doyle, before he ransacked his best mate's secrets and skulked around using stolen keys, he turned on all the lights, the radiators and the stereo, yet more Christmas songs bleating forth. He dropped his jacket over the back of the bedroom chair, flexed his fingers with the air of a master cracksman, and got *The Box*. For a moment, he stopped what he was doing, resting his hands on the chill metal, weighing the consequences of his action against the lure of having his curiosity satisfied. There was, quite simply, no contest, Doyle being a self-confessed nosy bastard. As he was fond of asking rhetorically to disabuse idiots of the notion of Doylistic altruism, why the fuck else would a man like him join the police force, if not to poke his nose into all sorts of interesting secrets? Bigger gossip than his mum—and that was no mean feat.

So he lay *The Box* more securely in the middle of the bed, took up the key, and with a sigh of profoundest pleasure, he opened it.

And found teddy bears.

But of a very different sort.

Foot-sore and very, very weary, Sarah having proved to be a witty and demanding conversationalist over two cups of coffee and chocolate gâteau, Bodie trudged up to his flat at an hour far later than it had any right to be. He was, he conceded, verging on the depressed, the evening being nothing that he expected. So much for his plans of a night at the opera, brandy and champagne afterwards, and then a hot and sexy foursome back at his flat. He'd even changed the

sheets in anticipation, hoping that he'd get lucky tonight, and that things would progress that next bit. Last time he and Ray had gone out on a double date, they'd got as far as shirts off and trousers at half mast before Bodie's girlfriend had gone coy on him, but that was better than the time before, and that was better than the time before that, all the way back to his very first carefully offhand suggestion that they go out in a foursome. He sighed heavily, slowly putting his key in the lock. He'd really had high hopes for tonight, actually thinking that he might get to see Ray naked and aroused. Christ, he thought that if he were really lucky, he might be able to 'accidentally' brush against Ray in the heat of passion with his girl. And what had he got? Doyle's sharp-tongued and intelligent girlfriend who was oblivious to her own sexiness until some poor sod tried to take her up on it. Then he smiled, thinking that he had one really good thing from this evening: the promise of Christmas Eve with Ray—at his home, even, with food concocted by the woman who had taught Ray to cook all those incredible dishes. So tonight hadn't been a complete loss and—

He stopped dead, hand snaking inside his jacket pocket, a curse muttered under his breath as he remembered that he didn't usually go armed to the opera. Cautiously, he inched open the door that he had left double locked and which had opened on the bottom lock alone. The hall was dark, but enough light was coming in from the landing for Bodie to see... One of his magazines, right there in the middle of the floor, propped up on a tin of beans, a grinning man and ardent cock limned by the outside light.

He seriously considered shutting the door, locking it, walking away and never coming back. But that wouldn't help, and at least Doyle—it had to be Ray, who else would have either the balls or the casual assumption of a right-to-know but Ray?—wasn't standing behind the door with a meat cleaver. Silently, he eased himself inside, shutting the door carefully, wincing as the locks clicked into place with an unfortunate excess of noise. No chance of Doyle missing that sound, for all that it was relatively quiet. Moving cautiously—there was also no chance that Ray would be satisfied with just one boobytrap at the front door—Bodie started along his hall, gathering up the damning evidence one

item at a time, blushing occasionally as the situation warranted, which was about once every three feet. The trail led off up the stairs to the bedroom, a long line of hard cocks signposting the way and Bodie gave up picking up all the little morsels Doyle had left out for him, now quite convinced that Doyle had emptied his box in its entirety.

Top of the stairs, more naked men, but now they had graduated to the magazines of couples and threesomes. Top landing and now they were at the hardcore fucking and sucking pictures, and then, worst of all, there, propped on a lurid can of Coke, and in the line of light escaping from under the closed bedroom door, was his diary. Oh no, Bodie groaned to himself, stooping to pick up the closely-written book. Oh, no, not that...

Oh, yes, that. It was there, in his own minute script, all of it, every last bit of it, all his helpless lust and desire and undeclared emotion, from that day he'd seen Doyle pull sweat-stained overalls off to reveal a hairy chest, and then gorgeous back and—

And he'd already put all of that down in his big black book, right on the page that Doyle had it opened at. Now he really did want to just creep quietly away. But—it suddenly dawned on him. Doyle had been in his box, had seen all his male magazines, had read that pæan to Ray's hairy chest and glorious body—and had chosen to leave a trail leading right to his bedroom door.

Heart in his mouth, Bodie opened the door of his bedroom, and stepped inside. Only to stop in utter, ecstatic delight. Ray was there already, lying sprawled on the bed, absolutely stark bollock naked, nothing on him but a smile. And there, propped between his widespread legs, Bodie's favourite magazine. *Teddy-Bears On Parade! 30 Hairy Men Get It On—For You!*

He was already naked by the time he got to the bed and Doyle tossed the magazine aside, opened his arms wide and said, "Time for beddie-byes!"

And that was how Bodie never did manage to give up sleeping with a teddy bear.



SNOWBOUND

OR

A TALE OF TWO SITUATIONS



Snowbound is one of those pieces that grew unpredictably and in a controversial direction. Originally it was meant to be a moderate tale of sado-masochism, one of the Glaswegian's 'particular perversions'. However, after the first draft was done, M. Fae decided to discard it as a lie. She felt it was too politically correct and not the way the characters wanted to go. So back to the keyboard to begin again. There are now two separate versions and the reader will have to make a choice of what and how much of each to read. This is a warning: the story M. Fae wanted to write consists of Nobody's Fault, It Was..., ...the Worst of Times, and Little Doyle. Read these four pieces if you do not mind rape presented without apology. If you do not wish to read a strong rape story, then read the alternate series which has no rape: Nobody's Fault, It Was..., ...the Best of Times. And stop. If you intend to read both versions, then please do so in the correct order and at different times. Everything all at once would be too overwhelming and would make little sense.

NOBODY'S FAULT

I've always wanted to be a soldier, for as long as I can remember. I think it was because when I was really small, I used to think King Arthur's Knights were soldiers, and every family back then had someone who went to war and never came back. Those were the blokes everyone had a good word for, you know, the

old 'never speak ill of the dead' bit, but I didn't know about that then: I just thought that soldiers—all the men who went away to fight were soldiers to me, whether they flew 'planes or sailed around in huge great big ships—all soldiers, were these wonderful people everyone loved and respected. So I suppose it's not sur-

prising that I wanted to be a soldier when I grew up. Better than being a riveter like my da, that was bloody certain. I can still remember him coming in at night, and you could smell the shipyards and the sweat off him. He was a big man, my da, and you know how when you go back as an adult, most people and things aren't half the size you thought they were when you were a kid? Well, my da were just as big. When I was small, I remember how it hurt the back of my neck to look up at him, and one of the first things I remember really clearly is him picking me up and swinging me as high as the ceiling. It made me dizzy and turned the world into something strange and bizarre and frightening: I shivered, absolutely terrified, when I looked down and could see the dust lying on the curve of the ceiling lightbulb. Funny how something like that can scare a kid, but it made me feel as if everything was all topsy-turvy and nothing made sense, like Alice through the looking-glass (which I moaned about when my mam tried to read it to me: my big brother always called it a sissy book and even if I didn't know what 'sissy' was, I knew it was something bad, like Fenian.). But Da had this great laugh, bigger than him, and when I was sitting on his lap, if he laughed at something on the wireless, I'd shake and shake with him laughing so hard, and I loved it. It was grand when he laughed, and I used to think about it after, when I was in bed at night, after I'd said my prayers and Mam had given me my kiss.

Then I'd think about what Da looked like, those round scars pockmarking his skin, little spots where the hair didn't grow any more, white dots that were so smooth when I moved the black hair on his forearm out of the way. I was fascinated by them, loved them and how soft they felt, until I realised that the ugly purple and black burns were what those pretty white spots started out like, part and parcel of being a riveter. Not that you ever heard him complain about it my da, not once.

I can still love my da when I think of him like that, and I can even understand him, now that I'm older myself, those nights he came in like a bear with a sore head, so bad-tempered he'd shout if anyone one of us tried to climb into his lap or get him to help with the homework. He had a hard job, and money was always on the

scarce side, and these days I know how hard it is to be responsible for other peoples' lives. So I can understand the nights when he came in tired and fed up. Friday nights are different, though. That's something I can't get past, and Friday nights were probably the reason I decided to actually do something about becoming a soldier instead of dreaming about it the way my mates dreamed about being football stars or pop singers. I was never sure if it was spite or genuine Faith that made my mum do it—and she wasn't the type you could ask, believe me—but every Friday night without fail, she'd make fish for tea. Every single Friday, like the good Catholic she was, and every single Friday, my da would come in late, and there it'd be in the oven between two plates—this is in the days before tin foil, of course, and we never had enough spare brass for take-away—dried up fish, boiled potatoes gone grey or yellowish or brown round the edges, peas that had started to dry out and harden. And that's when he'd start. First thing, he'd yank the plate out of the oven, slam it onto the kitchen table, and then he'd be f'ing and blinding all over the place. My mam'd hush all of us children, shooing us upstairs, but he'd be shouting at us as well, words and names that we didn't understand, but we knew it was all to do with the only thing they ever fought about. Funny isn't it? All my mates had families who had fights and aggro, and I always just lumped my family in the with them. It never even dawned on me till I was about ten that not everyone had an Irish Catholic mum and a Glaswegian Protestant dad (or Fenian and Proddy dog, which is what we'd hear when the fight'd start on Friday night) and that was what they argued about instead of money or him drinking or all the other crap that went on in my pal's houses. But anyway, we never went to Church, Mam'd leave us with the woman next door and go to the Church for early morning Mass just after Dad'd left for the yard during the week, but she was always going and complaining that she couldn't take us, and he'd always be complaining that she was still going to that 'Papist cludgie' and doing it behind his back. Later on, I'd understand a bit more about the strifes and strains of inter-religious marriage, but when I was a kid, all I knew was that Mam made fish on a Friday when all the other

neighbours were having liver or stew or sausages and that Da always went berserk when he saw it.

The drinking didn't help either, I suppose. He'd always go 'just for a few' or 'a wee bevvy' before he'd come home on Fridays. Never a whole pay-packet, mind, but enough to make him unsteady on his feet—there used to be a big dirty mark on the door lintel of the kitchen where he always stumbled into when he half-fell over the old-fashioned doorsill—and spoiling for a fight. He'd start off shouting, and she'd shout back, then he'd shout louder, and she'd get quieter, and we'd all be crowded together at the top of the stairs, listening. My big brother, and I remember this as far back as when I was too young to say his name properly and used to call him 'Bimmy' instead of Jimmy, he'd gather us three younger ones all together and put his arms around us and hold us together. My sister, Peggy, she'd always start crying, but Fiona never did. Not once, no matter what anyone ever did, our Fiona never shed a tear. She'd stroke my hair, petting me like a cat, when the arguing downstairs started getting scary, which was when Dad would be shouting at the top of his lungs and Mam would be so quiet it was as if she didn't exist any more.

That was the scariest, because we all knew what was coming next, and when the hitting actually started, it was almost a relief for us, because then it had happened, which meant that it would end, which was better than waiting for him to start and wondering if he'd come upstairs with his belt and take it out on us. But I suppose that's what helped me turn into such a loner as well: Jimmy'd be holding us together, and we'd all be hanging on tightly to each other, but as soon as we heard that first hit, we'd start to slowly unravel. It wouldn't even be physical at first, but I could feel it, even when I was really small. Most of all when I was little, I suppose. After a while, I learned how not to feel anything at all when it started, so that in a few years, all I'd think when the shouting started was a sort of boredom, a wish that they'd get it over and done with and shut up so that I could read or listen to the wireless. When I was really young—couldn't have been more than three, because I had my very first pair of big-boy flannel pyjamas on and the piping hadn't been picked off from the top of the pocket yet—I remember being the last one

left at the top of the stairs, watching the twisting shadows on the hall wall with a sickened, petrified fascination. I'd still be there, sometimes, when Dad would come stumbling up the stairs, and pick me up and hug me and tell me how much he loved me. He'd always start crying then, great big fat tears rolling down his face. And I'd feel sorry for him, and I'd love him, and I'd hate him at the same time for what he did to my mum.

Don't suppose it's really surprising that I grew up without the faintest idea how to have a good relationship with a woman. But on the other hand, Jim's happily married, so's Peggy. It's just me and Fiona who don't get close to people, not even each other. We're very alike, me and her. We even look similar, two peas in a pod Mam used to say. I was really shocked when she showed up at Dad's 60th birthday party—until I heard some of the barbed little poison remarks she kept on making to Dad. Fiona has a way with words: you ought to hear her when she gets started. Poor Da didn't know what'd hit him. I wasn't surprised though, especially not when I asked her why she'd shown up and it was for the same reason I did: she hated the old bastard, loved him a bit too, and she never wanted to have it on her conscience that she'd abandoned him. Hell's bells, I went to see him twice in the past six months, how's that for filial guilt?

I suppose it's not really true, though. As I get older, the memories lose a bit of their sting and I understand him a bit more. I'm not sure I like that: sometimes I hear myself saying something that could've come right from his mouth. But I wouldn't hit someone the way he did. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a bully. I'm not saying I'm a Lord Longford either, mind—I've been known to enjoy a fight or two in my day. I won't hesitate if some bloke looks like he's out for trouble. I put the boot in and that's him taken care of, isn't it? But it's when I get so fucking impatient with people being stupid, that's when I hear my da's voice coming out my mouth. And as I said, every year I get older, I see more of my da in me. Normal that, though, isn't it? We all do that, don't we? You grow up ashamed of your parents or hating them, and then one day, you look in the mirror and guess who's looking back at you.

I was a bit upset when my da died, but I still

don't think there's any need for me to be stuck in here writing all this down on pieces of paper. I'm only going to tear them up after, aren't I? No chance I'm going to let anyone else see this—especially not that Doctor Ross woman. Sharp as a tack and twice as cold, that woman. I think she's frigid. Well, she'd have to be, wouldn't she? Not a flicker from her when either me or Doyle walks in, and women always go for at least one of us. But not our Ross. All she does is sit there, cool as a cucumber, making notes. She won't be making any notes from any of this stuff, that's dead bloody certain.

Funny, isn't it, how much I miss my da? If you'd asked me before he died, I'd've said I mainly hated the rotten old sod, but now... I don't know. He had a few good ideas, I admit that. And he did love us, I never doubted that. Even when he'd been hitting Mam, he'd always come in to me and kiss me and cuddle me till I fell asleep. Sometimes he'd tickle me, and there I'd be, laughing my head off, knowing that no-one else got that from him. Course, the other side of that was that I was the one who bore the brunt of it when Mam didn't. I was about eight, I suppose, or perhaps seven, when he started taking his belt to me on a Friday night instead of hitting Mam. I can remember lying in bed, waiting for him to come home—his drinking got worse, and he'd started not coming home on a Friday till closing time—and lying there terrified, my heart pounding, waiting and waiting for him to come upstairs. It was the same as when I was really small: the anticipation was the worst bit. Once the hitting started, it got better. You see, after a while, you get to the stage where you don't even feel it any more. But I wasn't

stupid enough to let my da know that, was I? Didn't want him to start taking the belt to my legs instead of my bum. And the hitting never lasted that long, but afterwards, he'd cuddle me, and he'd bring my present out of his pocket. As long as I realised that I'd done something wrong—and I was a right rotten brat, no two ways about it—then after he'd punished me, he always made sure I knew how much he loved me.

Not much else I can say, is there? My da was a bastard, I know that, but he was also the only father I had and that man loved me. So it makes sense to me that I got a bit tangled there over whether I should cry my eyes out or dance on his grave. And it's not as if it's anybody's fault that he was the way he was, is it? I mean, he'd had a hard life—if you thought my da was a hard-nut, you should've met my Granda! Da had four kids to feed and clothe and house and a wife who never forgave him for not converting. It wasn't as if he ever did us any real damage either, is it? A bit of a belting never did anyone any harm—like my mam said, spare the rod and spoil the child. It's just that my dad applied that rule to his wife as well as his children. But you have to give credit where credit's due as well, he kicked us all hard enough that we've all done something with our lives.

Right. I've had it. Pubs open in half an hour and Doyle owes me grub. So you can consider this 'verbalisation exercise' over and done with. And I'm going to burn every last page before I leave this room. Nobody's business but mine, and nobody's fault that my family wasn't perfect. And Ross can stick that in her pipe and smoke it.

IT WAS...

A surreality of snow and sky ensconced them, nuances of white and grey and silver numbing into an endless shadow of light, coruscating endlessly, until the road grew steeper and the rimpling fields became hills and finally, exultantly, mountains. Chester was far behind them, and in the car, they were warm, safe, protected by the illusion of steel strength

rushing them on towards cosy destination. The road was far from endless, disappearing around corners only to reappear again, briefly, to hide its biting blackness behind the softness of wintering hills. Despite the heater curling warmth around his toes, Bodie had a red tartan travelling rug wrapped tightly around him, only his pale forehead and dark hair showing in rumpled

sleep. Whistling, almost softly, imbrued by the greetings card fairy-tale world he was driving through, Doyle sat behind the wheel, eyes bright and alert, hands and feet quick and deft as he drove them along the unintentional viciousness of the mountain roads.

Festive song whistled almost under his breath, precisely the perfect tune for a man bent on convincing himself that all was well in his world and that he mustn't grumble and had lots to be happy about. He was, he thought to himself, sparing a glance at the snoring lump beside him, quite happy. Content, almost, or as much so as he could ever be. All his worries and woes had been deliberately and painstakingly sloughed, snake-like, for this holiday: he was determined that nothing, but most especially not himself, was going to spoil it this time. As if waiting to be discovered by Hollywood, a prettily snow-festooned sign glimmered at him: not far to Llanfairvechan and cosy cottage now. A slight skidding of the wheels stopped both his musing and his whistling, then yet another bend in the road was past them, and he could see the village at the bottom of the hill, and there, a vague sliver of dark amidst the dotting blackness of fallow trees, the road that sidewound its way up to the holiday cottage they had rented.

They'd reached the crossroads, with its never-quite bustle of bus stop, garage, pub and shop. The pub looked appealing, but only for the convenience of the booze, and he was more anxious to settle into a nice warm house than wet his whistle amidst the dotting of hostile natives they'd find in there. The village was of the sort usually labelled picturesque, but the locals never thought of it that way, seeing it only as a collection of homes, of the spot where old Thomas the butcher had his heart attack in the street Easter Sunday, or where young Glynnis was caught lifting her skirt just to annoy that foreign Vicar here on holiday from Cheltenham. But to Doyle, it was a place out of myth or Dickens, and as he stretched from the confinement of the car, he half-expected to see waifs pressing their noses up against the bakery window.

He laughed to himself: if he wanted to see that, all he'd have to do is waken Bodie up. He glanced into the car, to meet one blue eye peering at him enquiringly over the woollen blanket.

"D'you want to come with me or stay in the car?" Doyle asked, knowing the answer, but asking just on the off-chance that Bodie might choose to stir himself.

The blue eye simply closed again, and the lump slid a little lower in the seat.

"Lazy bugger," Doyle muttered, meaning it. Usually it was Bodie who did all this donkey work, but Doyle had been the one to draw the short straw this time round, by dint of Bodie having had a slightly nastier time on their last case than Doyle himself had had. Sourly, he pulled his collar up to meet his curls, tucked his scarf in a bit more tightly, and went off to brave the natives.

The leaded glass of the door glowed romantically at him, heat hit him, and then all the bright conversation died and all the faces turned towards him were uniformly blank and unfriendly. He smiled politely, nodded a hello, and then the conversations started up again. In Welsh, pointedly and rudely, definitively shutting him out, ostracising him for the unwelcome foreigner he was. Shrugging, too accustomed to holidays in Wales to bother about the traditional local reaction to the current English invasion, he wandered over to the shelves, beginning to gather the mountain of food he'd need to keep Bodie fed and happy.

Eventually, it was his turn, if only because the last customer had left, calling out what Doyle assumed were goodbyes to Ruth the shopowner. The woman who sneered at him from behind the counter even unbent enough to speak to him in English when communication was truly unavoidable. Perhaps it was the amount of money he spent, but the brazen leer he got made him think it might have been his tight denims which made her go so far as to give him a genuinely sturdy box to pack all the purchases in. Laden, acutely aware of hostility mixing with lust at his rear, Doyle made it out to the car, dumping the box in the boot, carrying the clanking plastic bag of booze in to be placed carefully behind his own drivers seat. Bodie mumbled at him and Doyle dunted him one on the shoulder. "Oi, mate, you'd better stir yourself. Is that the right road for the house?"

"How would I know?" Bodie muttered, pulling the cosy blanket up over his head, muffling his voice even more. "Never been here before."

“Thought you said—”

“I said I’d stayed round here a couple of times before, but that doesn’t mean I know every fucking house in Gwynneth, does it? Christ, Doyle, why don’t you go and ask for directions for once in your life?”

“Thanks a lot, mate. Much appreciated. However would I manage without you?”

Bodie, eloquently, snored.

Doyle slammed the door shut, rocking the car, and stormed off back into the shop. “‘Scuse me,” he said, glad that it was just him and the owner in amongst the tins and the packets and the rolls of toilet paper. “Em, I feel a bit stupid about this—”

Not bothering to even pretend to see him as anything more than a nicely packed pair of jeans and a pretty pair of green eyes, she said: “Yes, well, you would do, wouldn’t you, boyo?”

Ruefully, Doyle conceded the point, deciding not to notice the way she was undressing him with a lascivious stare. “My mate—he’s in the motor—forgot to bring the map and the directions with him, so I was wondering if you could, you know, tell me how to get to the rental cottage.”

“And which rental cottage would that be that you’re talking about? There’s all rental cottages round here, what with all the English coming in and buying everything in sight. Forcing the prices up until none of the people who belong here can afford to even have their own home any more.”

Doyle, resolute in his wish to reach his destination, was not about to get into an argument over the impact of modern life on the wilds of Wales and he certainly wasn’t going to make any comments on the stupidity of bigotry against someone just because they’d been born English. “The owners are a Welsh couple, name of Dai and Anne Thomas. He’s a civil servant, works in London these days.”

“Oh, you mean the bloke in MI6, the one with the *English* wife. So it’s his cottage you’re after, is it then?” Actually being married to ‘an English’ was obviously worse than being one, in this woman’s books, and what little respect Doyle’s attractiveness had won him disappeared under the burden of being friends with a Welshman who’d not only gone to England, but married English as well. “In that case, you can take the

road outside right here at the crossroads, and then you can drive straight through, and don’t be turning off or you’ll be in Bangor before you know it.” She gave him another very disparaging glower, and Doyle kept his fingers crossed that she wasn’t giving him duff directions just to make his English life miserable. “You’ll be going up the hill, and you can’t miss the Thomas cottage, unless you can’t tell up a hill from down. It’s the last house up there, and if you go past it, you’ll be falling over the top of the hill before you find another human soul. Now, sir,” she said with a sincerely unfriendly smile as one of her regulars came in, a blast of cold air and snow following close behind, “is that it, or is there anything else you need for me to do for you?”

“No, no, that’s fine.” He couldn’t resist adding sarcastically, “And I’ll try not to fall off the side of the mountain.”

“Oh, that’s kind of you, sir. Save the Rescue from having to turn out.”

Not, Doyle suspected, that they would turn out if two Englishmen were stupid enough to fall off the side of a local hill. Bloody Welsh, he muttered to himself, a withering squall of wind and snow hitting him between the protection of his thick hair and even thicker jacket, cheek stinging red in the cold. Typical bloody unfriendly Welsh. Anyone’d think they had a grievance against the entire English race. Coming to the car and finding the door locked, Doyle seriously considered having a grievance against one particular representative of the English race. Fingers numb, he thumped the window, shivering until Bodie stirred himself to unlock the motor and let him in. “What was that in aid of, you dozy bastard? Scared someone was going to nick the car with you still in it?”

“Nah. Didn’t want anyone thinking they could lift the booze while I was asleep, that’s all.”

“You always this trusting, or d’you save this ‘specially for Wales?”

“You ought to see me in Scotland, mate.”

“I must remember to tell Cowley that one. Sure he’d be fair chuffed.”

But Bodie didn’t answer, gone back to cocooning himself in woollen warmth and solitude. Doyle sighed, muttered something very unflattering under his breath, and concentrated

on getting their heavily burdened car up the steep hill and finding their cottage.

Snow fell in exquisite patterns of beauty, making driving a hazard to anyone's health and positively lethal to Doyle's good temper. In between fuming over the sheer stupidity of deciding to Christmas in Wales—in this weather? Christ, they must've been drunk when they came up with this bright idea—he managed to navigate his way through billowing, blinding snow, past cars parked in tiny lay-bys outside smaller cottages, until he realised the road had petered out and that the slate-roofed chocolate-box house on his right had to be where they were going.

"Right, we're here. Off your arse, Bodie, we've got tons of stuff to get in there, so shift." Bodie shifted, stretching, blinking slowly and tiredly, his face pallid and fragile in the snowlight. Frowning to cover himself, Doyle felt the familiar melting inside as Bodie unwound himself from blanket and car seat, startlingly gorgeous in his sleepiness.

Voice gruff from sleep, words slightly slurred. "This it?"

"No, it's fucking Disneyland, what d'you think? Here, you can start with the food and I'll get the suitcase." Not looking at his partner, but diamond-sharp aware of him, Doyle hurried out of the car, actually glad of the bitter cold and the tearing wind: welcome distraction, even more welcome force to battle with in lieu of Bodie. It was a bit of a struggle, but he had the boot open, the box of food in Bodie's arms, the suitcase and bag in his own without any of it dropping into thick snow or blown off by gusting wind. Through the gate, a plodding trudge through the drift of new snow, then the key fumbled into the lock and they were inside, the wind banished outside, light switched on bright and shining and imparting an illusion of comfort and heat.

"Strewth, it's freezing in here!" Bodie snapped, slapping his arms for a bit of warmth. "I'll find the boiler and—"

"Dai said the new heating wasn't going in until April, so it's the coal fires, mate. There should be a bunker somewhere, so—"

"So I've stayed in cottages like this before, which is more than you can say, so I've got a better idea of where the fucking coal is than you

have. All right?"

So much for his fond self-delusion of everything being just hunky-dory. "Pardon me for breathing! If you're going to be such a fucking bastard about it, I'll do the kitchen then, while you do your Cinderella."

"Fine," Bodie snarled, stomping off in high dudgeon, cold, tiredness and the simmering violence of the past few months keeping his mood foul, fuelling yet another baseless blow-up. Nothing Doyle could say would be right, and nothing Bodie could say would be the right thing for Doyle either. So much for Christmas, Bodie brooded, shovelling coal into a scuttle, twisting newspaper to lay the fire, placing the coal with skill learned as a boy. So much for the idea that seemed so brilliant in October. But that was before the hostage mess, and before the gun running cock-up, and a lifetime before the undercover nightmare. He shuddered then, not from the cold, remembering being undercover, remembering what he had had to do to keep up the slimy persona he had had to play.

Across the room, arms filled with the food he'd hauled from London—a luxurious Fortnum & Mason Christmas pudding, a bottle of hard sauce, chocolates from Harrods, the Christmas cake from Bodie's favourite little bakery—Doyle was standing watching his partner, wincing in sympathy when Bodie shuddered, too clear a memory of his own making him understand Bodie's tension. He wanted to go over to Bodie, put his arms around him in support, give him a bit of a cuddle, tell him it was going to be all right. But it hadn't been all right, and platitudes like that were worse than nothing. But perhaps a bit later, once they'd had a few drinks... Yeh, Bodie always felt better with a few good drinks under his belt, so he'd open the gin early, for himself, and either the brandy or the Haig for Bodie. Anything that would help them get past the last job, and the one before it. And the one before that. A black cloud of his own hanging over him, Doyle said nothing, passing quietly behind Bodie, going into the kitchen, his clattering around lending an air of normalcy and vitality to the cottage.

The fire was lit downstairs, and now the one in the bedroom upstairs was roaring away merrily to itself. Bodie stared into the writhing flame, feeling the heat on his face, enjoying it

absently, crouching beside the hearth, brooding about nothing in particular. The room was beginning to warm already, with its windows tightly closed and curtains drawn. He checked the bed for damp, found it bone dry, quilt and blankets and clean linen folded neatly across the bottom. The electric blanket was the first thing on, heat turned low, and it took him only a few moments to get the bed made with neatly mitred corners and pristine smooth quilt. Inviting, it was, all mounds of feather quilt and big pillows and the hidden cache of heat from the electric blanket.

He wanted to have Doyle in that bed. Wanted to fuck him rigid. Not something he hadn't done before, but never when they were both *compos mentis* and never, absolutely never, to be discussed after. The one big, unwritten but inviolate rule: between encounters, the sex didn't exist. But not tonight. Not again, not ever again, for he had had more than his fill of all the lying and deception and pretending. And he knew that Doyle planned on doing it all the same way they always did: he'd seen the amount of booze the normally stingy bastard had brought with him. So it was going to be the same old story. A few drinks, then a few more, still more, until Doyle was drunk enough to let his inhibitions go and condescend to go to bed with Bodie. Abruptly, the thought of that made Bodie want to weep, or kill something instead. To sit there beside Doyle on the sofa, drinking his beer or his whisky or his brandy like a good little boy until Doyle got plastered, then the touching, and the cocksucking, then finally the fucking. And if he was lucky, then Doyle wouldn't hate him in the morning, would perhaps do nothing worse than cut him off dead instead of making him suffer all the seven hells for daring to give Doyle what Doyle literally begged for the night before. There was no-one, not even Cowley at his peak, as vicious-tongued as Doyle when he got started. Bodie could attest to that.

Collapsing onto the bed, Bodie knew he couldn't take it, not this time. Not this time, not here, not after what he'd been through. The box of matches was hurled against the wall before he even realised he was going to throw it, yellow box splintering, reddish-blue tipped guts spilling down the pale pink cabbage rose wallpaper. A little unlit pyre grew at the skirting board and

methodically, without a single outward sign of his outburst, Bodie began putting the matches in the bedside ashtray. So domesticated he looked, but there was a fierce resentment burning in him, and all that showed it was the slightest narrowing of his eyes and the tightness of his lips. He dusted his hands clean, standing in the middle of the room, hands on hips, heat of the fire tanning his backside, surveying what would be the scene of yet another of their furtive, drunken encounters. Normally, he would have gone into the next-door bedroom, making up the bed in there to maintain the illusion of them not planning on having sex with each other, but not tonight. Not after what he'd been through, and not after what Doyle had put him through. There'd be no booze tonight, no ticket to deliberate amnesia, no excuses given. Doyle was going to have his fucking tonight, just the way the unfeeling bastard wanted it, but this time, Bodie was damned if he was going to let either one of them lie about it. They'd do it, but they'd do it stone cold sober, or not at all.

"And if Doyle doesn't want to sleep with me, he can make his own fucking bed, can't he?" he announced to the room in general, needing suddenly to hear the sound of a human voice.

"What'd you say?" came up, distantly, from downstairs. Doyle, of course, hearing him, probably wondering what the hell was going on now.

"I've done the bed and the fire," Bodie shouted down, tossing towels into the bathroom, sticking a spare one in the bedroom beside the bed where they could reach it when it was needed, as they would, inevitably, if he and Doyle didn't end up killing each other first. He took a deep breath, deciding that unless Doyle got difficult about the sex thing, then getting into a major fight with Doyle wasn't worth the aggro. The stairs he took two at a time, hurrying downstairs to where smells of cooking were already drifting.

"What're you making?" Light, casual, and oh, so friendly, no warning there that Bodie was about to turn their relationship and Doyle's world on its head.

"Tinned soup, sandwiches, tea and some of those cream cakes you brought, fatso."

Bodie shrugged, and dipped his finger into a Marks & Sparks cream sponge. "Want some of

my cream?" he asked, filthily, one cream-coated finger held suggestively erect an inch from Doyle's lips.

"Don't be disgusting, Bodie," Doyle snapped, shoving Bodie aside, making a great show of going over to the cooker to avoid unwelcome attentions. But his hips swung, and he stood with bum canted invitingly.

Yet they both knew what would happen if Bodie tried to take him up on the offer that wasn't truly on offer until later, much later, when they both had a skinful and it could be put down to drunken randiness.

Bodie, dark blue eyes brooding, crossed the tiny kitchen, large hands cupping the slenderness of Doyle's arse.

"Gerroff!" Doyle shouted, twisting free. "What the fuck's got into you, Bodie?"

"Isn't it more what the fuck's going to get into you, Ray?" He loomed in the kitchen, towering over Doyle for all that they were almost the same height. "Bring enough booze, did you?" Roughly, he shoved Doyle's aran sweater up out of the way, exposing hairy chest and pink nipples, palming the flatness of Doyle's chest, then twisting, hard, Doyle's nipples. "And I presume you remembered to bring the cream we use when we fuck." He stepped forward, aborting the nascent rise of Doyle's knee into his crotch. "You know the stuff I mean, don't you, Ray?" he asked silkily, rubbing his hardening cock against Doyle, pressing his partner back dangerously close to the pot of bubbling oxtail soup until he could feel the heat on his own face and knew that it must be blisteringly hot on Doyle. "I'm talking about your favourite lubricant. The nice, slick stuff so I don't hurt either one of us when I ram my cock up your arse."

Doyle, eyes dark, face like thunder, denying that this was happening, that any of this had any basis other than Bodie's unfortunate education as a pretty boy amidst sailors and then mercenaries. Voice rising, he gave vent to all the unfocussed rage of the past few jobs and gave no recognition at all to the sweetly taboo nights when he'd spread his legs for Bodie, felt his partner deep inside. No recognition for that at all, for to recognise the sex was to recognise the need, and that, as far as Doyle was concerned, simply did not exist. "Get your paws off me, Bodie, or so help me, I'll break your sodding

neck."

"You and whose army?" Bodie asked him, voice a seductive whisper. "Anyway, this is how you like it, isn't it? You're always on at me to do it harder, aren't you?"

A long, assessing look, then a sigh, of the sort mothers give teenage daughters and Cowley gives seasoned agents. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, but if you're going to have a nervous breakdown and turn into a complete loony, would you mind going into the sitting room to do it? I'm trying to make lunch here." Calm words, calmer voice, the tone of the sane dealing with the unbalanced, but there was a wildness in his eyes, a glitter of fear, and of something else. Desire. Lust. Hunger.

Bodie saw all of that, and smiled. "Humouring the bamstick, is that it, Ray? And all the time, you're the one who's gone off the deep end, mate. Pretending we never fuck each other, Christ, what a sodding joke." The contempt was stinging, the thrust of his hips hard, punishing, the twist of his fingers painful. "But if that's how you want to play it, then fine. I'll go into the sitting room like a good little boy and wait for you to bring me my lunch." For a second, a terrifying second, he crowded over Doyle as if to kiss him, but then he pulled back to the harshness of his hand on Doyle's cock and the nip of his fingers on Doyle's nipples. "But don't think I'm going to stop, Ray, don't you think that for a second."

Then he was gone, the heavy door slamming shut behind him, and the kitchen was serene again. Apart, that is, from Doyle, who was still standing as Bodie had left him, jumper up under his armpits, nipples standing out swollen and thick. He licked his lips where Bodie hadn't kissed him, and conjured up the image of his partner leaning into him with the threat of rape.

And his cock throbbed.

Hard, erect, trapped by jeans that were far too tight, his cock remembered the thrill of Bodie's threat and power and intractable strength. The nearing loom of the kiss. The thrust of cock. The sharp pressure of hip. The heat of skin. The twisting fingers. The squeezing hand. All of it, all of him, all of them together, with the cooker digging into his back and the heat from the food scalding him. But all of it just puzzle pieces, to be put together into a knee-weakening memory of

Bodie, with the promise of sex in his hips and domination in his eyes. Trembling, Doyle undid his zip, hauling his cock out, fucking his fist fast and furious, replaying again and again the moment when Bodie leaned into him like that, with his cock so hot against him, his hands so hard and strong on his nipples, his eyes so darkly blue. His fingers clenched so tightly his knuckles were bone white, he leant against the kitchen table, bringing himself to a quick, painful climax. Searingly lonely, but better than giving in to Bodie. If Bodie only knew the way Ray reacted to him, then Doyle would never be up off his knees, and would never be free from Bodie's leash. As the last lonely spurt erupted from his cock, he fell forward, leaning on the back of the kitchen chair, letting it take his weight while he got his breath back and reined himself in under at least marginal control. He looked down at his hand, at the beaded whiteness slowly spreading, between his knuckles, onto his fingertips. And hated himself.

How are the mighty fallen, he thought to himself, so acutely aware of the legions of people who had wanted him, who had needed him. Yet here he was, standing in a kitchen with tinned soup on the cooker and cheese melting under the grill, so unromantic, so déclassé, alone with his cum sticky on his fingers, the man of his desires gone, uncaring, away. But then again, perhaps that was what he wanted most of all: to have Bodie labouring under the misconception that his, Doyle's, reluctance stemmed from an inability to deal with latent homosexual impulses—and what a joke that! If only, as the saying went, if only Bodie knew about the times up in the attic with his best friend, playing doctors at five, or earning a few extra quid when he'd been one step into disaster, running wild on the streets and half-way to Borstal. Useful, though, to have Bodie think that he was just being a complete moron about sex, bated once too often for his pretty-boy looks to be comfortable admitting that maybe, just maybe, the jibes might be true. As Doyle knew they were. As Doyle had always, silent confession in the dark to faceless priest, known they were.

Oh, no, it wasn't the queer aspect that worried him: it was the quicksand-slurping of need as it consumed him that scared him shitless. Needing so much, so all-devouringly, and needing

someone like Bodie. Bodie, who could be respected and deferred to. Bodie, who was strong enough to be leaned on. Bodie, who could always be needled into roughness, and violence, and the ominous pleasure of being dominated. His legs had stopped trembling, and his mind was capable of thinking beyond the confines of his own body and emotions, finally reminding him that the cheese would blacken soon and the soup boil over, and that Bodie, wonderfully dangerous Bodie, was waiting for him through that white-painted kitchen door. He should make his own lunch and demand that Bodie come through and fend for himself: assert his independence, display to himself that he wasn't really in danger of turning submissive to Bodie. He ought to. He really ought to.

But—a torn square of kitchen roll cleaned away the evidence of his weakness and his erotic addiction to Bodie's power, and then he was tucked away tidily, hands washed again, back to finishing making their lunch, setting the tray ready for two, heaping the pickle on more than half the toasted cheese, just the way Bodie liked it, doing the little things that pandered to Bodie so well. Only because they were partners, of course, he told himself. By the time he hauled the tray into the sitting room and faced Bodie again, he was his usual insouciantly pugnacious self, the lust and fear and self-knowledge tucked away as neatly as his spent cock.

"The least you could do is clear a bit of space, Bodie," he carped, using his own leg to shove Bodie's down from the coffee table, giving him somewhere to put the tray. Moving the scattered pages of the London paper out of the way, he felt it again: Bodie's hands on his arse, knowing fingers, confidant hands, utter certainty of welcome. Doyle whirled around fast, open hand slapping viciously into Bodie's cheek, violence restrained down to nothing more than that when he could so easily kill with that same hand, or with the knife on the tray, or with a sharply jagged broken china mug. Messier, to be sure, but effective, and they both knew it. But Bodie smiled at him, a long, slow smile and wilfully pressed Doyle on a sore point, one they both knew would set him off as quick as a firework.

"Slapping me off to protect your virtue? What a good little girl you are, petal, the Sisters would be proud of you." Then he moved forward,

trapping Doyle between his thighs, one hand pulling Doyle by the nape down, down, until they were face to face and Doyle's back was painfully contorted by the confining space and Bodie's inexorable hand. "Pity I know you're nothing but a fucking slag, isn't it? Just a cunt who'll spread for anyone who can get him drunk enough. That's you, isn't it, petal?" He ruffled Doyle's curls, a mockery of his usual affectionate gesture. "Gorgeous, aren't you, darling?" Rough fingers traced the shape of Doyle's eyes, tipping along his eyelashes, then following the line of his nose down to outline his lips. "Prettiest thing on the squad, that's my Raymond. Randroid too, but only if I get you legless first. Tell me, sweetheart, d'you let anyone with a bottle of whisky fuck you, or am I special?"

"You're a fucking maniac, that's what you are. Let go of me, Bodie, before I make you sing soprano." He pushed his knee forward, until the smooth roundness of his kneecap was up hard against Bodie's groin, and he could feel the rising cock there.

"Oh, yeh," Bodie breathed, rotating his hips a little, just enough to move himself against Doyle's knee, turning Doyle's aggressive dominance into caress, "do it like that. Harder, Ray, do it harder. But I forgot, didn't I? 'Do it harder' is your line, isn't it, petal?" He shoved Doyle backwards, so that Doyle barely missed the table and landed, heavily, on his backside. "That hard enough for you? Or am I being too rough for daddy's little boy?"

"I can take anything you dish out, so don't you come the bully with me, Bodie," Doyle snarled, getting to his feet in the proper stance for battle, lust curling hotly in his belly, the sensible part of his brain telling him he should turn on his heel and run like hell. From himself, not Bodie. "I'm sick fed up with your bully-boy shite, so you can just pack it in right now."

"Pack it in? Why, when it's what you want? Because it is, isn't it?" Bodie was on his feet, and they were poised, two tomcats fighting over territory, but they both knew the territory in question was Doyle's body. "You're so fucking insecure, you're petrified cos you fancy a bloke. What's the matter, Ray, that never happen to you before?" Then he catapulted forward, instantly past Doyle's defences, and there he was, kissing Doyle, tongue shoved deeply into

Doyle's mouth, hands clutching in Doyle's hair, holding him immobile. A ragged breath, and they were staring at each other, unblinking, one of them at least being honest, thinking the other was guilty of nothing more than a simple, obvious lie. "Or is it that it's happened too often?"

"I'm not a fairy, Bodie, and don't you go thinking you can make me feel like I am. Just because I—" he broke off in the nick of time, biting his tongue to stop himself from saying the dreaded words. Just because I let you fuck me, that's what he had been on the very precipice of saying, but he didn't dare say that. Didn't dare admit that some of what Bodie was saying was true. Not that it was, he told himself, swiping Bodie's hands away, marching over to sit on the sofa as if nothing had happened beyond one of their usual, far more innocent spats. Just because he'd done a couple of things when he was absolutely legless didn't mean anything anyway. After all, he'd stolen the odd thing when he'd been out drinking with his mates—and look at the night he'd cut that other kid up. Drunk as a pug he'd been that night, so all this was nothing more than another one of Bodie's exercises in excessive control, an attempt to turn a minor drunken weakness, a willingness to crawl at Bodie's feet, into an issue bigger than the Third World War.

"You know your problem, don't you," Doyle said, mouth full of toasted cheese and tomato, a speck of Branston pickle landing on his shirt. "You're too macho by half. In fact, Bodie, if either one of us has a problem with his masculine image, then it's you, mate. Stomping around like a bull on heat all the time..."

Bodie stood in front of Doyle, legs astride, arms folded, in black from the neck of his good wool poloneck to the toes of his snow-stained shoes. "Me? At least I don't walk around half hard all the time, showing it off to all and sundry and then screaming 'rape' every time some poor fella tries to get a taste."

"That's stupid! I don't—"

A slicing gesture with his hand, and Bodie had cut Doyle off. "I'm not going to argue with you, Doyle. You and I both know what you're like, and we both know I could talk until I'm blue in the face and you'd still deny it." He grabbed a plate, piling it high with the toasted cheese, taking his mug of soup, going over to the

solitary armchair and throwing himself into its cushions as if it were a newly honed Iron Maiden. "But I know the truth, Doyle, and I'm not going to keep on lying, not any more. I've had it with all your shite, and it's going to stop."

"Ooh, you're beautiful when you're angry, Bodie." Sliding steel between Bodie's ribs, the words glided out soft and vicious, turning the tables.

"That meant to be a dig at me, Doyle?" Bodie actually laughed, the tables turned not at all. "Supposed to get me all het up, all insecure about being a real man?" He took an enormous bite of toasted cheese, chewed it, had a swig of soup, picked the newspaper up again, burying his nose in the deathless prose about the upcoming home internationals. "Well, I've got news for you, mate," he muttered, all the more threatening because, so secure in his own self-image, he didn't even need to look at Doyle, "you can call me everything under the sun, you can waste your last breath on some pathetic innuendo that's supposed to put the wind up me, but all I have to do is remember you with my cock up your arse and you begging me to fuck you harder." Bodie looked up then, a quick, sweeping glance that stripped Doyle bare and made him see himself through Bodie's eyes, naked and impaled and pleading. "Oh, yeh, Ray, you'll have to do a bit better than cheap shots to get me on the run. Because I'm not backing down this time. Not a snowball's of that, sweetheart."

Doyle could feel the coldness of sweat trickling down his spine. He was over-familiar with that tone of Bodie's voice, having heard it in too many interrogations or too many sticky situations where only Bodie's louring threat could get them out unbruised or unbattered. But this was the first time that he'd been spoken to as if he were the enemy, as if he were the thing that all Bodie's strength was arrayed against. It scared him. In fact, it terrified him.

But not nearly so much as it aroused him. Blood thundered through his veins, straining his cock hard again, soon, too soon after the bleak moment in the kitchen—don't think about it, it didn't matter, it didn't count, he told himself, face reflecting only the disinterest he didn't feel and hiding the maelstrom of emotions within—but he was hard again, and his balls

wanted to be touched and squeezed, and his arse ached to be filled with Bodie, Bodie's cum seeping from him, still body-warm against his skin. He yearned, flammably, to take Bodie inside himself once more, or to have Bodie bent double under him, cock to the hilt, Bodie's eyes closed to hold the ecstasy inside, Bodie's arse clenched around him. He shuddered, desire and dread colliding on his spine. He didn't want to think about what they did in the dark, didn't want to remember the dark and the illicit pleasure and the sinful delight. Didn't want to remember the sound of his own voice, so husky, so raw with need, demanding Bodie for more, for harder, for deeper.

Smiling behind his newspaper, Bodie chewed contentedly on his lunch whilst pricklingly aware of Doyle chewing on his words. He was winning, he could sense it, knew that Doyle's resolve to lie about this was slowly dissolving, snow into slush and turning just as murky. But it was for the best, no two ways about that, and not only from his own point of view. Doyle had to get over this stupid hang-up about swinging both ways: a waste, that, of energy and too unsettling in a job that gave them all the uncertainty that anyone could ever want. But it was the guilt, he thought, peeking over the top of the page at a pondering Doyle who had forgotten the mug in his hand, steam weaving round his face like the greying curls at his temples. Always too much guilt—just have a gander at Doyle's performance over this last undercover crap. Not that the guilt was undeserved, not this time, considering it was Doyle's stupid fucking fault the whole thing had gone so messily wrong. But to wallow in it that much—Christ, he'd almost expected Doyle to come before Cowley, cap in hand, and ask for six of the best for being such a cock-up. Instead, what had happened was Doyle getting plastered three nights in a row, turning up on Bodie's doorstep, bottle in hand and unwilling lust in his eyes. Last thing the poor bugger needs, isn't it? Bodie thought to himself, forgetting to keep his eyes hidden behind the sports stories, all this mess about being bisexual, getting himself all tied up about it. Be much happier if he just accepted it and let me—

He garrotted the next word before he could even think it, abruptly drowning all thought in

an article about the skills and weaknesses of Kenny Dalglish as opposed to Kevin Keegan, slipping away from that dangerous word with consummate skill. He did not need to remind himself that he did not, absolutely did not, love Raymond Doyle. In fact, he didn't even dare think it, just in case he admitted that he was hopelessly wrong. Because if he confessed to the truth of loving Doyle, then it wouldn't take long before that truth turned to lie as love turned to hate. For if he loved Doyle, if he was going to go through all this and have it turn to pain, and all because Doyle was too fucking immature to accept himself... If he loved, and there was no love given back to him, no warmth to hold him as he wanted to hold Ray. No-one to tell him it would be all right, and make it so with the complicated security of love and being loved...

"You going to sit there like Alf bloody Garnett or are you going to shift your fat arse and do the washing up?"

Doyle, of course, making a point to himself, sounding to Bodie like a man trying hard to be macho to cover the simmering desires within. "Why don't you put your floral pinny on and do it yourself?"

"Because one, I don't have an apron and two, I cooked the lunch, so you can do the cleaning up after."

"Christ, Doyle, did you have your sense of humour surgically removed at birth? Oh, excuse me, doctors," he said in a giggly, breathy female voice, "could you do, you know, the operation. Not because we're Jewish, of course, but because we wouldn't want our son to be fun with his friends, now would we?"

Doyle, freezingly, glanced at Bodie out of the corner of his eye and then rose to his feet, the simple grace and subtle sensuality of it making Bodie suddenly hot under the collar. Doyle, oblivious, plugged the television in, waiting impatiently for the set to warm up, long fingers tapping an agitated samba on the tarnished wood veneer, then flicking, quick economy, until he'd found *Grandstand*. He was aware, unexpectedly, of Bodie staring at him, and self-conscious with the same itchy unease of spotty adolescence, amorphous desire writhing between them, swithering between being a lust that should not speak its name unless drunk, or a darkly dangerous desire for more than mere

sex, and more than simple emotion. "What you looking at, mate?" he snapped, rhetorical question turned into sharp reprimand.

"Dunno," Bodie answered him slowly, folding the paper neatly and putting it onto the table amidst the clutter of lunch. "On the one hand, I could say I'm looking at the best partner I've ever had—and that includes my team in the SAS."

Wide-eyed, all green gaze and out-thrust aggressive chin, Doyle looked back at him, *Grandstand* chuntering away in the background, as forgotten as the rest of the world that existed beyond him and Bodie. The compliment had him on the razor's edge, waiting to hear what was coming next, what poison would be slipped in through the chink made in his armour.

"Oh, yeh, definitely the best in the business, when it comes to the job," Bodie went on, almost idly, the same voice he would normally use to discuss the relative merits of left backs and forwards and goalies leaping around on the television screen. "Then there's the other." Bodie leaned forward, stubborn-faced, lips and jaw hard and determined, while his eyes smouldered with the images his words were creating. "In the dark, because you always have to have the light off. But I can still see you, Ray, did you know that? Like that time in the car. Or the time down the back alley, remember that? We came out of the pub and you said you thought you were going to be sick, so we went round the back. And then d'you remember what you did to me, Ray?"

The voice, so low, so seductive, had him shivering with excitement, as the hardness in the eyes and the angry clench of jaw had his stomach knotting with darkest lust and purest fear. God, how he loved Bodie like this! All chained power, held barely in check, as sure and as certain as hell. Nervous of his own reactions, Doyle licked his upper lip and felt a leap of desire as Bodie saw the gesture and smiled, blackly, at him.

"I can see that you do remember. Not as drunk as all that after all then, eh? Not so pickled that you can't remember plastering yourself all down my front, then whisking us round so that you had your back to the wall and me to your front. You were hard then already, couldn't wait to get those fucking jeans opened and your

prick out, could you? Almost came out my arse, you stuck your tongue so far down my throat. But you like that kind of thing, don't you, Ray? Being as far inside the other person as you can get."

Every step measured, approaching Doyle a heartbeat at a time, Bodie crossed the small room, his monologue interrupted only by the catch of Doyle's breath. "Then you turned round, didn't you, spreading your legs for me like the cheapest tart, pulling your bum open so I could see where you wanted me to plant myself." He was less than a foot from Doyle now, close enough to see the quiver of silver chain on heaving chest, close enough to imagine that he could hear the thunder of Doyle's heart. "And I gave you what you wanted, didn't I, Ray? Fucked you where you stood, in a filthy alley not ten feet from the back door of the pub where Murph and all the rest were still drinking themselves stupid."

Bodie took the last step, until his trousers brushed Doyle's, until he could, quite casually it seemed, nudge Doyle's legs shut, standing astride the tight-clenched denim, his crotch a scant few inches from Doyle's wide eyes and determinedly shut mouth. "Oh, I always give you what you want, don't I? But what do you ever give me, eh? Sweet fuck all, that's what. Never so much as a smile when we're sober, but then when you're drunk, it's different then, isn't it? Then all you want is a good fuck and anyone'd do, wouldn't they?"

He was so close that Doyle could smell him, the sultry musk of his genitals, the descant scent of the Pears soap, a faint spiciness from aftershave. Smells good enough to eat, the common daily expression flitted through his mind, punctuated by the thought of himself with Bodie's cock in his mouth, Bodie's semen splattering against the back of his throat, Bodie— He took a deep, deep breath, intoxicating himself on the mingled scents, and almost, so very nearly, yielded then and there to the allure that was Bodie. But he didn't. Not quite, held back by fear, scared into immobility by his own illicit desires. Sucking cock didn't bother him, did nothing to shake his image of himself, but it was more than that desire that was flooding him: it was more than the rising curve of genitalia blanketed by woollen trousers. It was the coiled power in Bodie, the man's strength, the immu-

tability of his spirit, his aggressively dominant attitude. All of it combined to make Doyle want nothing more than to crawl at Bodie's feet. Prostrate himself naked, on his belly, arse in the air for Bodie's delight, licking Bodie's feet, giving himself over completely to Bodie's whim.

"Wouldn't they, you little cunt?" Bodie, in a conversation Doyle had long since lost. But he hadn't lost Bodie's inimical presence, and heard himself moan as Bodie leaned forward, arching his groin into Doyle's face, promising and threatening at the same time.

"Anyone'd do, wouldn't they, cunt?" Bodie snarled again, so hurt he was infuriated by the simple truth. "You're so desperate for the feel of a prick up your arse, you wouldn't care if it was attached to the fucking Pope, it wouldn't matter. Not as long as you got what you wanted. You've been using me, cunt, like a fucking walking vibrator, just turn me on and then shove me up your arse. And you don't even have to buy new batteries, do you, you little bastard you?"

But Doyle wasn't listening, not to specific words. All he could hear were the obscenities and the thrilling strength of Bodie's voice. And his own inner voice, the one telling him that he oughtn't to give in, that he didn't dare, not if he wanted to keep on being separate and strong in his own right. But that inner voice was too weak, and the other voice was too strong, the siren song of submission, reeling him in slowly, so very slowly, but closer and closer and closer.

"Always wanting more, and never giving me a fucking thing, apart from your arse, and I wonder how many other blokes've had that, you smiling coyly at them every single fucking time, making them think they're special..." Voice cracking, Bodie broke off before he betrayed himself, fighting tears back, refusing to cry over something like this. Doyle didn't deserve his tears, wasn't worthy of them, but Bodie was aching inside. He'd never hurt so much before, not ever, but then, he'd never been in love like this either, had he? Never known the stabbing agony of watching love walk away, uncaring, nor of waiting for someone to be blind drunk before they could endure his touch by pretending it was someone else. Furious to cover the pain, he grabbed Doyle by the upper arms, hauling him to his feet, pushing and shoving and hitting,

getting Doyle out of the room and up the stairs so quickly neither one of them had time to get over the shock of his explosion of violence.

In the bedroom, with the bed he'd thought so inviting, with the man he needed beyond reason, and all Bodie could think about was how much Ray Doyle had hurt him, and would keep on hurting him. Callously, in the worst possible way, with the indifference of someone who didn't care at all. "Who d'you pretend I am, eh?" he whispered, bleakly threatening, hand clutching Doyle's shirt collar, one of the buttons flying off as cotton was strained and pulled. "Because you don't think about me when we do it, do you? Oh, no, because that would mean treating me like a real person instead of a convenient cock, wouldn't it? And you're not interested in people, not you. Not my sweet Raymond. Care for the masses, have your heart bleed for the poor downtrodden millions, but when it's your own partner, your own fucking partner—" He swallowed, hard, stifling the pain again, stuffing it down low behind the protection of anger, using his fury as a bandage, covering up the seeping wound that Doyle had inflicted with his blind disinterest.

"What d'you expect me to do?" Doyle asked, quietly dangerous in his own way, fighting off not Bodie but his own burgeoning desire for this dangerous version of his friend. "Buy you chocolates? But I already do that, don't I? Bring you them into work with the paper, or have a few bars of Bournville in when you're coming over for a drink. So what else d'you want? Flowers? Oh, but flowers get right up you hooter, at least that's what you say." He stalked two steps closer to Bodie, his nostrils flaring, his temper rising in carefully controlled increments. "What, is my poor little petal's feelings all hurt? Well, tell you what, I'll—"

"You'll shut your fucking mouth, you fucking cunt, before I ram my fist down your throat!" Bodie, heated now, nostrils flaring, temper boiling, all the confusion and loneliness and the aftermaths of sex crushing in on him. "You've got a cheek on you, I'll give you that. But you're not going to put one on me, and you're not going to get away with pretending that it's all me and chance that gets you drunk with your arse spread. You'd better face it, petal. You're a fucking nancy boy, a—"

"A what? An idiot for not going to Cowley the first time you got me plastered and fucked me?"

Bodie stared at him, dumbfounded, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're amazing, you know that? To stand there, bold as brass and say that to me—*me*, Doyle, or have you forgotten that I was there and saw the whole thing?" He grabbed at Doyle, pinning his arms, pulling his body in close to press them hard together. "Feel that? You've got me going again, but you expected that, didn't you?" He freed one hand long enough to mould the shape of Doyle's rising excitement, the cock fitting his cupped hand to perfection. "And d'you feel that? You want it just as much as I do. Which makes you bent, Doyle." He grinned at that, a mere baring of teeth and glinting of eye. "Makes you the original bent copper, dunnit? You going to admit it, Ray?" he asked, needing Doyle to actually say it, to give credence to all those shared nights and shared sexuality, to make all the pent-up emotion he sensed true and real and something he could depend on. "You going to admit you're queer?"

"What d'you think, Bodie, or have you given thinking up for Lent? Just because I've been taken advantage of when I was too drunk to know any different, by a bloke who was supposed to be my friend," Doyle was almost spitting the words out, the venom hiding the secret truth that scared him spineless. "Someone I didn't expect to betray me like a—"

It was then that Bodie hit him. Stinging, resounding slap, ricocheting sound through the room, ricocheting sensation through Bodie and Doyle. Bodie looked at his hand in something akin to horror, that he should enjoy it so much, and Doyle—eyes dropping shut, mouth dropping open, a gaping chasm of lust opening in his belly as the fire fled through his nerves from face to brain.

"Don't you dare call me names, you fucking prick. Betray you? And how the fucking hell could I betray you when you don't trust me in the first place, not off the job at any rate?" His hands were itching, aching to hit Doyle again, to spread the pain inside himself to Doyle, to bring Doyle to heel. "You cunt, you lying cunt. All you ever wanted was to be fucked rigid and be too drunk to have to admit that you get off on

having a cock up your arse.” Silken steel, his hands were hard and harsh on Doyle, twisting one arm up behind the slender back, the half-Nelson to lead Doyle to the bed. With a surge of effort and the subterranean wish that Doyle would collapse in dislocated agony, he tossed his so-called partner onto the bed.

Winded, Doyle lay where he was, saying nothing, feeling the insidious lassitude of passivity slithering into his belly. He half closed his eyes again, until his field of vision was Bodie, entirely, nothing else to distract him, nothing else to focus on. His breath seeped from him slowly, and he wanted nothing more in the world than to say, yes, yes, whatever you want, Bodie, whatever you feel like, Bodie, whatever takes your fancy, Bodie. His legs wanted to splay themselves, to display what was held between, to offer the deepest intimacies, because he knew that was what Bodie wanted. But more than that, he knew the words Bodie wanted to hear, and they burned on his tongue and battled to get past his firmly shut lips. It would be so easy, so comfortable to say that yes, he was a fairy, if that’s what Bodie wanted him to be—and did Bodie want him to wear frocks? Or a bit of make-up? Scent? Because he already wore jewellery—his copper bracelet was warm around

his wrist, and his silver chain was clinging to his throat like a collar—because Bodie liked him bedecked, Doyle could tell from the way Bodie would play with the jewellery when they camped it up, or when he was getting ready to go out on a foursome with Bodie and some birds, or when Bodie was fucking him mindless. He had even changed the way he dressed, getting rid of the tatty clothes and bovver-boy shirts in favour of thin t-shirts that drew Bodie’s attention, and wearing his hair that little bit longer. Slowly, inexorably, he was changing himself to suit Bodie. He could imagine himself kneeling in front of Bodie, letting Bodie choose dinner for him, listening to the music Bodie liked, himself fading away into a shadow devoted to Bodie, a life-time’s hard-won independence eroded into nothing.

“Where are you, Ray?” Bodie asked, one knee on the edge of the bed, other foot planted firmly on the floor, all his commitment to action muddled into indecision. “What’re you thinking?” Staring, rapt, at Doyle’s blissfully distracted face, as thoughts scudded across uneven features making Doyle more seductively mysterious and making Bodie suddenly ache, fiercely, to kiss him, gently.

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Doyle looked up at him, deliberately wiping all betraying expression from his face. The temptation was so strong he almost gave it voice, and wondered what Bodie would say if he told him the truth: I'm thinking about how easy it would be for me to just give up and let you make all my decisions for me. What would Bodie say to that, then? What would Bodie say if he confessed that malesex fazed him not at all, but that he was terrified a little more every single day when he watched another fragment of his independence disappear down the drain? Independence he had fought all the harder for, because it was not natural to him, a learned skill like knowing how to cope despite misfortunes or argue without degenerating into name-calling incitement. What would Bodie do if he admitted he was tired of struggling all the time and wanted nothing more than to yield, and cook for Bodie when Bodie wanted him to, fuck when Bodie wanted him to, go where Bodie wanted him to go. But of course, it was the imagining of what Bodie would do that stung him into speech. "What's it to you, butch?" he asked, the very picture of aggrieved belligerence.

All the sympathy fled Bodie's face, and it was the last of his sympathy, nothing left behind but the void where his willingness to understand and forgive had once been. "What's it to me? My fucking partner is giving me nothing but grief, getting himself tied up in knots over what he likes to do in bed and taking that out on me." He glowered, hands quick and blurring, stripping his own clothes off, flashing out to start on Doyle. "And don't you fucking deny that that's what went wrong this last undercover. And the obbo before that. So busy resenting me for giving you what you fucking well beg for, you can't even watch my back for me."

There. It was said. And then Bodie looked at Doyle, at the pale skin that was golden against his own winter pallor where Doyle's hands had locked over his own, stopping him from undressing Doyle, leaving Doyle protected by clothes compared to Bodie's uneasy nudity. "In fact, if we're going to be honest about this—and I am, oh Christ, I'm going to be honest even if you don't know the meaning of the word—it

wasn't even that you weren't watching my back, was it, Ray? Oh, no, not you. You were too busy sharpening the barbs and dipping the knives in poison, weren't you?"

"You watch your mouth—"

"Why—gone off the truth, Zarathustra? Well, here's something else you won't want to hear. I know about you landing me in it with Cowley. Pretty fucking low for a partner, eh, *partner*, stabbing me in the back like that because I'd fucked you the night before."

But it wasn't because you fucked me, Doyle thought but didn't say. It was because I cancelled going to that concert because you said you were tired and fancied a night in and did I want to come over to your place and watch the match on the telly. It was because I didn't even stop to think about it, I just did exactly what you wanted me to, like a fucking doormat—

"And don't think I don't know about that minute it took you to decide to come into the warehouse after me," Bodie said, low and cruel, shrugging Doyle's grip off, fingers going now to strip cotton from warm body. "The R/T was on, so I know how long it took you from getting the go-ahead from Cowley to coming in after me. And that was a morning after a night before as well."

But that wasn't because of the fucking, either. That was barely an hour after he'd caught himself changing his mind about where to have lunch because Bodie announced he wanted cod and chips instead of a vindaloo. Such a small thing, but it had been there again: the urge to hand himself, lock, stock, and barrel over to Bodie. To let the roles they played in sex carry over into the world outside the bedroom. To let Bodie command and control there too, the way he had wanted someone to make the decisions for him for as long as he could remember. The knight in shining armour come to sweep him off his feet and make him live happily ever after...

"You've bollocksed up the last two—no, it's the last three jobs. How'd you expect me to forget what you did to me on this undercover disaster? So kind of you to make a mistake like that, letting yourself be seen by a bloke you'd arrested and sent to the Scrubs. Clever, that, but

I suppose you'll tell me it was all purely accidental? And nothing to do with the fucking I'd given you not ten minutes before in the back of the car? 'Oh, no, Bodie,' he sneered, doing a creditable impersonation of Doyle's wandering accent, "it was all just a weird coincidence, honest'."

But it wasn't, Doyle knew that. It was because he'd been terrified and thrown completely off-balance, recognising a growing need in himself and a faster-growing weakness. He'd always been a bit of a masochist—emotionally, with his guilt; sexually, with his love of rough sex—but that never worried him. It was this creeping desire to turn into Bodie's slave, to say nothing but 'yes' to him, to give up thinking and responsibility, and leave it all up to Bodie: his happiness, his well-being, his life. The temptation was there again, in the biting sharpness at his nipples as Bodie nipped at him.

"Oh, yeh, you like that, don't you, you little bint. Like what I'm doing? Well," Bodie drew back until only his fingers, his knowing, wonderful fingers, were still touching Doyle, keeping him at the perimeter of pleasure, "you want more of that, you're going to have to ask for it. Stone cold sober, no booze, no excuses. You're going to have to admit it. Tell me you like it. Tell me you want to be fucked." His eyes were very blue, made almost navy by the wideness of his pupil, and his cheeks were very flushed, rose amidst the alabaster. "Tell me it has to be me who fucks you."

Too close, too tempting, too much like admitting his own emasculating truth. So he did the only thing he knew to hold the temptation at bay: he attacked the one person he wanted and needed above all else. "You? Thought you said I was such a fucking fairy I didn't care who the prick was, as long as it did the trick? Doesn't say much for you then, does it?"

And the cruel streak worked, the words striking home so hard that Bodie's face lost all colour, a white mask of banked fury. "So that's how it's going to be, is it?" he asked with a quiet calm that bespoke his fury with clarion clarity. "Fair enough, if that's how it's going to have to be. Want me to force you into it? I can do that. Want me to rape you? Oh, no problem, sunshine," and his fist was clenched too hard in Doyle's hair, and his voice was harsh and grating in Doyle's

ear, and his other hand was too, too tight on his balls. "I can rape you. In fact, I fancy the idea no end. Serves you fucking right, walking around the way you do, flashing your stuff about, cutting me off at the elbow if I touch you—unless you're drunk, 'course. And I'll tell you something else for nothing, Doyle. If you don't get your head wrapped round the idea of being ac/dc or queer, then with your libido, you're going end up a fucking alkier."

"Better than ending up your bumboy."

Bodie's smile adsorbed on the surface of his fury, a thin film of humanity over the raging pain and fury. "Bit late for that, isn't it? Seeing as how that's what you already are. Bumboy." His hand grabbed a fistful of Doyle's buttocks, reddening them, a bruise leaving the mark of his hand upon the flawless flesh. "My bumboy, and this," both hands now, under Doyle, grabbing him, hands full, holding him so tight his whole body shuddered when Bodie shook him, "is mine. My bum, my arse to fuck whenever I want it."

"Like fuck it is! You get your hands off me—" and now Bodie's power didn't seem quite so alluring and the intrinsic violence of the man no longer appealed. Quite serious now, Doyle tried to push Bodie off, something in his partner's eyes warning him that he was in over his head, way, way over his head, and if he didn't break free, then he was going to be either hurt—or worse, lost. If Bodie did this to him and it was what he needed, down deep where it was so dark and murky in his own mind that he was afraid to look there for fear of what he might find... Panic rushing through him, he shoved up with all his strength, and discovered that what had fuelled so many lonely fantasies was true: Bodie was so much stronger than he, the heavy muscle and stolid frame unmoved by Doyle's own determined efforts.

In an abomination of sex, they lay tangled together, Doyle's hands flat-palmed on Bodie's chest, cock to cock, eyes staring into eyes. But there was neither love nor even passion there. Gathering himself, Doyle heaved upwards, twisting and turning like an eel, freeing himself from Bodie's grasp, sliding from the bed—only to be grabbed, and turned, and hauled in, Bodie's catch of the day, and he wasn't strong enough, Christ, his mind gibbered at him even while he

kicked and clawed and yelled and punched, pulling every dirty trick in every book, Christ, but he wasn't strong enough. Bodie was bigger, heavier, more experienced at this kind of fighting. Absurdly, the thought swam quite clearly into Doyle's mind—must remember to tell Bodie that he was right: CI5 training's shit compared to SAS—then he was breathing deeply, struggling for calm, struggling to master the dawning horror of complete loss of control and the sickening knowledge that holymarymotherofgod, Bodie was going to do it, Bodie was going to rape him—

“Oh, yeh, you do that, cunt, you fight me. Like it like that, so go on, fight me. Ah-ah, no knees in the bollocks, that's not nice, sweetheart—”

There was something in the way Bodie said that, something in the tangible excitement of the man that made Doyle realise that Bodie was getting off on the violence and the power and the complete emasculation of his so-called partner. And that Bodie had probably done this before, somewhere, with some other poor bastard, maybe in Africa—

“Yeh, that's it, spread your legs for me. Oh no you don't sunshine, you don't bite me, not unless I ask you to.” Bodie was wild, high on the power and the seeing Doyle like that, the fear in his eyes, the whiteness around his lips, the frantic kicking of his legs. Half their training had gone out the window, he must remember that next time he needed Doyle to watch his back, not that he was going to let Doyle do much more than watch out for him. A vicious swipe of Doyle's leg almost got him, whacking against him hard enough to sting. “I've had enough of this, sweetheart,” he said, kneeling in the small of Doyle's back, holding him down, the gasping pain rasping from Doyle singing sweetly along his cock. One-handed, he fiddled the belt from Doyle's discarded trousers, binding Doyle's wrists together, tying the entire parcel to the central post of the ancient brass bed. Doyle was tossing and turning under him, a gale-tossed sea, but it didn't take much for Bodie to subdue him long enough to grab a shirt and use that to tie one thrashing leg to the bottom of the bed. Three-parts bound, Doyle could do nothing more than glare up at him and shout, invective hurled with deadly accuracy, making Bodie bleed inside

where no-one, absolutely no-one would ever see it. He laughed out loud, the sound startlingly bitter, mocking himself for his own stupid desires, his fond imaginings that it could be different with Ray, that he could trust Ray, that Ray could be the one person in the world he would let inside to honestly know him. Stupid. Nothing but stupid romantic crap, and served him right for falling for it, he told himself, taking his time now, taking a tie out of the bottom of his suitcase, picking up his good leather belt.

He held them both aloft, standing there, Colossus astride a sea of strife, until Doyle shut up and looked at him. “See these?” Bodie asked. “I'm going to use one to finish tying you up and I'm going to use the other one to teach you a lesson.” He smiled then, a very ugly sight to see such a malicious expression on a face that had been growing so close to love. “Can you guess which is which, eh, cunt?” The brown, gold and navy striped tie was dragged caressingly across Bodie's flat belly, the tip tickling at his heavy cock. “D'you think it's this one? Course it is,” he was still smiling, “because this is going to keep that nasty little knee of yours away from the crown jewels, isn't it? And this,” he cracked the belt like a whip, the metallic clunk of the buckle making Doyle flinch away as far as his bindings would let him, “this is going to teach you a few home truths, cunt.”

Pace measured, Bodie approached the bed, capturing Doyle's flailing leg, securing it out of his way. Hands on hips, belt dangling loosely from his right fist, he surveyed his handiwork. “Oh, my, my,” he smirked. “This shall never do!” Delicately, he snaked the belt from his own trousers, knelt astride Doyle to prevent any attempts at rebellion, carefully adding the black belt to the tan one already around Doyle's wrists, lengthening the leash but not loosening it. “There, that's better. Now I've got room enough for what I want to do.”

“What are you going to tell Cowley, eh? Because you're going to have to kill me, Bodie, because if you don't, when you let me go, I'll come after you and kill you, inch by fucking inch. I'll skin you, Bodie. I'll start at your toes and—”

“And the only thing I'm interested in your mouth for is sucking.” One hand on Doyle's throat in tacit threat, Bodie turned around until

his back was to the top of the bed and he could stare down the length of Doyle's beauty. Pillow dipping under his weight, he knelt astride Doyle's head, lowering himself until his balls covered Doyle's mouth the way his hand covered Doyle's windpipe. "Remember that trick Macklin taught you?" he mentioned, quite conversationally. "The one you were so chuffed about? Well, guess what, Ray, I already knew it and if you so much as graze me with your teeth, I'll cut your breath off. Not a pleasant thing to go through, believe me." He wriggled a little, until his balls were separated deliciously by the hard thrust of Doyle's chin, and his arsehole was over Doyle's mouth. "Rim me," he said, rocking back and forth a little. "Stick your tongue up my arse, cunt, and if you do it right, I might not hit you."

Doyle, muted by the pressure of flesh pressing onto him, kept his mouth stubbornly shut, fighting Bodie, fighting his own unenviable self-sabotage, that loathsome part of himself that was telling him that he deserved this, that he was no better than this, that he was only getting his just desserts, vile, disgusting brat that he was. And there was another part of him attacking from the rear, coming up on him in a flanking move, ready to pincer him into defeat: a small part of him wanted this. It craved the abuse, longed for the defeat, was desperate to be owned. It wanted nothing more than to let Bodie do this to him, to lie back and let someone else make all the choices. But it was a small voice, a tiny part that he would not let win. He wouldn't give in, he wouldn't yield, he would stay his own man. So he opened his mouth, and instead of lapping the puckered opening above him, he bit, sinking his teeth into tender flesh.

Bodie roared, rising up from Doyle, turning around and grabbing his jaw in one frighteningly smooth motion. "You stupid little cunt. I was going to let you off without the lesson, but I can see I was too soft-hearted with you. All right, if you can't be worth anything without being taught a lesson, then I'll give you a fucking lesson."

Left-handed, he reached out, retrieved his brown leather belt, brought it up to caress a path over his own hand where it held Doyle, and thence to dally over tightly-clenched lips.

Bodie got to his feet then, and Doyle opened his mouth as if to speak. The whistling crack of

the belt turned the words into breathless gasping as pain whittled through bone and muscle to touch his soul. Doyle writhed helplessly, a red welt thickening the skin across his belly. Bodie's hand raised again, and Doyle tensed, knowing what was coming, dreading it, hating the pain, fearing his own submission to it. Again, the leather came hurtling down, again it cracked against skin, again Doyle managed to hold the scream inside.

"Being brave, are we? We'll soon see about that. I'll have you begging by the time I've finished with you."

Again, and again, the belt rose and fell, and as Bodie raised his arm a fifth time, Doyle yelled. "No, oh, Christ, no, Bodie. Don't hit me again."

Bodie knelt astride him, the tip of the belt tracing the welts it had left. "Are you begging?"

Doyle dragged air into his lungs, his breath catching on the sob in his throat, and he whispered. "Yes. Yeh, I'm begging. Please, Bodie, don't hit me again. I can't take it. Please don't hit me. I'm sorry for biting you, honest, I really am. I won't do it again. Just please don't hit me..."

Triumphant, Bodie stared down at his captive, drinking in the power of his position over Doyle, stroking one wet finger along the red lines left by the force of his belt. "Some things never change, do they, cunt? It's like my da always said. There's two sorts of people in this world: victims and winners. And if you're not a winner, then you're a victim."

Eyes narrowed with pain, Doyle looked up at him, focussing his mind on the conversation as antidote to his body's hurt. "Big man, was he, your dad?"

"Right hard-nut. Everyone was scared of old Andy Bodie, even the local bobbies crossed the street when they saw my dad coming. No-one ever messed Da around the way you messed me about."

"This how your da solved his problems, is that it?"

"Oh, yeh, never failed. Put the boot in, put the head in, if it was one of the blokes wanting to take him down."

"And women? What about the women, eh, Bodie?"

Bodie laughed at him, a grim and unnerving sound. "What's this? Police Manual, Page 96, how to keep psychos talking? Won't wash,

Doyle, not with me it won't. But as you're curious, and as I'm in no hurry..." That last came out as a threat, and made Doyle shy away, trying to twist his body out of Bodie's reach. But all Bodie did was to pin him more tightly, and tap the end of the belt the length of Doyle's cock, the implicit warning making Doyle lie very still and very, very obediently. "Who's a good boy, then? My da never lifted a finger to a woman in his life—apart from my mam, course, but that's different. A man's got a right to keep order in his own house, hasn't he?"

Bodie wrapped his fist around Doyle's cock, a gentle touch that was more frightening than the outright violence, for Doyle had to wait to see what would be coming next, and all the while Bodie was being nice to him, caressing him, turning him on against his will, rewarding him for behaving himself, for giving the power all to Bodie. His heart was pounding, fighting to be free of his chest.

"Oh, yeh," Bodie was speaking again, "it's either victim or winner, isn't it? I'm never going to be a victim again and you'd better get that through your thick skull, Ray." Bodie shook his head, hand tightening, not unpleasantly, around Doyle's cock. "You shouldn't've tried to hurt me with the way you won't let me love you. As if I'm not good enough for you, as if all I'm good for is a fuck in the dark when no-one else would know what you let me do to you." His hand became a fist, and Doyle squirmed, pleasure on the very rim of turning into pain. "You really hurt me, cunt, and I don't like that. I don't like that at all, and I'm not going to let you do that to me any more. D'you hear me? I'm not taking it any more and you're going to have to learn that the hard way."

"Bodie—"

"I've already told you, cunt," Bodie said, voice tender as vicious hand clenched round fragile flesh. "The only thing your mouth is good for is sucking my prick. Open up, baby, oh, that's my boy, open wide..."

He was kneeling over Doyle's face again, leaning down over his body, right hand still locked around Doyle's purpling cock. With a single long, hard thrust, Bodie buried himself in Doyle's mouth, ramming into him with complete disregard to Doyle's comfort. Doyle gagged, choking on the bigness of cock down his throat,

and Bodie laughed, thrusting harder, pushing in deeper, letting the gag reflex massage his cock. "Oh, yeh, I like that," he murmured, closing his eyes, hips pistoning his cock up and down in Doyle's throat. Doyle was thrashing around under him, and Bodie eased up, permitting the other man to breathe.

"Too much for you, am I?" Bodie asked smugly, stroking his wet cock across Doyle's face, sliding it back in between straining lips. He pulled himself all the way out, pushed himself in completely, pubic hair grinding into Doyle's chin, giving himself one more push, fucking Doyle hard. Bodie lifted out a little then, settling into a smooth rhythm, using Doyle's throat for his pleasure, fucking Doyle's face while his right hand pressed between the delicacy of Doyle's balls. He dug his knuckles in, separating the ovals, rubbing hard against the flesh underneath, flattening his palm to roll Doyle's balls, then folding his hand once again, knuckles threatening Doyle's manhood.

"Think I should do this harder?" he asked, fist pressing deep between the fragile testes, the skin pulled so tight it shone. "Or have you learned this lesson, hmm?"

Doyle, with Bodie down his throat and Bodie between his legs, was helpless, unable to answer with more than a mumbling groan. He wanted to pull away, but Bodie wouldn't let him, fist and cock taking command of him. He tilted his pelvis, Bodie's hand sliding down to the rimple of flesh that led from balls to arse, and the sensation of Bodie's hand on him there was incredible. He moaned, and started putting effort into sucking Bodie's cock, no longer a passive throat, now an active partner, feverishly pleasuring Bodie so that the pain could stop and Bodie would keep on doing this wonderfully pleasurable thing to him.

Bodie allowed Doyle his pleasure, content to fuck Doyle's face while the expert throat took him. He could come like this, might, since Doyle was being so sensible, and wonderful, not fighting his own inner nature, and actually accepting both himself and Bodie for what they were. Oh, yes, Bodie thought, he just might come like this, with Doyle's tacit admittance of his own bisexuality. He arched his back, thrusting a bit more deeply into the hot throat, his fingers penetrating Doyle's arse the way

Bodie had penetrated Doyle on many a drunken night. The moan of purest pleasure bled from him, the incredible skill of that sucking mouth sending him soaring.

Only to land, with a thud. He pulled out, hunching himself away from Doyle's wet face, not looking at the shiny smear of saliva and his own pre-cum that surrounded Doyle's swollen lips. "You bastard," he said, when he could speak. "You unmitigated fucking sodding bastard!" he yelled, slapping Doyle, hard, once on the wet face, once there, between his legs, Doyle's hard cock bouncing under the blow and shrinking, shrivelling with the pain. "All this time," Bodie was saying, voice chilled with his inner horror, "all this time, you were leading me a merry dance, weren't you? Down the fucking garden path. Making me wait till you got drunk, playing the straight with me, pretending you had to be plastered until you could overcome your disgust and let me have what you said I needed. But the way you use your mouth—you never learned that when you were lying flat out drunk, did you? Oh, no, that's the mouth of experience, that's the mouth of practice. Who's had you, cunt?" Another slap, and another, rocking Doyle's head back and forth, tied hands and bound feet powerless to defend him.

"Who's had you?"

Doyle was helpless, but he could still be defiant, he could still guard his own truths. He said nothing, refusing to speak, rolling with the blows, tears stinging his eyes every time Bodie hit him. Yet he wouldn't speak. He wouldn't let Bodie win, not on this. But his lip was bleeding from where he'd bit himself to keep the words unspoken.

"Cat got your tongue?" Bodie was asking, stopping the hitting, kneeling beside Doyle. "Funny that, you've usually got something to say. And what's this? No more questions about my past? I'm surprised, cunt, I never thought you'd give in this easily." A swift movement, and his hand was pressed over Doyle's mouth, keeping him silent. "I'll tell you a story, shall I? When I was in Africa, we had a little game we'd play. Sometimes," he paused for a second, lengthening the bindings round Doyle's ankles until Doyle's legs could be bent up higher.

That was when Doyle began to shiver. Being fucked was one thing: what Bodie had in mind

was something else entirely. He considered biting the hand over his mouth, but that would just lead to more pain, more hitting, and then Bodie would fuck him anyway. Fuck? This wasn't fucking, he reminded himself, this was rape. Even if he'd provoked Bodie into it, it was still rape. Struggling, he tried to press his knees together, but two big hands came down on him, shoving them apart, laying him wide open.

"Sometimes we'd play the game with new fellas to the unit," Bodie whispered, running his gun-calloused hands up and down the soft hair of Doyle's inner thighs. "But then there were the times we'd play the game with blokes who were like you—prickteasers, liars, cheats. Anyone who did anything to hurt the unit, we played the game with him. And I," he brought his face down very close to Ray's, so close that his breath soughed against reddened skin, "was the best of all of us. I never lost, cunt, not once. Winners and victims, always the same. And I told you, I'm not going to be your victim any more."

Doyle wanted to scream. He wanted to kill Bodie, or kick him, or hurt him, anything it would take to stop Bodie. "Don't! Oh, dear God, Bodie, don't!"

"Why not? Why the fuck not, you fucking cunt? I'm not doing anything you haven't asked for, am I? And if you don't like it, you've only got yourself to blame, haven't you? So don't you come crying to me, not when it's not my fault." And then Bodie's strong arms were lifting Doyle's legs up out of the way, and he smiled in anticipation.

Bodie was lying on him, hard cock digging into his belly, sliding down, stabbing the tenderness of his balls and then there, threatening arse, and Doyle could feel the scream rise in his throat. "No, oh, no, no, no, no," he said, again and again and again, a litany of denial that moved Bodie not at all. Unless it incited him to even greater powerplays.

"No?" Bodie whispered, grazing Doyle's puckered, tight arsehole with the engorged head of his cock. "No? *You* dare say no to *me*? You haven't learned anything at all then, have you? Well, you can learn from this."

One sundering thrust, and Bodie was in him, hard and burning and huge, fucking him viciously, handsome face contorted into an ugliness of violence inches above Doyle's face.

“Feel that? Feel that, you fucking cunt? Feel how big a man I am? Yeh, you like that, don’t you? Saying no all the time, but all you want is to be on your back with your legs in the air and a real man fucking you solid.” He jolted his hips forward, grunting with the effort, almost lifting Doyle off the bed. “You’re learning, cunt, you’re learning it at last. You belong to me, d’you hear me? You’re mine, and no-one else gets to have you. Just me, and that’s it.” He was sweating, hips forcing his cock farther into Doyle, orgasm clustering sweetly round his cock and nipples and balls. “You’re mine, mine, mine, mine.” The sweat was streaming down his spine now, pooling in the hollows in the small of his back, dripping down onto Doyle.

Burning pain screaming through him, the cutting rod ripping his guts apart, Doyle had a shriek rising in his chest, heart stuttering, all the emotion and sensation twisting together. And then Doyle felt the gathering pleasure in his belly, body’s automatic reactions betraying him again. He didn’t want Bodie inside him, not like this, not in hate and anger and violence. But his cock was ruled by the pressure on his prostate, and Doyle could have wept with humiliation and self-loathing. To be like this, with as little control as a cat on heat, prey to every tom in the area, oh, God, he wanted to die.

Bodie grabbed Doyle by the chin, forcing the averted face around until he could see it, until Doyle had to open his eyes, and Bodie stared into them as he fucked himself deeply into Doyle’s body, cramming himself inside, leaving no room for any awareness but of him. He plucked Doyle’s nipples, pulling them hard, grinning feral pleasure as Doyle trembled under him, and groaning with devout satisfaction as he felt Doyle’s erection stabbing into his belly.

One hand came down to manhandle Doyle’s cock, rubbing his balls hard, thumb pressing into the slitted head, fist tight around the hard heat. “Come, you cunt, go on, I want to see you shoot. Give it to me, let me have it, Ray. You belong to me, and I want it. Let me see you come.”

The voice sundered Doyle’s resistance, Bodie’s consuming desire defeating him, his will lost in the onslaught of terror and abuse and need. Every muscle in body went taut, his spine an arc of pleasure, his eyes filled with the

overwhelming sight of Bodie curled above him, face stripped bare by his need for Doyle. Staring into those blue eyes, Doyle let himself be fucked, let Bodie own him, possess him. Wished his arms free, that he could hug Bodie close. He pushed down on the cock impaling his guts, and the pleasure sang through him, as Bodie’s face twisted with the ecstasy of being inside him, and Doyle knew that same sweet delight, orgasm sweeping through him.

Snow-white cum exploded onto his blurring hand, and Bodie gave a shout of triumph. He wrapped himself the more tightly around Doyle, semen slick and slippery on their bellies, and gave himself over to sensation, shuddering into exquisite climax, his semen spurting from him, emptying his balls, emptying his aching soul into Doyle.

Cold. He was cold, shivering, the draught from the open door catching him full on the back. Drowsily, he shifted, only then remembering Doyle. “You must be bloody stiff, poor lamb,” he said, planting tiny kisses all over Doyle’s wet face. “Let me undo you, get you under the covers, hmm, love? Be nice, that, won’t it?”

Capable hands undid bindings gone tight in the throes of struggle and passion, those same hands growing gentle as they soothed circulation back into wrists marked red by the gnaw of leather. “Oh, look at you!” Bodie murmured, licking at the marks, caressing Doyle’s tenderised skin with his tongue. “You really shouldn’t do this to yourself, should you, Ray? Oughtn’t to make me so angry like that. It’s not healthy, Ray, it really isn’t.”

Bodie was undoing Doyle’s feet now, pulling covers down out of the way, until Doyle was lying, limp, exhausted, green eyes staring emptily at Bodie, awaiting his cue. It was an odd sensation, as if he were the eye of a tornado, such calm in the midst of such destructive, chaotic nightmare. He supposed he should fight Bodie, argue with him, kick him in the balls for what he’d done. But then again, he had asked for it, he was sure of that. Bodie could be a headstrong bastard, but he was basically a decent bloke: not someone who’d go around hurting other people if they hadn’t asked for it, was he? The electric blanket had made the bed all toasty and cosy, and he let himself relax into it, pillow soft under

his head, Bodie's strong arms moving him here, and here. He was sleepy, sleepier than he'd ever been before in his life, and all he wanted to do was curl up in this cocooned warmth that Bodie was creating for him, and sleep.

"Wore you out, did I, love?" Bodie whispered to him, draping the heavy blankets over their tangled limbs. "Not surprised, little tiger that you are. You really love it, don't you, Ray? Yeh, that's it, get yourself comfy, that's my boy." He enveloped the smaller body, stroking its hurts, smoothing its bruises, kissing away its tears. "But don't make me do it to you again, Ray, there's a good boy. I don't like hurting you, but sometimes, you leave me so that there's nothing else I can do. Cept leave you—"

"No!" Doyle was struggling up through the cotton clouds of sleep, fighting that obscene thought: a life without Bodie, unbearable, unendurable. He'd do anything to avoid that, anything to make Bodie happy... "Don't leave me. Just tell me what to do, tell me what you want—"

"Shh, shh," Bodie pressed tiny kisses to Doyle's forehead, soft caresses closing Doyle's eyes, tender kiss sealing his mouth. "It's all right, I'm not leaving you. As long as you don't pull any more crap, it'll be all right. Shh, I've forgiven you, you've got nothing to worry about. Just go to sleep, go to sleep..."

"Don't leave me..."

"I won't. I won't ever leave you, Ray. Sleep..."

With the loving gentleness of that voice and those hands cradling him in security, Doyle gave in to the surcease of sleep, so relieved to have Bodie still with him, so glad that Bodie hadn't left, so proud that Bodie loved him enough to force him to see how wrong he'd been.

As Doyle grew heavy in his arms, Bodie slowed his kisses, slowed his stroking hands, gave himself over to watching his Ray, examining every feature in a new light, memorising every inch of his lover. He'd been telling the truth, when he'd said it would be all right. As long as Ray did as he ought and didn't try to reck their relationship with any of his denial shit, everything would be all right. His hand found the rippled welt left by his belt, and as Bodie fell asleep, he was smiling.

He wasn't sure what had woken him up.

City-bred as he was, perhaps it was the utter silence outside, so that the heart beating behind him was deafeningly loud. Eyes wide in the dark, Doyle lay looking out the bedroom door, at the hall window that was close enough for him to see the night outside, but distant enough for all the details to be indistinct, all of the world blurred into snowy fuzziness. The snow seemed to be falling so quickly, such a thick, meandering cascade, piling up in the corners of the window panes, that Doyle was sure they would end up snowbound. They'd be stuck here for God knew how long, just the two of them, nowhere for him to go, no-one for him to see. Just Bodie.

The arm draped across his waist tightened, Bodie gathering him close even in sleep, and for a moment, Doyle resisted. But then Bodie muttered something irritable under his breath, shifting sharply, and Doyle felt himself go still and passive despite the rebellion his conscious mind was crying. He should get up and go, he knew he should. Even if all he did was go to the toilet or to the kitchen for a bite to eat, he should get up and move, and snap at Bodie if Bodie woke and complained.

That's what he should do. He knew, intellectually, morally, that he should face Bodie for what Bodie had done. He knew, again, in his mind and by his code of ethics, that he'd done not a damn thing to deserve what Bodie had done to him. But there was a voice inside him telling him that he did deserve it. After all, hadn't he been having fantasies about Bodie taking care of him and making all his decisions for him? About Bodie taking his independence away and keeping it safe for him? Only the benefits, none of the penalties, that's what he'd been after. Greedy. Selfish. Liar. So he shouldn't cry because he got his lumps as well as all Bodie's goodness, should he? Bodie had only been trying to make him see light. All right, so it wasn't exactly a good way to make anyone see the light—but what other means had he left Bodie, he asked himself. Plus, he ought to be ashamed of himself for driving a man like Bodie to violence...

And knew it all for the rationalisation it was. Driving a man like Bodie to violence? he sneered to himself. Bodie was a man who had lived his entire life by violence, and most of it by choice.

No-one had forced Bodie to be a gun-runner, or a merc, nor even a member of Her Majesty's Armed Forces. No, it was always Bodie's choice. He'd even joined CI5, the most violent of the non-military security forces Doyle knew all the studies, had read all the reports, knew all the statistics. But still, he swept the truth under the metaphoric carpet, going back to look at what he'd done that had provoked Bodie so.

The sky was beginning to lighten in the distant window when Doyle felt Bodie stirring awake behind him. The right thing to do would be to get up from this bed and never let Bodie victimise him again. The right thing to do would be to walk out and retrieve his hard-won independence. The right thing was to run from this hellward twisting gyre as quickly as his feet could take him. Anything, but lie here and listen to Bodie's sweet words, letting the love and affection erase the violence and the violation.

He should get up and walk away. He knew

he should. But instead, he turned around in the circle of Bodie's arm, and smiled to please Bodie. Blue eyes glinted desire at him and his own shaky happiness was buttressed by that measure of approval. He'd do anything to keep Bodie happy and loving him. And it wasn't as if Bodie was going to make a habit of hurting him, was it? he tried to convince himself. Bodie was a good bloke, last night had just got out of hand, and who's fault had that been? No, he was better prepared now, he could keep Bodie happy. Words of love and praise were being whispered to him, and he did as he was bid. He'd talk to Bodie about last night—but later. When Bodie wouldn't be upset by him getting out of line. Anything to keep Bodie happy. Anything to keep Bodie with him. Anything. He opened his mouth to Bodie's tongue and his legs for Bodie's cock, drifting off on this morning's love.

And knew himself to be lost.

LITTLE DOYLE

23rd December

Been a while since last I got down to doing this, hasn't it? Still, it's not surprising, what with one thing another. It's been a bit busy on the job, even busier off it—haven't even seen Bodie since yesterday, although he's coming round at lunchtime with the Christmas tree and booze he says. But between Cowley and Bodie, I haven't had a minute to myself—and that's probably why the year's flown past. Christ, it's incredible. A whole, entire year for me and Bodie now. I wouldn't have given us a month, not with my record with people, but Bodie's got the patience of a saint, the way he puts up with my rotten temper. As Mum always said, I'm a moody bastard and a right pain—especially first thing in the morning. Or like yesterday, when I hadn't had any lunch, not a drop since half a cup of tar the cheeky git in the café was passing off for tea—which reminds me, Murphy and McCabe owe me for for the curry night before last—I was a proper bastard yesterday. And what did Bodie do? Smiled at me and tried to make me laugh. Course, he got

a bit broody as the day wore on, but that was my fault, really. But there's not a snowball's that I'm going to let him feel me up in public like that, pinching my bum in front of half the squad. Just not on, not a bit of it. Still, he looked as if his pet parrot had died when I gave him a look for it. I really felt like a cad of the old school when he did that, but what else was I supposed to do? Mind, I know he can't resist my arse when I'm wearing those trousers and no pants under them.

I suppose I should stop and think about that, shouldn't I? It's what this diary's always been about, thinking things through, getting things down on paper. Everything always seems a lot clearer after I've got it all organised on paper. So, why do I wear clothes like that to work when I know how Bodie's going to react to them? That's an easy one to answer, dead easy. It's what proves to me that he still loves me. Oh, he's always saying it, very affectionate is my Bodie, even if I nearly fell over in shock the first time he brought me flowers. But it's not the same when it's something for Valentine's Day or my birthday. Those're always pre-set, you expect some

something then—leastways, I always do, and Bodie always takes care of me. But if he can't keep his mind off me even when we're working—Christ, I've seen Bodie step over a dead body and not notice it because we're in the middle of a situation, but even then—maybe *especially* then, still waters run deep—he can't keep from feeling me up. It's as if it reassures him, same way he *needs* a good cuddle if a job's gone wrong, or if I've been an absolute bastard to him and we're making up after. Now *that's* something that happens often enough, but I must admit, I'm getting better. I'm finally learning what sets Bodie off, what really gets right up his nose, and what scares the shite out of him. Making him think I'm going to leave him is top of the list for all of *that*. I could've killed Cowley for sending me after that girl. You should've seen poor Bodie's face. Worst was the night I came tearing back to his flat—job was just finished, I'd reported in to Cowley and the old sod had given me the rest of the day off at *seven* at night, mark you—anyway, I wasn't thinking. All I wanted to do was get home to Bodie, try to explain it all away to him. I was desperate for him to tell me that it was all still all right between us. So like the stupid fucking idiot I am when it comes to people—I'm a fucking genius when it comes to crowds and strangers, I mean, Gandhi's got nothing on *me* when I get started, but I've got about as much finesse and tact as Hitler with the people I really care about—I come haring over to Bodie's without even ringing him up first. Do I stop to have a wash first? Oh, no, not me. Do I even run a flannel over my face to get rid of her bloody pink lipstick? Oh, no, not me, that's too clever by half for me when I'm in a hurry to have Bodie fall at my feet. I thought he was going to *kill* me that night—came perilously fucking close, I can tell you. He's a big lad, is my Bodie, especially when he's in a temper. I couldn't even hit him back, and not just because Bodie hates it when I do that. He was so—Christ, the poor bastard was almost in tears. *Bodie*, this far from bawling his eyes out like a baby, and he kept on saying it over and over again, about how I had her smell on me, and how he could see where I'd been kissing her, and how much I must've enjoyed it. Knew better than to lie to him, because although he went spare when he got me to admit it, he'd've blown his stack completely if

I'd lied to him. But that was the last big fight we've had, thank God, I honestly thought I'd fucked things up permanently after that, but then he calmed down, and he came over and he took me to bed and made love to me as if his heart was breaking for belting me. That's Bodie for you, isn't it? I'm the one who fucks up, I'm the one who makes him angry, and what does he do? Forgives me, that's what. I'd never forgive *him* for doing half the things I've done. I bear grudges, *long* grudges, but Bodie blows up and then that's it, over and done and forgotten. Christ, I'm fucking lucky to have him. There aren't many who would put up with me, I can tell you. In fact, before Bodie, there wasn't one. I know a lot of brothers and sisters don't get on very well, but me and my brother—Mum used to threaten throwing both of us out of the house, the way we used to fight. It was him who gave me my beautiful new cheekbone, and all I'd done to *him* was pinch his girlfriend from him. Didn't even fancy her, just wanted to prove to Steven that I could take anything of his that I wanted to. Charming, right? Still, breaking my cheekbone was a bit much, even if it was an accident and he'd never meant me to hit my face on the fireplace. I remember him punching me, and I can still remember seeing that fucking mantle getting closer and closer and me not being able to stop myself. Next thing I remember is waking up in hospital, my face feeling as if my head had exploded, and enough bandages wrapped round me I looked like a fucking mummy. When they took the bandages off, mind, I wished I was the invisible man. Course, it looks better since they put the plastic in and cleaned the scar up, but it's still as ugly as sin. Fits in with the rest of me, really, not that I'd ever let Bodie hear me say that. He caught me in front of the mirror one night, loved me half to death after. I thought he'd gone in for his bath, so there I am, standing there stark bollocks naked, looking at myself in the mirror, trying to work out what the fuck a handsome big bastard like Bodie would want someone like me for. I mean to say, I've got skinny hairy little legs—for that matter, I'm hairy all over, can still remember my first serious love affair nearly screaming when I finally got her into bed and she got her hands on all that 'peach fuzz' as Bodie calls it—and I've got hips that are too narrow, a barrel chest from

all that smoking when I was a kid, scars all over the place from the job, a head of hair that looks like something the cat wouldn't want to drag in if I don't have it permed, crooked teeth, funny-looking eyes and of course, my lovely cheekbone. D'you know what they put on my file at the hospital? *Permanent facial disfigurement*, that's what, and they were right. It's the first thing you see when you look at me—but Bodie swears blind that I'm just being a complete pillock when I say that. Anyway, that night I thought he was soaking the attentions of our dearly beloved Herr Wenderheim away, turns out he'd forgotten a towel or something. And then when he sees me standing there looking miserable—Christ, I don't know how I managed to land someone like Bodie. He made love to me—he even kissed my fucking *toes*! Claimed they were beautiful. Now how's that for besotted? It's things like that that make me put up with his temper and his jealousy. I mean, it's a bit unreasonable for me to expect him to adore me and put up with my faults and then do a fainting fraülein because the only thing he ever does wrong is lose his temper. And even then, I usually have to push him really hard to get him to *that* stage.

But I am learning, which isn't surprising after a year with him. If I didn't know who was boss behind closed doors, I'd probably agree with a certain someone who thinks Bodie's a fool to put up with the way I treat him. I still maintain that Murphy's just jealous—I know for a fact that he's offered Bodie sex on any terms Bodie fancies. Waste of breath, that. Bodie's not going to leave me, not for someone who's all sweetness and light like Murphy. But Murphy and half the people I know go weak at the knees if Bodie so much as *smiles* at them. But he's mine, and he's always going to be mine. Doesn't take much to get his attention back if he looks like his eyes are straying. All I have to do is go out without any underwear on, or wear one of those t-shirts he likes me in instead of one of my old checked shirts. And if I *really* want to bring Bodie back in close to me, I can put on that necklace he bought me to replace the one that got broken that night, or the bracelet I lost. It's not just the jewellery of course, not even when those're as close to a ring we can come. It's the *memories* that come with them. That bracelet was after we came as near as

spit to splitting up, and the necklace was his way of saying sorry after he'd gone a bit over the top for something I hadn't done. That's one of the things I like best about Bodie—he's never backwards about coming forwards if he's fucked up. Even if it's not his fault, he usually takes the blame—after he's calmed down, of course. Gets a bit hot under the collar if he thinks I've had an attack of the wandering hands.

Christ, look at the time! He'll be home soon, and if he keeps his threat, he'll be bringing home the biggest Christmas tree in London, and I wouldn't put it past him to nick the big one in Trafalgar Square either. I was supposed to be doing my diary to work out if I should stay with him or not, but I've already answered that, haven't I? I know if Ross knew about him doing me over once in a while, she'd say it's me reliving what I learned as a child, but that's just so much crap. What does she know? I put up with Bodie's temper not because of what she calls my 'damaged self-esteem' that she claims was caused by a childhood of everyone knowing I was my mother's bastard because I looked like my dad's best mate instead of him. I got used to that a long time ago—had to, didn't I? Bodie understands about that, a bloody sight fucking better than Ross does, the unfeeling frigid bitch. In fact, me and him understand each other better than anyone else ever could. See, it could be *me* flying off the handle all the time, only it'd be worse then, because I'd be going for him if he so much as showed a twitch of interest round someone else. Bodie and me're two sides of the same coin, and I know why he does it, and I'd rather it was him than me. I don't have his self-control, and I don't forgive and forget. Him being this strong with me, him being so—I don't know, it's almost as if he's the one who gives me limits sometimes and actually lets me *know* when I'm getting out of line. No-one else's ever cared that much before, they've always just let me away with everything and then walked out when they couldn't put up with it any more. But not my Bodie. He pulls me up short when I start, and I think that's what's kept us together for *twelve fucking months*. I never thought we could last that long, but Bodie's the one who's glued us together, although I've done my share too, a bit. I've learned how to keep him happy, I've stopped winding him up just for the sake of proving how

big a man I am—Christ, I must’ve been fucking impossible to put up with at first. How he did it, I’ll never know. Well, that’s not true, it’s just that I still find it a bit hard to believe sometimes, which is why I still push him sometimes until he loses his rag. He’s always so incredibly loving after that I can actually believe that someone—that *he*—honestly does love me as much as he says he does. And it’s getting better all the time. He *never* gets angry any more unless I ask for it, so I’ve got nothing to complain about, have I?

Bloody hell, I forgot the time! He’ll be home in half an hour, and I still haven’t got the lunch on or the bathroom cleaned—tidy bastard, is my Bodie, worst thing about him—and after the way I was yesterday, he’s going to be really pissed off with me for giving him a showing up in public like that. I’ll put on that green t-shirt he gave me, and the tight trousers he loves, and the necklace—

After yesterday, that’s not going to do the trick, is it? Think I’d better greet him with nothing but the necklace and a smile. Get him straight into bed. He always likes it when I do that, says it makes him feel that I love him as much as he loves me—and best of all, of course, is that he’d forgive me bugging the entire England squad if I take him to bed and beg him to fuck me. It’s funny, how important I am to him—never thought I’d ever be the centre of the Universe for anyone, especially not Bodie. Christ, I used to think he was so self-contained and smug, didn’t I? That first holiday we had in Wales together opened my eyes for me though, that’s dead bloody sure. I was so fucking scared of him and me as well, but now—it’s hard to even remember what we used to be like before that Christmas. I

know I’ve changed, I’m a lot more comfortable with who I am now. Needing Bodie doesn’t worry me the way it used to, not when he’s proved how much I can trust him and how safe I am with him. In fact, it’s a fucking relief to have someone I can actually let make the decisions once in a while, and I can do that with Bodie, because he never makes me feel like a sissy when I do. In fact, it’s when I let him lead and take the decisions for both of us that he lets me fuck him. Lovely that, makes me feel—I don’t know, sounds stupid, but I feel like a fucking superhero, as if I could take on the world and win. Christ, but I’ve got it bad, haven’t I? Should count myself lucky that it was someone as decent as Bodie that I fell for. Even if he *does* lose his temper—and after yesterday, there’s not much else he can do, is there? But even if he does go round the bend, I know it’s only because he loves me as much as he does, poor bugger. But I think I will meet him at the door bollocks-naked—always makes him happy, that. Then it’ll be up to him what comes next, but at least I’ll’ve shown willing, won’t I? And we’ve actually got time off from now until Boxing Day, so it’s not as if we have to hurry to get the house all decked out for Christmas—we can always do the tree and all the decorating after. And if I’m right, and unless I fucked everything up yesterday, I have a sneaking suspicion that he’s planning to ask me to move in with him. And on that happy note, I better get the lunch on before he gets home, else he’ll be too busy shouting for anything else, and I want him today. Thank Christ he wants me just as much, even if I don’t understand what he sees in me.

SNOWBOUND

OR

A TALE OF TWO SITUATIONS



Snowbound is one of those pieces that grew unpredictably and in a controversial direction. Originally it was meant to be a moderate tale of sado-masochism, one of the Glaswegian's 'particular perversions'. However, after the first draft was done, M. Fae decided to discard it as a lie. She felt it was too politically correct and not the way the characters wanted to go. So back to the keyboard to begin again. There are now two separate versions and the reader will have to make a choice of what and how much of each to read. This is a warning: the story M. Fae wanted to write consists of Nobody's Fault, It Was..., ...the Worst of Times, and Little Doyle. Read these four pieces if you do not mind rape presented without apology. If you do not wish to read a strong rape story, then read the alternate series which has no rape: Nobody's Fault, It Was..., ...the Best of Times. And stop. If you intend to read both versions, then please do so in the correct order and at different times. Everything all at once would be too overwhelming and would make little sense.

NOBODY'S FAULT

I've always wanted to be a soldier, for as long as I can remember. I think it was because when I was really small, I used to think King Arthur's Knights were soldiers, and every family back then had someone who went to war and never came back. Those were the blokes everyone had a good word for, you know, the

old 'never speak ill of the dead' bit, but I didn't know about that then: I just thought that soldiers—all the men who went away to fight were soldiers to me, whether they flew 'planes or sailed around in huge great big ships—all soldiers, were these wonderful people everyone loved and respected. So I suppose it's not sur-

prising that I wanted to be a soldier when I grew up. Better than being a riveter like my da, that was bloody certain. I can still remember him coming in at night, and you could smell the shipyards and the sweat off him. He was a big man, my da, and you know how when you go back as an adult, most people and things aren't half the size you thought they were when you were a kid? Well, my da were just as big. When I was small, I remember how it hurt the back of my neck to look up at him, and one of the first things I remember really clearly is him picking me up and swinging me as high as the ceiling. It made me dizzy and turned the world into something strange and bizarre and frightening: I shivered, absolutely terrified, when I looked down and could see the dust lying on the curve of the ceiling lightbulb. Funny how something like that can scare a kid, but it made me feel as if everything was all topsy-turvy and nothing made sense, like Alice through the looking-glass (which I moaned about when my mam tried to read it to me: my big brother always called it a sissy book and even if I didn't know what 'sissy' was, I knew it was something bad, like Fenian.). But Da had this great laugh, bigger than him, and when I was sitting on his lap, if he laughed at something on the wireless, I'd shake and shake with him laughing so hard, and I loved it. It was grand when he laughed, and I used to think about it after, when I was in bed at night, after I'd said my prayers and Mam had given me my kiss.

Then I'd think about what Da looked like, those round scars pockmarking his skin, little spots where the hair didn't grow any more, white dots that were so smooth when I moved the black hair on his forearm out of the way. I was fascinated by them, loved them and how soft they felt, until I realised that the ugly purple and black burns were what those pretty white spots started out like, part and parcel of being a riveter. Not that you ever heard him complain about it my da, not once.

I can still love my da when I think of him like that, and I can even understand him, now that I'm older myself, those nights he came in like a bear with a sore head, so bad-tempered he'd shout if anyone one of us tried to climb into his lap or get him to help with the homework. He had a hard job, and money was always on the

scarce side, and these days I know how hard it is to be responsible for other peoples' lives. So I can understand the nights when he came in tired and fed up. Friday nights are different, though. That's something I can't get past, and Friday nights were probably the reason I decided to actually do something about becoming a soldier instead of dreaming about it the way my mates dreamed about being football stars or pop singers. I was never sure if it was spite or genuine Faith that made my mum do it—and she wasn't the type you could ask, believe me—but every Friday night without fail, she'd make fish for tea. Every single Friday, like the good Catholic she was, and every single Friday, my da would come in late, and there it'd be in the oven between two plates—this is in the days before tin foil, of course, and we never had enough spare brass for take-away—dried up fish, boiled potatoes gone grey or yellowish or brown round the edges, peas that had started to dry out and harden. And that's when he'd start. First thing, he'd yank the plate out of the oven, slam it onto the kitchen table, and then he'd be f'ing and blinding all over the place. My mam'd hush all of us children, shooing us upstairs, but he'd be shouting at us as well, words and names that we didn't understand, but we knew it was all to do with the only thing they ever fought about. Funny isn't it? All my mates had families who had fights and aggro, and I always just lumped my family in the with them. It never even dawned on me till I was about ten that not everyone had an Irish Catholic mum and a Glaswegian Protestant dad (or Fenian and Proddy dog, which is what we'd hear when the fight'd start on Friday night) and that was what they argued about instead of money or him drinking or all the other crap that went on in my pal's houses. But anyway, we never went to Church, Mam'd leave us with the woman next door and go to the Church for early morning Mass just after Dad'd left for the yard during the week, but she was always going and complaining that she couldn't take us, and he'd always be complaining that she was still going to that 'Papist cludgie' and doing it behind his back. Later on, I'd understand a bit more about the strifes and strains of inter-religious marriage, but when I was a kid, all I knew was that Mam made fish on a Friday when all the other

neighbours were having liver or stew or sausages and that Da always went berserk when he saw it.

The drinking didn't help either, I suppose. He'd always go 'just for a few' or 'a wee bevvy' before he'd come home on Fridays. Never a whole pay-packet, mind, but enough to make him unsteady on his feet—there used to be a big dirty mark on the door lintel of the kitchen where he always stumbled into when he half-fell over the old-fashioned doorsill—and spoiling for a fight. He'd start off shouting, and she'd shout back, then he'd shout louder, and she'd get quieter, and we'd all be crowded together at the top of the stairs, listening. My big brother, and I remember this as far back as when I was too young to say his name properly and used to call him 'Bimmy' instead of Jimmy, he'd gather us three younger ones all together and put his arms around us and hold us together. My sister, Peggy, she'd always start crying, but Fiona never did. Not once, no matter what anyone ever did, our Fiona never shed a tear. She'd stroke my hair, petting me like a cat, when the arguing downstairs started getting scary, which was when Dad would be shouting at the top of his lungs and Mam would be so quiet it was as if she didn't exist any more.

That was the scariest, because we all knew what was coming next, and when the hitting actually started, it was almost a relief for us, because then it had happened, which meant that it would end, which was better than waiting for him to start and wondering if he'd come upstairs with his belt and take it out on us. But I suppose that's what helped me turn into such a loner as well: Jimmy'd be holding us together, and we'd all be hanging on tightly to each other, but as soon as we heard that first hit, we'd start to slowly unravel. It wouldn't even be physical at first, but I could feel it, even when I was really small. Most of all when I was little, I suppose. After a while, I learned how not to feel anything at all when it started, so that in a few years, all I'd think when the shouting started was a sort of boredom, a wish that they'd get it over and done with and shut up so that I could read or listen to the wireless. When I was really young—couldn't have been more than three, because I had my very first pair of big-boy flannel pyjamas on and the piping hadn't been picked off from the top of the pocket yet—I remember being the last one

left at the top of the stairs, watching the twisting shadows on the hall wall with a sickened, petrified fascination. I'd still be there, sometimes, when Dad would come stumbling up the stairs, and pick me up and hug me and tell me how much he loved me. He'd always start crying then, great big fat tears rolling down his face. And I'd feel sorry for him, and I'd love him, and I'd hate him at the same time for what he did to my mum.

Don't suppose it's really surprising that I grew up without the faintest idea how to have a good relationship with a woman. But on the other hand, Jim's happily married, so's Peggy. It's just me and Fiona who don't get close to people, not even each other. We're very alike, me and her. We even look similar, two peas in a pod Mam used to say. I was really shocked when she showed up at Dad's 60th birthday party—until I heard some of the barbed little poison remarks she kept on making to Dad. Fiona has a way with words: you ought to hear her when she gets started. Poor Da didn't know what'd hit him. I wasn't surprised though, especially not when I asked her why she'd shown up and it was for the same reason I did: she hated the old bastard, loved him a bit too, and she never wanted to have it on her conscience that she'd abandoned him. Hell's bells, I went to see him twice in the past six months, how's that for filial guilt?

I suppose it's not really true, though. As I get older, the memories lose a bit of their sting and I understand him a bit more. I'm not sure I like that: sometimes I hear myself saying something that could've come right from his mouth. But I wouldn't hit someone the way he did. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not a bully. I'm not saying I'm a Lord Longford either, mind—I've been known to enjoy a fight or two in my day. I won't hesitate if some bloke looks like he's out for trouble. I put the boot in and that's him taken care of, isn't it? But it's when I get so fucking impatient with people being stupid, that's when I hear my da's voice coming out my mouth. And as I said, every year I get older, I see more of my da in me. Normal that, though, isn't it? We all do that, don't we? You grow up ashamed of your parents or hating them, and then one day, you look in the mirror and guess who's looking back at you.

I was a bit upset when my da died, but I still

don't think there's any need for me to be stuck in here writing all this down on pieces of paper. I'm only going to tear them up after, aren't I? No chance I'm going to let anyone else see this—especially not that Doctor Ross woman. Sharp as a tack and twice as cold, that woman. I think she's frigid. Well, she'd have to be, wouldn't she? Not a flicker from her when either me or Doyle walks in, and women always go for at least one of us. But not our Ross. All she does is sit there, cool as a cucumber, making notes. She won't be making any notes from any of this stuff, that's dead bloody certain.

Funny, isn't it, how much I miss my da? If you'd asked me before he died, I'd've said I mainly hated the rotten old sod, but now... I don't know. He had a few good ideas, I admit that. And he did love us, I never doubted that. Even when he'd been hitting Mam, he'd always come in to me and kiss me and cuddle me till I fell asleep. Sometimes he'd tickle me, and there I'd be, laughing my head off, knowing that no-one else got that from him. Course, the other side of that was that I was the one who bore the brunt of it when Mam didn't. I was about eight, I suppose, or perhaps seven, when he started taking his belt to me on a Friday night instead of hitting Mam. I can remember lying in bed, waiting for him to come home—his drinking got worse, and he'd started not coming home on a Friday till closing time—and lying there terrified, my heart pounding, waiting and waiting for him to come upstairs. It was the same as when I was really small: the anticipation was the worst bit. Once the hitting started, it got better. You see, after a while, you get to the stage where you don't even feel it any more. But I wasn't

stupid enough to let my da know that, was I? Didn't want him to start taking the belt to my legs instead of my bum. And the hitting never lasted that long, but afterwards, he'd cuddle me, and he'd bring my present out of his pocket. As long as I realised that I'd done something wrong—and I was a right rotten brat, no two ways about it—then after he'd punished me, he always made sure I knew how much he loved me.

Not much else I can say, is there? My da was a bastard, I know that, but he was also the only father I had and that man loved me. So it makes sense to me that I got a bit tangled there over whether I should cry my eyes out or dance on his grave. And it's not as if it's anybody's fault that he was the way he was, is it? I mean, he'd had a hard life—if you thought my da was a hard-nut, you should've met my Granda! Da had four kids to feed and clothe and house and a wife who never forgave him for not converting. It wasn't as if he ever did us any real damage either, is it? A bit of a belting never did anyone any harm—like my mam said, spare the rod and spoil the child. It's just that my dad applied that rule to his wife as well as his children. But you have to give credit where credit's due as well, he kicked us all hard enough that we've all done something with our lives.

Right. I've had it. Pubs open in half an hour and Doyle owes me grub. So you can consider this 'verbalisation exercise' over and done with. And I'm going to burn every last page before I leave this room. Nobody's business but mine, and nobody's fault that my family wasn't perfect. And Ross can stick that in her pipe and smoke it.

IT WAS...

A surreality of snow and sky ensconced them, nuances of white and grey and silver numbing into an endless shadow of light, coruscating endlessly, until the road grew steeper and the rimpling fields became hills and finally, exultantly, mountains. Chester was far behind them, and in the car, they were warm, safe, protected by the illusion of steel strength

rushing them on towards cosy destination. The road was far from endless, disappearing around corners only to reappear again, briefly, to hide its biting blackness behind the softness of wintering hills. Despite the heater curling warmth around his toes, Bodie had a red tartan travelling rug wrapped tightly around him, only his pale forehead and dark hair showing in rumpled

sleep. Whistling, almost softly, imbrued by the greetings card fairy-tale world he was driving through, Doyle sat behind the wheel, eyes bright and alert, hands and feet quick and deft as he drove them along the unintentional viciousness of the mountain roads.

Festive song whistled almost under his breath, precisely the perfect tune for a man bent on convincing himself that all was well in his world and that he mustn't grumble and had lots to be happy about. He was, he thought to himself, sparing a glance at the snoring lump beside him, quite happy. Content, almost, or as much so as he could ever be. All his worries and woes had been deliberately and painstakingly sloughed, snake-like, for this holiday: he was determined that nothing, but most especially not himself, was going to spoil it this time. As if waiting to be discovered by Hollywood, a prettily snow-festooned sign glimmered at him: not far to Llanfairvechan and cosy cottage now. A slight skidding of the wheels stopped both his musing and his whistling, then yet another bend in the road was past them, and he could see the village at the bottom of the hill, and there, a vague sliver of dark amidst the dotting blackness of fallow trees, the road that sidewound its way up to the holiday cottage they had rented.

They'd reached the crossroads, with its never-quite bustle of bus stop, garage, pub and shop. The pub looked appealing, but only for the convenience of the booze, and he was more anxious to settle into a nice warm house than wet his whistle amidst the dotting of hostile natives they'd find in there. The village was of the sort usually labelled picturesque, but the locals never thought of it that way, seeing it only as a collection of homes, of the spot where old Thomas the butcher had his heart attack in the street Easter Sunday, or where young Glynnis was caught lifting her skirt just to annoy that foreign Vicar here on holiday from Cheltenham. But to Doyle, it was a place out of myth or Dickens, and as he stretched from the confinement of the car, he half-expected to see waifs pressing their noses up against the bakery window.

He laughed to himself: if he wanted to see that, all he'd have to do is waken Bodie up. He glanced into the car, to meet one blue eye peering at him enquiringly over the woollen blanket.

"D'you want to come with me or stay in the car?" Doyle asked, knowing the answer, but asking just on the off-chance that Bodie might choose to stir himself.

The blue eye simply closed again, and the lump slid a little lower in the seat.

"Lazy bugger," Doyle muttered, meaning it. Usually it was Bodie who did all this donkey work, but Doyle had been the one to draw the short straw this time round, by dint of Bodie having had a slightly nastier time on their last case than Doyle himself had had. Sourly, he pulled his collar up to meet his curls, tucked his scarf in a bit more tightly, and went off to brave the natives.

The leaded glass of the door glowed romantically at him, heat hit him, and then all the bright conversation died and all the faces turned towards him were uniformly blank and unfriendly. He smiled politely, nodded a hello, and then the conversations started up again. In Welsh, pointedly and rudely, definitively shutting him out, ostracising him for the unwelcome foreigner he was. Shrugging, too accustomed to holidays in Wales to bother about the traditional local reaction to the current English invasion, he wandered over to the shelves, beginning to gather the mountain of food he'd need to keep Bodie fed and happy.

Eventually, it was his turn, if only because the last customer had left, calling out what Doyle assumed were goodbyes to Ruth the shopowner. The woman who sneered at him from behind the counter even unbent enough to speak to him in English when communication was truly unavoidable. Perhaps it was the amount of money he spent, but the brazen leer he got made him think it might have been his tight denims which made her go so far as to give him a genuinely sturdy box to pack all the purchases in. Laden, acutely aware of hostility mixing with lust at his rear, Doyle made it out to the car, dumping the box in the boot, carrying the clanking plastic bag of booze in to be placed carefully behind his own drivers seat. Bodie mumbled at him and Doyle dunted him one on the shoulder. "Oi, mate, you'd better stir yourself. Is that the right road for the house?"

"How would I know?" Bodie muttered, pulling the cosy blanket up over his head, muffling his voice even more. "Never been here before."

“Thought you said—”

“I said I’d stayed round here a couple of times before, but that doesn’t mean I know every fucking house in Gwynneth, does it? Christ, Doyle, why don’t you go and ask for directions for once in your life?”

“Thanks a lot, mate. Much appreciated. However would I manage without you?”

Bodie, eloquently, snored.

Doyle slammed the door shut, rocking the car, and stormed off back into the shop. “‘Scuse me,” he said, glad that it was just him and the owner in amongst the tins and the packets and the rolls of toilet paper. “Em, I feel a bit stupid about this—”

Not bothering to even pretend to see him as anything more than a nicely packed pair of jeans and a pretty pair of green eyes, she said: “Yes, well, you would do, wouldn’t you, boyo?”

Ruefully, Doyle conceded the point, deciding not to notice the way she was undressing him with a lascivious stare. “My mate—he’s in the motor—forgot to bring the map and the directions with him, so I was wondering if you could, you know, tell me how to get to the rental cottage.”

“And which rental cottage would that be that you’re talking about? There’s all rental cottages round here, what with all the English coming in and buying everything in sight. Forcing the prices up until none of the people who belong here can afford to even have their own home any more.”

Doyle, resolute in his wish to reach his destination, was not about to get into an argument over the impact of modern life on the wilds of Wales and he certainly wasn’t going to make any comments on the stupidity of bigotry against someone just because they’d been born English. “The owners are a Welsh couple, name of Dai and Anne Thomas. He’s a civil servant, works in London these days.”

“Oh, you mean the bloke in MI6, the one with the *English* wife. So it’s his cottage you’re after, is it then?” Actually being married to ‘an English’ was obviously worse than being one, in this woman’s books, and what little respect Doyle’s attractiveness had won him disappeared under the burden of being friends with a Welshman who’d not only gone to England, but married English as well. “In that case, you can take the

road outside right here at the crossroads, and then you can drive straight through, and don’t be turning off or you’ll be in Bangor before you know it.” She gave him another very disparaging glower, and Doyle kept his fingers crossed that she wasn’t giving him duff directions just to make his English life miserable. “You’ll be going up the hill, and you can’t miss the Thomas cottage, unless you can’t tell up a hill from down. It’s the last house up there, and if you go past it, you’ll be falling over the top of the hill before you find another human soul. Now, sir,” she said with a sincerely unfriendly smile as one of her regulars came in, a blast of cold air and snow following close behind, “is that it, or is there anything else you need for me to do for you?”

“No, no, that’s fine.” He couldn’t resist adding sarcastically, “And I’ll try not to fall off the side of the mountain.”

“Oh, that’s kind of you, sir. Save the Rescue from having to turn out.”

Not, Doyle suspected, that they would turn out if two Englishmen were stupid enough to fall off the side of a local hill. Bloody Welsh, he muttered to himself, a withering squall of wind and snow hitting him between the protection of his thick hair and even thicker jacket, cheek stinging red in the cold. Typical bloody unfriendly Welsh. Anyone’d think they had a grievance against the entire English race. Coming to the car and finding the door locked, Doyle seriously considered having a grievance against one particular representative of the English race. Fingers numb, he thumped the window, shivering until Bodie stirred himself to unlock the motor and let him in. “What was that in aid of, you dozy bastard? Scared someone was going to nick the car with you still in it?”

“Nah. Didn’t want anyone thinking they could lift the booze while I was asleep, that’s all.”

“You always this trusting, or d’you save this ‘specially for Wales?”

“You ought to see me in Scotland, mate.”

“I must remember to tell Cowley that one. Sure he’d be fair chuffed.”

But Bodie didn’t answer, gone back to cocooning himself in woollen warmth and solitude. Doyle sighed, muttered something very unflattering under his breath, and concentrated

on getting their heavily burdened car up the steep hill and finding their cottage.

Snow fell in exquisite patterns of beauty, making driving a hazard to anyone's health and positively lethal to Doyle's good temper. In between fuming over the sheer stupidity of deciding to Christmas in Wales—in this weather? Christ, they must've been drunk when they came up with this bright idea—he managed to navigate his way through billowing, blinding snow, past cars parked in tiny lay-bys outside smaller cottages, until he realised the road had petered out and that the slate-roofed chocolate-box house on his right had to be where they were going.

"Right, we're here. Off your arse, Bodie, we've got tons of stuff to get in there, so shift." Bodie shifted, stretching, blinking slowly and tiredly, his face pallid and fragile in the snowlight. Frowning to cover himself, Doyle felt the familiar melting inside as Bodie unwound himself from blanket and car seat, startlingly gorgeous in his sleepiness.

Voice gruff from sleep, words slightly slurred. "This it?"

"No, it's fucking Disneyland, what d'you think? Here, you can start with the food and I'll get the suitcase." Not looking at his partner, but diamond-sharp aware of him, Doyle hurried out of the car, actually glad of the bitter cold and the tearing wind: welcome distraction, even more welcome force to battle with in lieu of Bodie. It was a bit of a struggle, but he had the boot open, the box of food in Bodie's arms, the suitcase and bag in his own without any of it dropping into thick snow or blown off by gusting wind. Through the gate, a plodding trudge through the drift of new snow, then the key fumbled into the lock and they were inside, the wind banished outside, light switched on bright and shining and imparting an illusion of comfort and heat.

"Strewth, it's freezing in here!" Bodie snapped, slapping his arms for a bit of warmth. "I'll find the boiler and—"

"Dai said the new heating wasn't going in until April, so it's the coal fires, mate. There should be a bunker somewhere, so—"

"So I've stayed in cottages like this before, which is more than you can say, so I've got a better idea of where the fucking coal is than you

have. All right?"

So much for his fond self-delusion of everything being just hunky-dory. "Pardon me for breathing! If you're going to be such a fucking bastard about it, I'll do the kitchen then, while you do your Cinderella."

"Fine," Bodie snarled, stomping off in high dudgeon, cold, tiredness and the simmering violence of the past few months keeping his mood foul, fuelling yet another baseless blow-up. Nothing Doyle could say would be right, and nothing Bodie could say would be the right thing for Doyle either. So much for Christmas, Bodie brooded, shovelling coal into a scuttle, twisting newspaper to lay the fire, placing the coal with skill learned as a boy. So much for the idea that seemed so brilliant in October. But that was before the hostage mess, and before the gun running cock-up, and a lifetime before the undercover nightmare. He shuddered then, not from the cold, remembering being undercover, remembering what he had had to do to keep up the slimy persona he had had to play.

Across the room, arms filled with the food he'd hauled from London—a luxurious Fortnum & Mason Christmas pudding, a bottle of hard sauce, chocolates from Harrods, the Christmas cake from Bodie's favourite little bakery—Doyle was standing watching his partner, wincing in sympathy when Bodie shuddered, too clear a memory of his own making him understand Bodie's tension. He wanted to go over to Bodie, put his arms around him in support, give him a bit of a cuddle, tell him it was going to be all right. But it hadn't been all right, and platitudes like that were worse than nothing. But perhaps a bit later, once they'd had a few drinks... Yeh, Bodie always felt better with a few good drinks under his belt, so he'd open the gin early, for himself, and either the brandy or the Haig for Bodie. Anything that would help them get past the last job, and the one before it. And the one before that. A black cloud of his own hanging over him, Doyle said nothing, passing quietly behind Bodie, going into the kitchen, his clattering around lending an air of normalcy and vitality to the cottage.

The fire was lit downstairs, and now the one in the bedroom upstairs was roaring away merrily to itself. Bodie stared into the writhing flame, feeling the heat on his face, enjoying it

absently, crouching beside the hearth, brooding about nothing in particular. The room was beginning to warm already, with its windows tightly closed and curtains drawn. He checked the bed for damp, found it bone dry, quilt and blankets and clean linen folded neatly across the bottom. The electric blanket was the first thing on, heat turned low, and it took him only a few moments to get the bed made with neatly mitred corners and pristine smooth quilt. Inviting, it was, all mounds of feather quilt and big pillows and the hidden cache of heat from the electric blanket.

He wanted to have Doyle in that bed. Wanted to fuck him rigid. Not something he hadn't done before, but never when they were both *compos mentis* and never, absolutely never, to be discussed after. The one big, unwritten but inviolate rule: between encounters, the sex didn't exist. But not tonight. Not again, not ever again, for he had had more than his fill of all the lying and deception and pretending. And he knew that Doyle planned on doing it all the same way they always did: he'd seen the amount of booze the normally stingy bastard had brought with him. So it was going to be the same old story. A few drinks, then a few more, still more, until Doyle was drunk enough to let his inhibitions go and condescend to go to bed with Bodie. Abruptly, the thought of that made Bodie want to weep, or kill something instead. To sit there beside Doyle on the sofa, drinking his beer or his whisky or his brandy like a good little boy until Doyle got plastered, then the touching, and the cocksucking, then finally the fucking. And if he was lucky, then Doyle wouldn't hate him in the morning, would perhaps do nothing worse than cut him off dead instead of making him suffer all the seven hells for daring to give Doyle what Doyle literally begged for the night before. There was no-one, not even Cowley at his peak, as vicious-tongued as Doyle when he got started. Bodie could attest to that.

Collapsing onto the bed, Bodie knew he couldn't take it, not this time. Not this time, not here, not after what he'd been through. The box of matches was hurled against the wall before he even realised he was going to throw it, yellow box splintering, reddish-blue tipped guts spilling down the pale pink cabbage rose wallpaper. A little unlit pyre grew at the skirting board and

methodically, without a single outward sign of his outburst, Bodie began putting the matches in the bedside ashtray. So domesticated he looked, but there was a fierce resentment burning in him, and all that showed it was the slightest narrowing of his eyes and the tightness of his lips. He dusted his hands clean, standing in the middle of the room, hands on hips, heat of the fire tanning his backside, surveying what would be the scene of yet another of their furtive, drunken encounters. Normally, he would have gone into the next-door bedroom, making up the bed in there to maintain the illusion of them not planning on having sex with each other, but not tonight. Not after what he'd been through, and not after what Doyle had put him through. There'd be no booze tonight, no ticket to deliberate amnesia, no excuses given. Doyle was going to have his fucking tonight, just the way the unfeeling bastard wanted it, but this time, Bodie was damned if he was going to let either one of them lie about it. They'd do it, but they'd do it stone cold sober, or not at all.

"And if Doyle doesn't want to sleep with me, he can make his own fucking bed, can't he?" he announced to the room in general, needing suddenly to hear the sound of a human voice.

"What'd you say?" came up, distantly, from downstairs. Doyle, of course, hearing him, probably wondering what the hell was going on now.

"I've done the bed and the fire," Bodie shouted down, tossing towels into the bathroom, sticking a spare one in the bedroom beside the bed where they could reach it when it was needed, as they would, inevitably, if he and Doyle didn't end up killing each other first. He took a deep breath, deciding that unless Doyle got difficult about the sex thing, then getting into a major fight with Doyle wasn't worth the aggro. The stairs he took two at a time, hurrying downstairs to where smells of cooking were already drifting.

"What're you making?" Light, casual, and oh, so friendly, no warning there that Bodie was about to turn their relationship and Doyle's world on its head.

"Tinned soup, sandwiches, tea and some of those cream cakes you brought, fatso."

Bodie shrugged, and dipped his finger into a Marks & Sparks cream sponge. "Want some of

my cream?" he asked, filthily, one cream-coated finger held suggestively erect an inch from Doyle's lips.

"Don't be disgusting, Bodie," Doyle snapped, shoving Bodie aside, making a great show of going over to the cooker to avoid unwelcome attentions. But his hips swung, and he stood with bum canted invitingly.

Yet they both knew what would happen if Bodie tried to take him up on the offer that wasn't truly on offer until later, much later, when they both had a skinful and it could be put down to drunken randiness.

Bodie, dark blue eyes brooding, crossed the tiny kitchen, large hands cupping the slenderness of Doyle's arse.

"Gerroff!" Doyle shouted, twisting free. "What the fuck's got into you, Bodie?"

"Isn't it more what the fuck's going to get into you, Ray?" He loomed in the kitchen, towering over Doyle for all that they were almost the same height. "Bring enough booze, did you?" Roughly, he shoved Doyle's aran sweater up out of the way, exposing hairy chest and pink nipples, palming the flatness of Doyle's chest, then twisting, hard, Doyle's nipples. "And I presume you remembered to bring the cream we use when we fuck." He stepped forward, aborting the nascent rise of Doyle's knee into his crotch. "You know the stuff I mean, don't you, Ray?" he asked silkily, rubbing his hardening cock against Doyle, pressing his partner back dangerously close to the pot of bubbling oxtail soup until he could feel the heat on his own face and knew that it must be blisteringly hot on Doyle. "I'm talking about your favourite lubricant. The nice, slick stuff so I don't hurt either one of us when I ram my cock up your arse."

Doyle, eyes dark, face like thunder, denying that this was happening, that any of this had any basis other than Bodie's unfortunate education as a pretty boy amidst sailors and then mercenaries. Voice rising, he gave vent to all the unfocussed rage of the past few jobs and gave no recognition at all to the sweetly taboo nights when he'd spread his legs for Bodie, felt his partner deep inside. No recognition for that at all, for to recognise the sex was to recognise the need, and that, as far as Doyle was concerned, simply did not exist. "Get your paws off me, Bodie, or so help me, I'll break your sodding

neck."

"You and whose army?" Bodie asked him, voice a seductive whisper. "Anyway, this is how you like it, isn't it? You're always on at me to do it harder, aren't you?"

A long, assessing look, then a sigh, of the sort mothers give teenage daughters and Cowley gives seasoned agents. "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, but if you're going to have a nervous breakdown and turn into a complete loony, would you mind going into the sitting room to do it? I'm trying to make lunch here." Calm words, calmer voice, the tone of the sane dealing with the unbalanced, but there was a wildness in his eyes, a glitter of fear, and of something else. Desire. Lust. Hunger.

Bodie saw all of that, and smiled. "Humouring the bamstick, is that it, Ray? And all the time, you're the one who's gone off the deep end, mate. Pretending we never fuck each other, Christ, what a sodding joke." The contempt was stinging, the thrust of his hips hard, punishing, the twist of his fingers painful. "But if that's how you want to play it, then fine. I'll go into the sitting room like a good little boy and wait for you to bring me my lunch." For a second, a terrifying second, he crowded over Doyle as if to kiss him, but then he pulled back to the harshness of his hand on Doyle's cock and the nip of his fingers on Doyle's nipples. "But don't think I'm going to stop, Ray, don't you think that for a second."

Then he was gone, the heavy door slamming shut behind him, and the kitchen was serene again. Apart, that is, from Doyle, who was still standing as Bodie had left him, jumper up under his armpits, nipples standing out swollen and thick. He licked his lips where Bodie hadn't kissed him, and conjured up the image of his partner leaning into him with the threat of rape.

And his cock throbbed.

Hard, erect, trapped by jeans that were far too tight, his cock remembered the thrill of Bodie's threat and power and intractable strength. The nearing loom of the kiss. The thrust of cock. The sharp pressure of hip. The heat of skin. The twisting fingers. The squeezing hand. All of it, all of him, all of them together, with the cooker digging into his back and the heat from the food scalding him. But all of it just puzzle pieces, to be put together into a knee-weakening memory of

Bodie, with the promise of sex in his hips and domination in his eyes. Trembling, Doyle undid his zip, hauling his cock out, fucking his fist fast and furious, replaying again and again the moment when Bodie leaned into him like that, with his cock so hot against him, his hands so hard and strong on his nipples, his eyes so darkly blue. His fingers clenched so tightly his knuckles were bone white, he leant against the kitchen table, bringing himself to a quick, painful climax. Searingly lonely, but better than giving in to Bodie. If Bodie only knew the way Ray reacted to him, then Doyle would never be up off his knees, and would never be free from Bodie's leash. As the last lonely spurt erupted from his cock, he fell forward, leaning on the back of the kitchen chair, letting it take his weight while he got his breath back and reined himself in under at least marginal control. He looked down at his hand, at the beaded whiteness slowly spreading, between his knuckles, onto his fingertips. And hated himself.

How are the mighty fallen, he thought to himself, so acutely aware of the legions of people who had wanted him, who had needed him. Yet here he was, standing in a kitchen with tinned soup on the cooker and cheese melting under the grill, so unromantic, so déclassé, alone with his cum sticky on his fingers, the man of his desires gone, uncaring, away. But then again, perhaps that was what he wanted most of all: to have Bodie labouring under the misconception that his, Doyle's, reluctance stemmed from an inability to deal with latent homosexual impulses—and what a joke that! If only, as the saying went, if only Bodie knew about the times up in the attic with his best friend, playing doctors at five, or earning a few extra quid when he'd been one step into disaster, running wild on the streets and half-way to Borstal. Useful, though, to have Bodie think that he was just being a complete moron about sex, bated once too often for his pretty-boy looks to be comfortable admitting that maybe, just maybe, the jibes might be true. As Doyle knew they were. As Doyle had always, silent confession in the dark to faceless priest, known they were.

Oh, no, it wasn't the queer aspect that worried him: it was the quicksand-slurping of need as it consumed him that scared him shitless. Needing so much, so all-devouringly, and needing

someone like Bodie. Bodie, who could be respected and deferred to. Bodie, who was strong enough to be leaned on. Bodie, who could always be needled into roughness, and violence, and the ominous pleasure of being dominated. His legs had stopped trembling, and his mind was capable of thinking beyond the confines of his own body and emotions, finally reminding him that the cheese would blacken soon and the soup boil over, and that Bodie, wonderfully dangerous Bodie, was waiting for him through that white-painted kitchen door. He should make his own lunch and demand that Bodie come through and fend for himself: assert his independence, display to himself that he wasn't really in danger of turning submissive to Bodie. He ought to. He really ought to.

But—a torn square of kitchen roll cleaned away the evidence of his weakness and his erotic addiction to Bodie's power, and then he was tucked away tidily, hands washed again, back to finishing making their lunch, setting the tray ready for two, heaping the pickle on more than half the toasted cheese, just the way Bodie liked it, doing the little things that pandered to Bodie so well. Only because they were partners, of course, he told himself. By the time he hauled the tray into the sitting room and faced Bodie again, he was his usual insouciantly pugnacious self, the lust and fear and self-knowledge tucked away as neatly as his spent cock.

"The least you could do is clear a bit of space, Bodie," he carped, using his own leg to shove Bodie's down from the coffee table, giving him somewhere to put the tray. Moving the scattered pages of the London paper out of the way, he felt it again: Bodie's hands on his arse, knowing fingers, confidant hands, utter certainty of welcome. Doyle whirled around fast, open hand slapping viciously into Bodie's cheek, violence restrained down to nothing more than that when he could so easily kill with that same hand, or with the knife on the tray, or with a sharply jagged broken china mug. Messier, to be sure, but effective, and they both knew it. But Bodie smiled at him, a long, slow smile and wilfully pressed Doyle on a sore point, one they both knew would set him off as quick as a firework.

"Slapping me off to protect your virtue? What a good little girl you are, petal, the Sisters would be proud of you." Then he moved forward,

trapping Doyle between his thighs, one hand pulling Doyle by the nape down, down, until they were face to face and Doyle's back was painfully contorted by the confining space and Bodie's inexorable hand. "Pity I know you're nothing but a fucking slag, isn't it? Just a cunt who'll spread for anyone who can get him drunk enough. That's you, isn't it, petal?" He ruffled Doyle's curls, a mockery of his usual affectionate gesture. "Gorgeous, aren't you, darling?" Rough fingers traced the shape of Doyle's eyes, tipping along his eyelashes, then following the line of his nose down to outline his lips. "Prettiest thing on the squad, that's my Raymond. Randroid too, but only if I get you legless first. Tell me, sweetheart, d'you let anyone with a bottle of whisky fuck you, or am I special?"

"You're a fucking maniac, that's what you are. Let go of me, Bodie, before I make you sing soprano." He pushed his knee forward, until the smooth roundness of his kneecap was up hard against Bodie's groin, and he could feel the rising cock there.

"Oh, yeh," Bodie breathed, rotating his hips a little, just enough to move himself against Doyle's knee, turning Doyle's aggressive dominance into caress, "do it like that. Harder, Ray, do it harder. But I forgot, didn't I? 'Do it harder' is your line, isn't it, petal?" He shoved Doyle backwards, so that Doyle barely missed the table and landed, heavily, on his backside. "That hard enough for you? Or am I being too rough for daddy's little boy?"

"I can take anything you dish out, so don't you come the bully with me, Bodie," Doyle snarled, getting to his feet in the proper stance for battle, lust curling hotly in his belly, the sensible part of his brain telling him he should turn on his heel and run like hell. From himself, not Bodie. "I'm sick fed up with your bully-boy shite, so you can just pack it in right now."

"Pack it in? Why, when it's what you want? Because it is, isn't it?" Bodie was on his feet, and they were poised, two tomcats fighting over territory, but they both knew the territory in question was Doyle's body. "You're so fucking insecure, you're petrified cos you fancy a bloke. What's the matter, Ray, that never happen to you before?" Then he catapulted forward, instantly past Doyle's defences, and there he was, kissing Doyle, tongue shoved deeply into

Doyle's mouth, hands clutching in Doyle's hair, holding him immobile. A ragged breath, and they were staring at each other, unblinking, one of them at least being honest, thinking the other was guilty of nothing more than a simple, obvious lie. "Or is it that it's happened too often?"

"I'm not a fairy, Bodie, and don't you go thinking you can make me feel like I am. Just because I—" he broke off in the nick of time, biting his tongue to stop himself from saying the dreaded words. Just because I let you fuck me, that's what he had been on the very precipice of saying, but he didn't dare say that. Didn't dare admit that some of what Bodie was saying was true. Not that it was, he told himself, swiping Bodie's hands away, marching over to sit on the sofa as if nothing had happened beyond one of their usual, far more innocent spats. Just because he'd done a couple of things when he was absolutely legless didn't mean anything anyway. After all, he'd stolen the odd thing when he'd been out drinking with his mates—and look at the night he'd cut that other kid up. Drunk as a pug he'd been that night, so all this was nothing more than another one of Bodie's exercises in excessive control, an attempt to turn a minor drunken weakness, a willingness to crawl at Bodie's feet, into an issue bigger than the Third World War.

"You know your problem, don't you," Doyle said, mouth full of toasted cheese and tomato, a speck of Branston pickle landing on his shirt. "You're too macho by half. In fact, Bodie, if either one of us has a problem with his masculine image, then it's you, mate. Stomping around like a bull on heat all the time..."

Bodie stood in front of Doyle, legs astride, arms folded, in black from the neck of his good wool poloneck to the toes of his snow-stained shoes. "Me? At least I don't walk around half hard all the time, showing it off to all and sundry and then screaming 'rape' every time some poor fella tries to get a taste."

"That's stupid! I don't—"

A slicing gesture with his hand, and Bodie had cut Doyle off. "I'm not going to argue with you, Doyle. You and I both know what you're like, and we both know I could talk until I'm blue in the face and you'd still deny it." He grabbed a plate, piling it high with the toasted cheese, taking his mug of soup, going over to the

solitary armchair and throwing himself into its cushions as if it were a newly honed Iron Maiden. "But I know the truth, Doyle, and I'm not going to keep on lying, not any more. I've had it with all your shite, and it's going to stop."

"Ooh, you're beautiful when you're angry, Bodie." Sliding steel between Bodie's ribs, the words glided out soft and vicious, turning the tables.

"That meant to be a dig at me, Doyle?" Bodie actually laughed, the tables turned not at all. "Supposed to get me all het up, all insecure about being a real man?" He took an enormous bite of toasted cheese, chewed it, had a swig of soup, picked the newspaper up again, burying his nose in the deathless prose about the upcoming home internationals. "Well, I've got news for you, mate," he muttered, all the more threatening because, so secure in his own self-image, he didn't even need to look at Doyle, "you can call me everything under the sun, you can waste your last breath on some pathetic innuendo that's supposed to put the wind up me, but all I have to do is remember you with my cock up your arse and you begging me to fuck you harder." Bodie looked up then, a quick, sweeping glance that stripped Doyle bare and made him see himself through Bodie's eyes, naked and impaled and pleading. "Oh, yeh, Ray, you'll have to do a bit better than cheap shots to get me on the run. Because I'm not backing down this time. Not a snowball's of that, sweetheart."

Doyle could feel the coldness of sweat trickling down his spine. He was over-familiar with that tone of Bodie's voice, having heard it in too many interrogations or too many sticky situations where only Bodie's luring threat could get them out unbruised or unbattered. But this was the first time that he'd been spoken to as if he were the enemy, as if he were the thing that all Bodie's strength was arrayed against. It scared him. In fact, it terrified him.

But not nearly so much as it aroused him. Blood thundered through his veins, straining his cock hard again, soon, too soon after the bleak moment in the kitchen—don't think about it, it didn't matter, it didn't count, he told himself, face reflecting only the disinterest he didn't feel and hiding the maelstrom of emotions within—but he was hard again, and his balls

wanted to be touched and squeezed, and his arse ached to be filled with Bodie, Bodie's cum seeping from him, still body-warm against his skin. He yearned, flammably, to take Bodie inside himself once more, or to have Bodie bent double under him, cock to the hilt, Bodie's eyes closed to hold the ecstasy inside, Bodie's arse clenched around him. He shuddered, desire and dread colliding on his spine. He didn't want to think about what they did in the dark, didn't want to remember the dark and the illicit pleasure and the sinful delight. Didn't want to remember the sound of his own voice, so husky, so raw with need, demanding Bodie for more, for harder, for deeper.

Smiling behind his newspaper, Bodie chewed contentedly on his lunch whilst pricklingly aware of Doyle chewing on his words. He was winning, he could sense it, knew that Doyle's resolve to lie about this was slowly dissolving, snow into slush and turning just as murky. But it was for the best, no two ways about that, and not only from his own point of view. Doyle had to get over this stupid hang-up about swinging both ways: a waste, that, of energy and too unsettling in a job that gave them all the uncertainty that anyone could ever want. But it was the guilt, he thought, peeking over the top of the page at a pondering Doyle who had forgotten the mug in his hand, steam weaving round his face like the greying curls at his temples. Always too much guilt—just have a gander at Doyle's performance over this last undercover crap. Not that the guilt was undeserved, not this time, considering it was Doyle's stupid fucking fault the whole thing had gone so messily wrong. But to wallow in it that much—Christ, he'd almost expected Doyle to come before Cowley, cap in hand, and ask for six of the best for being such a cock-up. Instead, what had happened was Doyle getting plastered three nights in a row, turning up on Bodie's doorstep, bottle in hand and unwilling lust in his eyes. Last thing the poor bugger needs, isn't it? Bodie thought to himself, forgetting to keep his eyes hidden behind the sports stories, all this mess about being bisexual, getting himself all tied up about it. Be much happier if he just accepted it and let me—

He garrotted the next word before he could even think it, abruptly drowning all thought in

an article about the skills and weaknesses of Kenny Dalglish as opposed to Kevin Keegan, slipping away from that dangerous word with consummate skill. He did not need to remind himself that he did not, absolutely did not, love Raymond Doyle. In fact, he didn't even dare think it, just in case he admitted that he was hopelessly wrong. Because if he confessed to the truth of loving Doyle, then it wouldn't take long before that truth turned to lie as love turned to hate. For if he loved Doyle, if he was going to go through all this and have it turn to pain, and all because Doyle was too fucking immature to accept himself... If he loved, and there was no love given back to him, no warmth to hold him as he wanted to hold Ray. No-one to tell him it would be all right, and make it so with the complicated security of love and being loved...

"You going to sit there like Alf bloody Garnett or are you going to shift your fat arse and do the washing up?"

Doyle, of course, making a point to himself, sounding to Bodie like a man trying hard to be macho to cover the simmering desires within. "Why don't you put your floral pinny on and do it yourself?"

"Because one, I don't have an apron and two, I cooked the lunch, so you can do the cleaning up after."

"Christ, Doyle, did you have your sense of humour surgically removed at birth? Oh, excuse me, doctors," he said in a giggly, breathy female voice, "could you do, you know, the operation. Not because we're Jewish, of course, but because we wouldn't want our son to be fun with his friends, now would we?"

Doyle, freezingly, glanced at Bodie out of the corner of his eye and then rose to his feet, the simple grace and subtle sensuality of it making Bodie suddenly hot under the collar. Doyle, oblivious, plugged the television in, waiting impatiently for the set to warm up, long fingers tapping an agitated samba on the tarnished wood veneer, then flicking, quick economy, until he'd found *Grandstand*. He was aware, unexpectedly, of Bodie staring at him, and self-conscious with the same itchy unease of spotty adolescence, amorphous desire writhing between them, swithering between being a lust that should not speak its name unless drunk, or a darkly dangerous desire for more than mere

sex, and more than simple emotion. "What you looking at, mate?" he snapped, rhetorical question turned into sharp reprimand.

"Dunno," Bodie answered him slowly, folding the paper neatly and putting it onto the table amidst the clutter of lunch. "On the one hand, I could say I'm looking at the best partner I've ever had—and that includes my team in the SAS."

Wide-eyed, all green gaze and out-thrust aggressive chin, Doyle looked back at him, *Grandstand* chuntering away in the background, as forgotten as the rest of the world that existed beyond him and Bodie. The compliment had him on the razor's edge, waiting to hear what was coming next, what poison would be slipped in through the chink made in his armour.

"Oh, yeh, definitely the best in the business, when it comes to the job," Bodie went on, almost idly, the same voice he would normally use to discuss the relative merits of left backs and forwards and goalies leaping around on the television screen. "Then there's the other." Bodie leaned forward, stubborn-faced, lips and jaw hard and determined, while his eyes smouldered with the images his words were creating. "In the dark, because you always have to have the light off. But I can still see you, Ray, did you know that? Like that time in the car. Or the time down the back alley, remember that? We came out of the pub and you said you thought you were going to be sick, so we went round the back. And then d'you remember what you did to me, Ray?"

The voice, so low, so seductive, had him shivering with excitement, as the hardness in the eyes and the angry clench of jaw had his stomach knotting with darkest lust and purest fear. God, how he loved Bodie like this! All chained power, held barely in check, as sure and as certain as hell. Nervous of his own reactions, Doyle licked his upper lip and felt a leap of desire as Bodie saw the gesture and smiled, blackly, at him.

"I can see that you do remember. Not as drunk as all that after all then, eh? Not so pickled that you can't remember plastering yourself all down my front, then whisking us round so that you had your back to the wall and me to your front. You were hard then already, couldn't wait to get those fucking jeans opened and your

prick out, could you? Almost came out my arse, you stuck your tongue so far down my throat. But you like that kind of thing, don't you, Ray? Being as far inside the other person as you can get."

Every step measured, approaching Doyle a heartbeat at a time, Bodie crossed the small room, his monologue interrupted only by the catch of Doyle's breath. "Then you turned round, didn't you, spreading your legs for me like the cheapest tart, pulling your bum open so I could see where you wanted me to plant myself." He was less than a foot from Doyle now, close enough to see the quiver of silver chain on heaving chest, close enough to imagine that he could hear the thunder of Doyle's heart. "And I gave you what you wanted, didn't I, Ray? Fucked you where you stood, in a filthy alley not ten feet from the back door of the pub where Murph and all the rest were still drinking themselves stupid."

Bodie took the last step, until his trousers brushed Doyle's, until he could, quite casually it seemed, nudge Doyle's legs shut, standing astride the tight-clenched denim, his crotch a scant few inches from Doyle's wide eyes and determinedly shut mouth. "Oh, I always give you what you want, don't I? But what do you ever give me, eh? Sweet fuck all, that's what. Never so much as a smile when we're sober, but then when you're drunk, it's different then, isn't it? Then all you want is a good fuck and anyone'd do, wouldn't they?"

He was so close that Doyle could smell him, the sultry musk of his genitals, the descant scent of the Pears soap, a faint spiciness from aftershave. Smells good enough to eat, the common daily expression flitted through his mind, punctuated by the thought of himself with Bodie's cock in his mouth, Bodie's semen splattering against the back of his throat, Bodie— He took a deep, deep breath, intoxicating himself on the mingled scents, and almost, so very nearly, yielded then and there to the allure that was Bodie. But he didn't. Not quite, held back by fear, scared into immobility by his own illicit desires. Sucking cock didn't bother him, did nothing to shake his image of himself, but it was more than that desire that was flooding him: it was more than the rising curve of genitalia blanketed by woollen trousers. It was the coiled power in Bodie, the man's strength, the immu-

tability of his spirit, his aggressively dominant attitude. All of it combined to make Doyle want nothing more than to crawl at Bodie's feet. Prostrate himself naked, on his belly, arse in the air for Bodie's delight, licking Bodie's feet, giving himself over completely to Bodie's whim.

"Wouldn't they, you little cunt?" Bodie, in a conversation Doyle had long since lost. But he hadn't lost Bodie's inimical presence, and heard himself moan as Bodie leaned forward, arching his groin into Doyle's face, promising and threatening at the same time.

"Anyone'd do, wouldn't they, cunt?" Bodie snarled again, so hurt he was infuriated by the simple truth. "You're so desperate for the feel of a prick up your arse, you wouldn't care if it was attached to the fucking Pope, it wouldn't matter. Not as long as you got what you wanted. You've been using me, cunt, like a fucking walking vibrator, just turn me on and then shove me up your arse. And you don't even have to buy new batteries, do you, you little bastard you?"

But Doyle wasn't listening, not to specific words. All he could hear were the obscenities and the thrilling strength of Bodie's voice. And his own inner voice, the one telling him that he oughtn't to give in, that he didn't dare, not if he wanted to keep on being separate and strong in his own right. But that inner voice was too weak, and the other voice was too strong, the siren song of submission, reeling him in slowly, so very slowly, but closer and closer and closer.

"Always wanting more, and never giving me a fucking thing, apart from your arse, and I wonder how many other blokes've had that, you smiling coyly at them every single fucking time, making them think they're special..." Voice cracking, Bodie broke off before he betrayed himself, fighting tears back, refusing to cry over something like this. Doyle didn't deserve his tears, wasn't worthy of them, but Bodie was aching inside. He'd never hurt so much before, not ever, but then, he'd never been in love like this either, had he? Never known the stabbing agony of watching love walk away, uncaring, nor of waiting for someone to be blind drunk before they could endure his touch by pretending it was someone else. Furious to cover the pain, he grabbed Doyle by the upper arms, hauling him to his feet, pushing and shoving and hitting,

getting Doyle out of the room and up the stairs so quickly neither one of them had time to get over the shock of his explosion of violence.

In the bedroom, with the bed he'd thought so inviting, with the man he needed beyond reason, and all Bodie could think about was how much Ray Doyle had hurt him, and would keep on hurting him. Callously, in the worst possible way, with the indifference of someone who didn't care at all. "Who d'you pretend I am, eh?" he whispered, bleakly threatening, hand clutching Doyle's shirt collar, one of the buttons flying off as cotton was strained and pulled. "Because you don't think about me when we do it, do you? Oh, no, because that would mean treating me like a real person instead of a convenient cock, wouldn't it? And you're not interested in people, not you. Not my sweet Raymond. Care for the masses, have your heart bleed for the poor downtrodden millions, but when it's your own partner, your own fucking partner—" He swallowed, hard, stifling the pain again, stuffing it down low behind the protection of anger, using his fury as a bandage, covering up the seeping wound that Doyle had inflicted with his blind disinterest.

"What d'you expect me to do?" Doyle asked, quietly dangerous in his own way, fighting off not Bodie but his own burgeoning desire for this dangerous version of his friend. "Buy you chocolates? But I already do that, don't I? Bring you them into work with the paper, or have a few bars of Bournville in when you're coming over for a drink. So what else d'you want? Flowers? Oh, but flowers get right up you hooter, at least that's what you say." He stalked two steps closer to Bodie, his nostrils flaring, his temper rising in carefully controlled increments. "What, is my poor little petal's feelings all hurt? Well, tell you what, I'll—"

"You'll shut your fucking mouth, you fucking cunt, before I ram my fist down your throat!" Bodie, heated now, nostrils flaring, temper boiling, all the confusion and loneliness and the aftermaths of sex crushing in on him. "You've got a cheek on you, I'll give you that. But you're not going to put one on me, and you're not going to get away with pretending that it's all me and chance that gets you drunk with your arse spread. You'd better face it, petal. You're a fucking nancy boy, a—"

"A what? An idiot for not going to Cowley the first time you got me plastered and fucked me?"

Bodie stared at him, dumbfounded, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're amazing, you know that? To stand there, bold as brass and say that to me—*me*, Doyle, or have you forgotten that I was there and saw the whole thing?" He grabbed at Doyle, pinning his arms, pulling his body in close to press them hard together. "Feel that? You've got me going again, but you expected that, didn't you?" He freed one hand long enough to mould the shape of Doyle's rising excitement, the cock fitting his cupped hand to perfection. "And d'you feel that? You want it just as much as I do. Which makes you bent, Doyle." He grinned at that, a mere baring of teeth and glinting of eye. "Makes you the original bent copper, dunnit? You going to admit it, Ray?" he asked, needing Doyle to actually say it, to give credence to all those shared nights and shared sexuality, to make all the pent-up emotion he sensed true and real and something he could depend on. "You going to admit you're queer?"

"What d'you think, Bodie, or have you given thinking up for Lent? Just because I've been taken advantage of when I was too drunk to know any different, by a bloke who was supposed to be my friend," Doyle was almost spitting the words out, the venom hiding the secret truth that scared him spineless. "Someone I didn't expect to betray me like a—"

It was then that Bodie hit him. Stinging, resounding slap, ricocheting sound through the room, ricocheting sensation through Bodie and Doyle. Bodie looked at his hand in something akin to horror, that he should enjoy it so much, and Doyle—eyes dropping shut, mouth dropping open, a gaping chasm of lust opening in his belly as the fire fled through his nerves from face to brain.

"Don't you dare call me names, you fucking prick. Betray you? And how the fucking hell could I betray you when you don't trust me in the first place, not off the job at any rate?" His hands were itching, aching to hit Doyle again, to spread the pain inside himself to Doyle, to bring Doyle to heel. "You cunt, you lying cunt. All you ever wanted was to be fucked rigid and be too drunk to have to admit that you get off on

having a cock up your arse.” Silken steel, his hands were hard and harsh on Doyle, twisting one arm up behind the slender back, the half-Nelson to lead Doyle to the bed. With a surge of effort and the subterranean wish that Doyle would collapse in dislocated agony, he tossed his so-called partner onto the bed.

Winded, Doyle lay where he was, saying nothing, feeling the insidious lassitude of passivity slithering into his belly. He half closed his eyes again, until his field of vision was Bodie, entirely, nothing else to distract him, nothing else to focus on. His breath seeped from him slowly, and he wanted nothing more in the world than to say, yes, yes, whatever you want, Bodie, whatever you feel like, Bodie, whatever takes your fancy, Bodie. His legs wanted to splay themselves, to display what was held between, to offer the deepest intimacies, because he knew that was what Bodie wanted. But more than that, he knew the words Bodie wanted to hear, and they burned on his tongue and battled to get past his firmly shut lips. It would be so easy, so comfortable to say that yes, he was a fairy, if that’s what Bodie wanted him to be—and did Bodie want him to wear frocks? Or a bit of make-up? Scent? Because he already wore jewellery—his copper bracelet was warm around

his wrist, and his silver chain was clinging to his throat like a collar—because Bodie liked him bedecked, Doyle could tell from the way Bodie would play with the jewellery when they camped it up, or when he was getting ready to go out on a foursome with Bodie and some birds, or when Bodie was fucking him mindless. He had even changed the way he dressed, getting rid of the tatty clothes and bovver-boy shirts in favour of thin t-shirts that drew Bodie’s attention, and wearing his hair that little bit longer. Slowly, inexorably, he was changing himself to suit Bodie. He could imagine himself kneeling in front of Bodie, letting Bodie choose dinner for him, listening to the music Bodie liked, himself fading away into a shadow devoted to Bodie, a life-time’s hard-won independence eroded into nothing.

“Where are you, Ray?” Bodie asked, one knee on the edge of the bed, other foot planted firmly on the floor, all his commitment to action muddled into indecision. “What’re you thinking?” Staring, rapt, at Doyle’s blissfully distracted face, as thoughts scudded across uneven features making Doyle more seductively mysterious and making Bodie suddenly ache, fiercely, to kiss him, gently.

...THE BEST OF TIMES

Yet overlying all that aching tenderness was the desire to punish, to pay Doyle back for all the hurts suffered at his hands. “I could kill you,” he said in a voice of frightening calm. “I could fucking kill you!” Repeated, but shouted this time, his repressed anger breaking through, his fists clenching with the need to punch and bruise and hurt.

Doyle was looking at him, fear clouding his eyes, panic stealing the colour from his face, the muscle along his jaw jumping with tension. “Don’t,” he said, appalled by the whisper of his voice, “don’t do it like this, Bodie...”

“Begging, are we?” Bodie sneered at him, hand cupping Doyle’s chin cruelly, fingers biting into flesh. “After what you did,” he was shouting again, words thundering from him,

“you expect me to let you off with it? You, my lad, need a good beating to—”

And he stopped, horrified. Was that really him shrieking like that? Or his father, raging at him, at his mother, at the world. My God, he thought, stumbling away from Ray, turning away from the sight of his partner tossed onto the bed like dirty washing. My God, I’m as bad as Da was, I’m doing it, I’m doing what I swore I’d never do, I’m being just like him. He wiped his hand across his mouth, as if that could clean away the bitter taste of what he’d said and done, as if that could lift away the vicious mark of Cain.

“Bodie?” Doyle, rising to sit on the edge of the bed, getting to his feet, the sensible part of his brain telling him to get out of there fast while

Bodie was still distracted, the emotional part of him unwilling to move, unable to leave either the erotic thrill of this man, or to abandon Bodie to this inner horror. There was still an edge of anger in himself, and that bit of him was pleased to see Bodie so self-loathing. "What? Haven't got the balls for rape after all?" he lashed at Bodie, both inciting and excoriating. "Decided that you didn't much fancy yourself as a rapist after all?"

Bodie turned on him then, the hate and the fury in his eyes making Doyle take a step back, the edge of the bed catching him behind the knees and forcing him to sit down abruptly. "Not much fancy myself as a rapist? Not bloody likely, Doyle," but he didn't come any closer, didn't trust himself to batten down the anger inside, didn't know if he could stop himself in time or if he'd be like his father all over again. "Don't push me, Ray, don't play any of your fucking games with me right now. You think this is the first time I've done this? Not by a long chalk, mate, and you should count your fucking blessings that you know me now and not fourteen years ago."

That brought Doyle up short. One thing for the fantasy, another for the reality. But he couldn't believe it, not of Bodie. "You? But you wouldn't—"

"You stupid fucking idiot! What'd you think I was going to do to you, then, eh? Hold your hand and ask you to marry me? I was going to do you, Ray," and without willing it, he had crossed the room again and was close, too close, to Ray. "I was going to do you, but I was going to rape you first." He was pacing now, too much roiling through him to stand still, too much temptation to hit Doyle coiling his fists. "Not that there's much difference," and he was talking to himself more than Doyle, lost in memories he had thought best forgotten, "not when it comes down to it. But Christ, it makes me sick when I think of what I did in Africa and then to be about to do it to you—" He broke off, bile souring his throat, as he thought about the rabid, raging young man he'd once been, and how terribly close he'd come to being that bastard again.

"I wouldn't've let you," Doyle said, believing it, knowing that he was strong enough and vicious enough.

"And how would you've stopped me, eh? For fuck's sake, Doyle, you're good, but you're not that good."

"So what'd you think I was going to do, lie there and take it?"

Bodie looked at him with a chilling calm. "You would've if you'd been sensible. If I'd actually got to where I'd've done it..." He shook his head, wishing that this was all a nightmare from whence he would wake up to the sweet sound of his alarm clock screeching at him. "If I was that far gone, then you'd've really had to do me serious damage to make me stop." He glanced at Doyle then, wanting to see the answer on Ray's face. "Would you've been able to do that, Ray?"

"Of course I bloody would..." Doyle's turn to pause, thinking about his own ambivalence to rough use of his body, and his own intense feelings for his friend. "I think I would've..."

"If you have to think about it, mate, then you wouldn't've. Christ, I came *that* close again!" He leant his forehead on the mantelpiece, the stone cold in contrast to the heat of the fire. He'd sworn, made a covenant with himself that he'd never let his fury get the better of him ever again. Sworn that he'd never force anyone ever again. Sworn that he'd never be lost to temper like his father on a Friday night... And he'd come within an inch of doing all that, and to Ray Doyle of all people. Ray. God, to have been that close to doing it to Ray...

Doyle was watching him, trying to catch his breath, all the emotions and words churning round inside him still. He had to get a grip on himself, he knew that. Had to do something to help Bodie and to get this entire mess sorted out. If he didn't—he didn't want to think about that, but the images flooded his mind. If he didn't get this resolved between them, then they wouldn't even be able to work together. They probably wouldn't even be able to look at each other.

Was his pride really worth that? Was keeping a false image intact worth losing Bodie for? Did fitting in with what other people expected of him really matter so much that he was willing to give up Bodie for it? The answers were all so simple, the storm between himself and Bodie reducing it all down to the honest truth about how he felt and what he really wanted. Pride, he knew, was a cold bedfellow. With Bodie, if he

could take the risk, there was the chance of happiness. The chance that it wouldn't all backfire on him and destroy them both.

Bodie's anger was already doing that, anger that Doyle believed was his own fault for having pushed and hurt Bodie the way he had. His fault. If he hadn't done half the things he had, if he hadn't been so obsessed with saving face... If he hadn't been so unwilling to trust Bodie...

Bodie, using methods perfected in the years since Africa, martial arts to tame the soul and damp the fire, took the few steps he needed to be in front of Ray again. He gazed at the distracted face, and wondered again how he could have come so close to losing it all by degenerating once more into the barely leashed mirror image of his father. The only difference between himself and his da, he was miserably aware, was that his da had never used sex to batter home his violence. But that was the only difference, that, and the fact that Bodie had come to his senses years before and refused to sink into the same self-pitying cesspit that his father had. Unlike his father, he had done something about his anger and his temper and his quick fist. Unlike his da, he didn't need to control every second of the lives of the people he loved. He had found a way around that, something that satisfied the jealous beast of his soul and let him love without abusing whomever he most needed. And for him now, and he acknowledged finally, probably forever, that one person was Doyle.

The moment clung to them, hovering between them, Doyle lost in his thoughts, Bodie left outside, cold and lonely, gazing at the one person he had ever loved beyond reason. Bodie's fingers trembled with the desire to caress Ray, to stroke him sweetly, to let the anger go far away where it couldn't hurt either of them, and to drown himself in all the love that he could see buried way inside Ray, deep where he was never allowed to touch. But if only Ray would just let him...

"What are you thinking, love?" he asked, hanging on desperately to this soft moment, so absorbed in reaching Ray and locking away his own temper that he was unaware of his own betraying words, mindless of everything but his own aching need to be permitted to love Ray Doyle, to wipe the shadows from those green eyes, to teach Ray that love didn't have to be

pain. The fury in him was banked once more, tenuously under control, for all that it was never completely tamed, he having mastered that blinding temper with years of hard work and discipline. He swallowed, his throat hurting with emotion, and tried again to get through to his partner. "What're you thinking, Ray?"

Doyle blinked, and looked up at him, coming back to the present with a resounding thump. "I don't think you want to know," he said, meaning it.

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that, eh, Ray?" He kept his voice gentle, instinct telling him that this was a moment of utmost delicacy, when their whole future could sway this way or that. "What were you thinking about? You didn't even know I was here, did you?"

"Oh, I knew that all right," Doyle said, abruptly aware that Bodie was being sweet to him, that Bodie must therefore know about all the fear in him, and that Bodie couldn't possibly have guessed that Ray had been thinking about not having trusted him after all this time.

"So what were you thinking about?" A second, two, three, more, until a full minute had passed, and Bodie was still standing like a hungry child with his nose pressed to the window, all Doyle's love kept inside the clearest of cold barriers. "You're not going to tell me, are you?" Against everything he'd tried to make himself into, the anger was coming back, fury so much less painful to endure than the agony of Doyle shutting him out, of Doyle condemning them both to this unemotional fucking, this denial of all the feelings between them. He tried to focus his returning rage, tried to siphon it off into protectionism before he ended up belting Doyle again. He managed, barely leashing it within, the need to cover himself winning over the need to make Doyle pay. "You little bastard. Your pride's more fucking important to you than I am, isn't it? After the way you fucked that job up—you almost got me killed, and now you're going to lie here like Lady Muck and laugh at me because I can't take it any more? Oh, you—"

It was the bravery that got to Doyle. He could see what Bodie was feeling, saw a glimmer of tears in eyes that usually went cold and hard when Bodie was hurt. Now, there was anguish and loss there, for all that Bodie was putting a good face on it, being so strong and all stiff

upper lip, it was enough to make a grown man weep for his friend. “You’d let me, too, wouldn’t you?” Doyle asked, his voice remarkably calm amidst the contained tempest of emotion that filled the room. “You let me do anything I want to, as long as I let you fuck me sometimes.”

“It’s not—”

“How the fuck can you expect me to tell you the truth if you’re lying to me, eh?” But he didn’t want the argument back, didn’t want to have to fight any more, not himself, not Bodie, not life itself. He was tired, so tired of all the denials and the deceptions, and he was more frightened than he had dared admit by the way their job was disintegrating. He had come too damned close to getting Bodie killed that last time, and for what? Because he was so fucking screwed up about his feelings for Bodie and what he would become if he let himself lean too heavily on his mate.

With infinite tenderness to balance the lingering urge to beat Doyle for what he’d done, and a patience and sensitivity few would ever credit him for, Bodie waited, almost holding his breath, unsure of what was going on, but knowing that this was a moment of truth for Ray. He said nothing, for he was all too aware of how easy it would be to say the wrong thing to his partner. So Bodie held his tongue and made himself as small and as still as he could, doing nothing that might interrupt Ray and tip the balance the wrong way, refusing to allow his temper rein.

And Doyle? He was living through what might have been, if he hadn’t sorted things out in time, and Bodie had died because of him. He was thinking about what life would be like without Bodie. He was thinking of what life would be like if he were to admit the truth to Bodie, and himself. Would it be so bad? Would it really be so dreadful to give up this uneven battle for independence and a spurious freedom that existed only if he lied to himself and everyone around him? Everyone was dependent on something—would it really be such a Hitchcockian horror to let Bodie take over a little, once in a while?

No, but it might be a nightmare to allow himself that much, if he couldn’t stop himself from sinking into it completely. It would be so easy to simply yield and let Bodie take command, take his decisions for him, take all the pressure

off him. What did he have to prove to Bodie? Nothing.

Save that Ray Doyle loved him, and Bodie didn’t have to be hurt any more.

Could he do that? Could he give up the burden of freedom to make Bodie happy?

He refocused his eyes, seeing Bodie’s anxiety, and blinked, slowly, as he realised that the decision had been made a long time ago, and that all he’d been doing was continuing with his own propaganda. After all the struggle it was an enormous relief to give up the battle. He said it, baldly, without artifice. “I’m queer, Bodie.”

That was the last thing Bodie had expected to hear, not announced so casually. “It’s all right,” he soothed, a great happiness threatening to spill the tears that the misery had started, thinking that there was hope for them now that Ray had had the courage to admit the truth to himself. “I know it’s bloody tough at first, but—”

Wary of what might come of his next sacrificial truth, Doyle placed his fingers against Bodie’s lips, silencing him momentarily, determined that now he’d started, he wasn’t going to slide off into cowardice. He went on, needing to make Bodie understand, and needing to finally face himself fully. “It’s not something new to me, mate,” he said, and knew, sickeningly, the instant Bodie understood the implications.

“What?” Bodie’s mouth was working, twisting, as he tried to find mere words that could ask the unaskable and to keep his hand on the rein of his temper. It’s not Ray’s fault, he told himself, it’s not been easy for him, there must’ve been a reason he didn’t tell me...

“I’ve known all my life that I liked blokes better than girls.” Bare fact, unvarnished, Doyle uneasily watching Bodie, beginning to wonder if he should have phrased things more diplomatically. Wondering if that violence that so often simmered below Bodie’s surface was about to erupt and scald them both and only too aware now that it was an unrecognised trust that had allowed him to be aroused by Bodie’s violence. The real thing had been terrifying, and a world away from the thrill of Bodie’s superbly controlled dangerousness.

For Bodie, it was as if the world had stopped with a nauseating lurch. “You mean you’ve been lying to me?”

Oh, such threat in that quiet question. One

wrong word, and Doyle knew that Bodie could snap his spine in a moment of blind fury. "I've been lying to myself."

Bodie fought the urge to rend Doyle, dragged air into his lungs, repeated the litany over and over and over again that he was not like his father, not weak like his father, he was strong enough to control it, he was man enough not to hit or bully. Finding a fragment of his calm, he grabbed it, forcing himself to some semblance of serenity, forcing himself to give the other man one more chance—to give them *both* one more chance. "You better explain yourself, Doyle, or I'm going to fucking kill you."

The words stayed in the air, poisoning the atmosphere with their truth.

Bodie looming over him, Doyle deliberately severed another strand of his vicious independence, and settled more deeply into accepting certain truths about himself. "I was too scared to admit how much I needed you," he said, and heard the unalloyed affection in his own voice, was proud that he could actually admit it both to himself and to Bodie. "I was too terrified I'd wind up being your bumboy and then have you dump me when you got tired of me."

"You think I'd do that? Me? Do that to—" Bodie shut up, outrage drying all his words up. He shook his head, genuine disappointment and dismay wiping out the incipient ire. "You really don't know me at all, do you, Ray?"

Doyle slanted a glance up at him, refusing himself the luxury of telling any more lies. "Not as well as I should. Too busy being scared of what I'd end up like, if I gave in to myself and..."

"And what?" Bodie sat down on the edge of the bed beside him, and all the lust born of anger was as faded as summer. Slowly, he traced a single fingertip across Ray's chest, unable to feel the crest of nipple through the thickness of Aran knitting. It was easier now, seeing Doyle's own self-fear, to put all the fury away and forgive all the hurts if only because Ray had obviously suffered worse self-inflicted misery. "What're you so scared about that you'd risk my neck?" He caught the guilty shift of unease in the body beside his. "Oh, yeh, I know exactly what's been going on about all that with you—for quite a time now. That's why I was willing to come up here even when the weather said it was going to be cold as hell and arse-deep in snow. We needed

to get ourselves sorted out, Ray."

He was indulging himself in an orgy of self-recrimination, paying penance for all the dreadful things he'd done to Bodie. "Us? You mean *me*, mate. I'm the one who's fucked up."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you knew what I'd been planning on doing to you."

Wide green eyes looked up at him, utterly fearless. "You mean raping me?"

"You—what—"

"Oh, yeh, I knew. I'd been pushing you that way long enough. Christ on a crutch, Bodie, wipe that look off your face! Here, shift an' all, let me sit up." He hitched himself up, taking time to arrange pillows to support him, giving himself time to gather both his thoughts and his courage. "Look, Bodie, I've known you a long time, and I admit, I still don't know you as well as I should, but there're some things about you that are fucking hard to miss."

Defensive now, his own culpability gnawing at him, Bodie sat silently, letting Doyle do all the speaking, letting Doyle bear the brunt of whatever had to be done next.

"For starters," Doyle went on as if Bodie had asked him for examples, "there's the way you always want to thump anyone who either hurts you or makes you feel useless. Then there's the way you look like you want to murder anyone who steps on my toes, but we'll talk about that in a bit." He fiddled with one of the matches from the smashed box, flicking the tip against his nail, the rasping sound setting Bodie's teeth on edge. "Getting you to lose your temper and take it out on someone's always been dead easy, and I always knew you'd done some stuff in Africa that made you ashamed. So I put two and two together and—"

"I was young then, Ray, and so fucking furious with the entire world I would've dropped a fucking atom bomb on anyone who got up my nose. That was a long time ago, and I've paid for what I did there. To think you were trying to..." His voice faded into disbelieving silence.

"Told you you weren't going to like it. But I'm not a very likeable person, am I? And you don't have to answer that, thanks very much. Yeh, yeh, it wasn't fair of me, but it was better than admitting what I really wanted."

"Better for who? Eh? You tell me *that!*" And he was on his feet, pacing the room, struggling

to maintain his calm, pushing away the anger that was nibbling so surreptitiously on him.

"Me." He was watching Bodie, waited for Bodie to turn to face him, then made his confession, all his bridges burned the instant he had decided to start telling the truth. "Since when've I ever been anything but a selfish bastard?"

"Since you took on a job that risked your life for strangers."

"Yeh, but it's easy to do that for strangers, Bodie. It's the people close to me I have trouble with, in case you hadn't noticed, you stupid bastard. It's people like you I don't know what to do with. So I hurt you and then I run away to hide."

Bodie returned to the bed, sitting down gingerly, unwilling to interrupt this unprecedented flood of confiding truths, so many things coalescing into a clearing picture. "Why d'you do that?" he asked, making sure his voice was very level, letting none of the unspent anger rise up again.

"What for?" A shrug, with the bravado Doyle must have shown when still a child, making him appear all the more vulnerable. "Because it's better than letting you get too close to me and all the rest of it."

Bodie said nothing, merely looked interrogatively at his partner.

Doyle answered, as if it was so obvious he was surprised Bodie needed him to actually say it. "So that you won't leave me. Everyone does, once they know what I'm really like it."

He hadn't meant to sound quite so forlorn about it. Hadn't even known that he felt that way...

"Is that what you think I'd do, Ray? After what we've been through, you think I don't know you?"

Quick, sharp tongue cutting, denying the hope that Bodie might be different from everyone else he'd ever tried to love. "You didn't know I was queer."

Bodie slid his hand up under the heavy sweater, fingers warmed by the damp heat of Ray's chest, heart warmed by the comprehension flooding through him. "Oh, I knew you were as ginger as me. What I thought was that *you* didn't know that about yourself. But you did, and that makes it different, Ray. That makes it very different, doesn't it?" He leaned forward, patience

finally eroded, temper finally conquered, the need for action slithering in his belly, lust uncurling to fill his cock. He was whispering now, scant inches from Doyle's face. "What is it you're so afraid of?" he asked, knowing the answer probably better than Doyle. He could ask, though, could take the time because he was strong and confident as the knowledge of Doyle's need for him infused him, and as the certainty of what he'd been too self-absorbed to see for himself made all his next moves clear. "Go on, Ray, you can tell me."

Mesmerised, Ray stared into those eyes he'd always feared would one day see him too well.

"C'mon, Ray," Bodie said again, so many minuscule hints over so much time adding up until he was absolutely positive he knew what it was Ray had to confess and well aware that Doyle had to say these things for himself. "What is it you're scared of?"

"Me," came the answer at last. "Me turning into your shadow. Needing you too much, depending on you too much, losing who I am..."

Teeth nipping tender throat, Bodie murmured, "Is that all you trust me? D'you honestly think I'd ever let anything like that happen to you, love? And anyway, what's wrong with needing *me* like that?"

The echo of his own thoughts filled Doyle, and he felt another sliver of fear leave him, and with it, another shard of his burden of independence. Gradually, he began to wonder why he'd fought so hard to be so fiercely free when it wasn't something he truly wanted, only something he had thought he had to have, were he to be a real man.

Bodie was nuzzling open-mouthed, tongue tracing erotic designs on arched neck, in his element now, understanding all of Doyle's behaviours, seeing what it was that had been wrong until now, settling easily and comfortably into a rôle he was eminently well prepared for. **This was what he had learned many, many years ago: this the key to his own nature, and obviously, to Doyle's as well. So much safer this, allowing himself the sweet edge of domination he needed while keeping himself and Ray safe from the violence his childhood had taught was love.** He was experienced enough at this to know what Doyle needed, although there was an element of embarrass-

ment that it had taken him this long to recognise what Ray was doing and going through. Stupid, really, to have missed it, when all the signs had been there so very clearly. But he had finally dropped his blinkers and looked closely enough to comprehend, and now he had the means to take a crumbling relationship and turn it into something wonderful and steady and lasting. “Like that, Ray?” he asked, voice a bare breath on sensitive skin.

“Yeh. Oh, yeh...” and Doyle was floating away on sensation, luxuriating in the sheer joy of not being responsible and in the relief from the hint of uncontrolled violence being turned aside. He didn’t like being hurt like that, oh, no, pain had to be a very special *frisson*, doled out in minute quantities to make the pleasure slide down all the more sweetly. He moved with the gentle pressure of Bodie’s hand, his sweater eased off, chest exposed, and Bodie was kissing his bared flesh. Bodie shifted him again, making him feel as if he were just a body, one of Bodie’s endless string of girls and so there was a flash of the old panic, the corrosive fear of losing himself, of giving up too much too soon. Some habits die very hard indeed, and in a blur of motion, he was upright on the bed, naked torso heaving, jeans half open, a hint of pubic hair visible in the light.

Bodie was the only one of them who didn’t seem surprised. “It’s all right, Ray,” he murmured, reaching out to stroke a puckered nipple, keeping his face impassive when Doyle smacked his hand away, although there was a stab of annoyance quickly stifled. He wasn’t going to fall into that trap again. “Don’t do that to me,” he warned, speaking very quietly, all the more threatening because of his unnatural calm. “We almost ended up fighting once today, we’re not doing it again.”

“Who’s fighting? All I’m doing—” He broke off, not unwilling to admit it, wary of giving Bodie another weapon to be used against him.

“You don’t know what you want, do you?” And Bodie was close to him again, staring at him, the dark gaze enveloping him. “You’ve been fighting yourself on this for so long now, you don’t know how to give it up. I can show you, love,” Bodie whispered, mouth against Ray’s, wanting nothing more in this life than to have Doyle let him love him and let him keep

Ray safe. “I can make it easy for you. All you have to do is trust me.”

“Oh, yeah, all I have to do is trust you, give myself over to you lock stock and barrel? Is that it? Well, you tell me, William Andrew Philip fucking Bodie, why the fucking hell I should do that?” Doyle was out of breath, heart scudding in his chest, nerves fluttering in his stomach. He couldn’t just lie down and give in, couldn’t just let a lifetime’s fight go like this, the fetters of fear still too tightly tied.

Bodie was too firmly in command of himself and too complete within his rôle now to answer Doyle with the anger that could degenerate into violence, but there was the erotic thrill of enormous strength held in check by nothing but will-power. Instead of letting Doyle back off and hide behind a fight, Bodie smiled at him, and kissed him, with all the love they had both of them denied. This one-sided explosion from Ray, he knew, was the last hurrah, Doyle’s final skirmish to prove to them both that he was still an independent, tough man—and it was also Ray’s own personality, as prickly as a porcupine, something that would probably never change on the surface. But Bodie wasn’t interested in the surface. Ray could have all the tantrums he wanted, when he wanted. Ray could have all the trappings of machismo whenever he needed them. As long as he recognised certain inner secrets here in the intimacy of their bedroom. Secrets Bodie wanted to bring out between them for them to look at and indulge. Smiling yet, he fondled Ray’s flesh, his hand parting denim to grasp a tumescent cock. Time enough for himself later: for this initial moment, it all had to be for Ray, it all had to be enough to make Ray want him, and trust him. And, of course, yield. It was what they both needed, Bodie decided, excitement rising in him at the image of Ray surrendering to him. Ray, needing him, spread for him, doing anything Bodie wanted him to, proving his love and trust over and over again.

But Doyle was looking at Bodie askance, his face disputatious, as he vacillated between the pleasure of what Bodie was doing to him, and the price he would have to pay for that same pleasure. Again, he asked himself, if letting someone else bear the burden would be really such a dreadful thing. Yes, he told himself, moving away from the caressing hands, pulling

his jeans a bit tighter round himself. No, he thought, seeing the expression in Bodie's eyes, recognising hurt and the faint glimmerings of anger. He wanted desperately to simply give in, to let the weak side of his nature win this endless battle, but he didn't quite dare give up his own image of himself as a real man who was in control of his own life. He didn't see himself as a weakling, but he would be, if he gave in to Bodie.

Bodie, watching him, remembered that nothing had been said about what might come next: he'd said nothing about wanting to take this beyond basic fucking. "Ray," he began, standing up and stripping, as mundane as if they were getting ready for a run and not changing their lives, "d'you have any idea what I'm after?"

Doyle, remembering the mastery of Bodie's hands, the domination of his strength, knew exactly what Bodie was after. It was, after all, why he himself was caught on the horns of dilemma. "Of course I fucking do! Just how stupid do you think I am?"

Oh, that was his Ray! Feisty and strong and ready to draw blood. And ripe, Bodie thought, for the picking. "Don't tempt me, love! So you know what I want?"

"Yeh." He gave Bodie an inscrutable look, added: "Me. On my knees and licking your feet."

Bodie parked himself on the bed, not too close, deliberately taking the sting and the heat of sex out of the atmosphere. "Well, that'd do for starters. But I like a bit of the rough, Ray—" An interrogative noise, which Bodie answered. "Bondage and discipline, bit of light SM, rôle playing—something to spice things up every so often."

Doyle kept his expression blank, stripping off his clothes to distract Bodie for long enough that he could catch his breath, giving himself time to sift through his own emotions and reactions. "And?"

"And is that what's got you so bothered?"

"I don't believe you," Doyle said in genuine amazement. "I don't fucking believe you! This time last week, we were having it off with each other if we had enough drinks that we could pretend we were drunk, and then here we are today and you've turned into a fucking gorilla on me. You weren't planning on stopping after

you'd manhandled me upstairs, were you?"

Bodie refused to answer that, most certainly not to himself.

"Oh, come off it, Bodie! You would've raped me if I'd let you."

"If you'd let me," Bodie looked up at him, eyes very clear, not hiding what they had both been on the verge of permitting, and the angry pain was filling him again, its presence warning them of how terribly easily they could end with nothing, "then it wouldn't've been rape, would it?"

Doyle was the first to look away, subsiding against pillows, running his hands through his hair. Honesty, he reminded himself. Time to break the habits and start telling the truth and living the life he wanted, not the life he *ought*. Time, finally, to start trusting, or lose Bodie. But it wasn't easy to give up all his defences. It wasn't easy at all. His voice was flat when he spoke, facts stated hard as stone. "Yeh, but it's better than me falling at your feet and saying take me I'm yours."

"Says who?" Bodie retorted, with just the right edge of disbelief. He knew how to play this, knew precisely how to reel Doyle in and thus keep him at his side forever. "So what's so wrong about wanting me to have you?"

Doyle looked at him with pity, too wrapped up in his own shifting perceptions to see what Bodie was doing. "You don't get it at all, do you?"

"What—that you fancy the idea of a bit of kinky sex, but you're scared you'll like it?"

"Oh, for fuck's—Look, Bodie, I've been having sex since you were still trying to work out what that funny floppy thing between your legs was for; I already *know* all about what you call kinky sex, and what's more, I bet I've gone farther than you've ever dreamed!"

Not quite what he'd expected to hear, but Bodie changed gears smoothly, altering his approach perfectly. "Fair enough. But if that's true—and I'm not saying it's not," he added, letting Ray see that he and his temper were still respected, "but if that's true, then what was all the arguing in aid of?" His pause was flawlessly timed and then he said, purely to provoke the right kind of admission: "Or are you always a top?"

Doyle shrugged, not quite sure how to re-

spend to this casual discussion of his sexual proclivities. "I've done it all, but..." He didn't want to say it, his security blanket shredding around him, but Bodie was looking at him, silently, relentlessly demanding, getting to his feet as if he would leave if Doyle wouldn't talk to him. And the need to be his own man was dissolving quietly, his own deep-seated proclivities struggling to be heard, his love of Bodie overwhelming his doubts, until Doyle found that he did want to say it after all. "I never went back for a second go."

Appalled, Bodie sat back down. He'd been wrong: utterly wrong, first about why Ray kept the sex in the closet, and second about what Ray liked. Christ, if he was that far off the mark, then— But Ray was speaking to him again, making everything all right again, the quiet words the keys to the gates of heaven.

"I never went back to the same *bloke* twice, I should say." A quick glance to see how Bodie was taking this, too quick, in fact, for him to find out. "I was scared because I liked it too much. But only when someone else was the one in control."

Bodie reached out now, taking Ray's hand in his own, an undemanding, friendly gesture, gentle handling to get Ray to conquer his own fear and come to Bodie of his own free will. He wanted that from Ray, needed it to be that Ray wanted this as much as he did. No guilt for him that way, and no danger that he would end up behaving like his dad again. He winced as he thought about the way he'd hauled Ray upstairs, and the things he had planned on doing in his fury: things he'd sworn he'd never do again. But he had come close, so revoltingly close he disgusted himself. All the more reason to stay completely in control of himself right now, to back off from doing anything that might be his father's violent manipulations disguised as persuasion. For the sake of his own conscience, for the sake of the promises he had made to himself, he had to make sure that this really was what Ray wanted. Bodie had come too far in his life to swap one form of rape for another. Judging that he'd given Doyle time enough to think, he rubbed his thumb, caressingly erotic, over the vulnerable pulse in Ray's wrist. "Even if you liked it too much," he said, no longer filled with his own pre-conceived notions of what made

Ray Doyle tick, willing to actually listen to him, "where's the problem in that? So you have a bit of a fetish—who hasn't?"

Doyle focussed on that thumb stroking him, but he was still too aware of Bodie's nakedness and muscular power. Distracted, he had to clear his throat before he could speak. "I've been telling you, you twit, it's not the sex. I just used that to pull the wool over your eyes so you wouldn't twig."

Bodie lifted Ray's hand to his mouth, pressed open-mouthed kisses to the palm, and then, responding to Ray's avowal about sex, used his teeth to nip the tender skin of inner wrist.

Doyle's breath hissed out of him and passion sped in. He tugged, hard, freeing his hand, putting himself out of reach of temptation. So difficult not to simply surrender—but then, hadn't it always been? Always been there inside him, just waiting for the one person whom he could trust in enough. Like it or not, he thought, stealing an uneasy glimpse of Bodie out of the corner of his eye, he'd found that person. "If you start that now, I'll never be able to tell you..."

Bodie sat back, making a point of silence, waiting attentively—but his foot slid slowly and sensuously along the soft hair covering Ray's leg.

"It's not the sex that bothers me," Doyle said, unaware that he was repeating himself, more thinking out loud than truly explaining everything to Bodie. After all, Bodie was quite comfortable with their rôles in this, it was Doyle who needed to hear this far more than Bodie did. "It's afterwards. It's... Christ, Bodie, I've always been the one the other boys picked on, I've always had to fight to be taken seriously, too pretty by half..." He looked up, flushed with the awareness of the pleading that would be in his eyes. "I've always wanted someone to come take care of me, fight some of my battles for me..."

Bodie smiled at him, slow and lazy and overbrimming with affection. "One knight in shining armour coming up," he said, turning on the bed until he was astride Ray's thighs, his own bum resting heavily on Ray's groin, Doyle's cock pressed between them. "And as I said before, what's wrong with that? There's no shame in it, is there? Even I let you fight my battles for me sometimes."

"Only when you want more money out of

Cowley! And d'you honestly think I'd be worried about something like that anyway? Don't be so fucking stupid! It's..." he paused, trying not to lose track of his thoughts with the beauty of Bodie pressing into him threatening to turn him into a brainless mass of arousal. He said the last of it all in a rush. "It's that I think I could end up getting in way over my head and wind up like one of those pathetic bastards with dog collars round their necks that you see in the magazines and clubs."

Bodie burst out laughing, the image of Raymond Doyle so utterly subservient preposterous beyond belief. "You?" he finally spluttered, still laughing as a stroppy Doyle glowered at him. "You? Oh, Ray, you idiot, you might end up making someone a lovely wife, but you'd never be a slave. All right," he hastened, sobering quickly as Doyle moved sharply as if to bring his knee up to where it would do Bodie the most damage, "all right, so it's no laughing matter, I know. But still, you—a slave in a collar?"

"What's so farfetched about that? I wear this fucking necklace, don't I?"

Bodie was genuinely puzzled by what, to him, was a total *non sequitor*. "What's your jewellery got to do with it?"

"I wear it because *you* like it. Same with the bracelet, and these new t-shirts, and the boots, and the way I've been letting my hair get too long and—"

"And I've been wearing leather jackets for you, and that horrible blue shirt you like me in, even though I hate it, and I've been letting my hair grow as well."

"You call that toilet brush long?" Then the sense of what Bodie had said penetrated. "Yeh, well, that's because you love me."

Bodie blinked at that, but didn't show just how shocked he was by Doyle's casual knowledge of something he himself had barely worked out. "So even if you don't love me, it's only natural to do things for the other person, make them feel important."

"Might be natural for you, mate, but I've never done it in my life before."

"Perhaps," back arching, leaning forward to lick a pert nipple, Bodie whispered, fishing for compliments, "you never loved anyone before."

"Oh, I've been in love before—too bloody often. But...I mean, I'm dafter over you than

I've ever been anyone else, right?"

Bodie was only too happy to agree, something sweet and joyous stirring in him. It took him a second to recognise hope: the feeling that they were going to manage after all.

"So here I am, always had to fight myself so's I don't end up a doormat like my dad, and now all I want to do is let you run my life for me."

"Doormats," Bodie said, lapping at the hair on Doyle's chest, "are only doormats because the people they fall in love with take advantage of them." He raised himself up, until he was face to face with Doyle. "Are you trying to tell me you think I'd abuse you?"

"You came fucking close this afternoon, didn't you?"

"Yeh, well, it's not often I get like that these days, is it? And I'm watching myself for it all the time, Ray, all the fucking time. Listen," and he was intent and intense, willing Doyle to believe him, willing his partner to take this final hurdle, "I'm not saying I'm never ever going to fuck things up, but if I do, I'll be right in there, making up for it. And I won't do the same stupid thing twice."

"And I'm supposed to believe that?" Doyle said, hedging his bets, needing that one last promise before he dared take the final risk. "How'm I supposed to believe that, eh?"

"You could always try trusting me. And yourself."

"How can I?"

Bodie grinned at him and filled his hands with warm Ray Doyle. "Because I can trust you, and I do trust you, and seeing as how I'm such a fucking genius..." He let his words trail off, and hugged Ray close to him as he watched the thoughts scudding across Doyle's eyes. "C'mon, Ray," he whispered, "give it a go. I'll make you a deal: I promise you I won't let you get in too deep, and you promise to tell me if I'm getting out of line, all right?"

Doyle still had questions, still had things he could worry at like a bone, but he also had feelings, emotions that screamed that Bodie was the one person he could really trust. That Bodie would take care of everything for him. That with Bodie, there was nothing they couldn't deal with. He took a deep breath, then lowered his hands until they were a cradle under Bodie's cock and balls. "Fair enough," he said, tracing

his fingertip over the pulse of vein, “you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“But?” Bodie asked, arching up into the touch, expecting Doyle to have a myriad of doubts to chew over.

“But nothing,” Doyle said, not looking him in the eye. There were still questions, still problems he could see, but there was nothing thinking about them in advance could do. And right now he had Bodie within reach, exposed to him, made vulnerable as a means of proving to Doyle that he could, indeed, trust. Suddenly, he looked up, startling Bodie into honesty, the blue eyes expressive of emotions that Doyle needed more than anything else in the world. “You really mean it, don’t you? You don’t think I’ll ever get to the pathetic stage—”

“And if you ever tried, I’d fucking kill you.” Bodie kissed him, too lightly, a scant temptation of lips. “What use would I have for some bastard who can’t think without his Master telling him what to think first? In the bedroom, that’s different, but outside? No thanks, mate. And before you say anything,” he said, having a fairly good idea of which particular worry had just frowned across Doyle’s face, “letting me exercise my natural talents for leadership isn’t the same fucking thing as being led around by the nose.” He shifted himself lower on Doyle’s legs and pulled denim open, burrowed his hand under the body-warm fabric until his hand filled with turgid arousal. “Or by the cock, for that matter. And anyway, you shouldn’t try to live this whole thing out before it happens, that’s—”

“Bad karma,” Doyle supplied, smiling at Bodie’s personal superstition, closing his eyes at Bodie’s very personal caress. His head fell back, and he lifted his hips a little higher, pressing himself more into Bodie’s hand.

Staring at the body sprawled in front of him, Bodie recognised that the moment had come: Doyle was poised, one last step to take, and if Bodie didn’t take command right now, then Doyle would start his worrying again, would start to fear the instant their fucking hinted at anything but Doyle being on top in the most basic of sex. Not something Bodie was willing to permit: he’d come here to Wales determined that this Christmas holiday would either sort everything out, or free him from his anguished love for Ray Doyle. So close, so tantalisingly

close, he wasn’t going to allow any of Ray’s stupid insecurities to push them apart. Make or break, that’s what these few days were supposed to be all about. Closing his teeth around a pointed nipple, Bodie thought he’d be damned if he let their relationship break.

The sharpness of a bite snapped Doyle’s eyes open, the pain shingling through him, causing an explosive pleasure in his balls. “Christ, Bodie!” he managed, but then his mouth was filled with Bodie’s fingers, a substitute cock for him to suck on, and he mouthed the digits, taking them inside, displaying his skill, enticing Bodie to give him the real thing. He moved to reach around to Bodie’s cock—and was stopped. He froze, caught in the conflict of his deepest desire, and the fear of what giving in to that would do to him.

Bodie rose to his knees, no part of him touching Ray, and he looked at his mate very seriously, setting the mood, beginning the scene. “Don’t,” he said, voice deeper than usual. “Just remember that some of the most powerful men in the world get their kicks from being tied up helpless and getting their arses tanned for them. This is your escape from the responsibility of killing some people and saving other ones. Let the fear go, Ray, let it go, and trust me.”

Last chance. He knew it was his last chance—to go forward, to run screaming backwards, anything but languish in limbo. He took a deep breath, aware that they hadn’t discussed all the things that should be discussed, but recognising that was part of it. He had to trust. Implicitly, without reservation, he *had* to trust Bodie. He looked at the man waiting so impassively in front of him, an entire history between them. If either of them had cause not to trust, then it was Bodie, not Doyle himself. Yet Bodie was there, willing to take a chance on him: willing to do something Doyle wouldn’t do, were he in Bodie’s shoes.

“Do you trust me, Ray?”

Doyle met his eyes. Couldn’t lie. Couldn’t hide behind fear. “Yes.”

Bodie smiled, giving away only the faintest hint of his elation and victory. “Then get on your knees. On the floor.” He watched avidly as Doyle did as he was told, then tugged his belt free from his trousers. “Arms behind your back.” Doyle obeyed, but Bodie could see the slight

shimmer of sweat begin on the shoulders and upper back: not a comfortable position for a security agent, to be kneeling with his hands bound behind his back. But incredibly erotic, Bodie knew, firmly strapping Doyle into immobility. Walking tall, he circled the kneeling man, only once unable to resist the temptation to smooth the curls on the downbent head. Doyle's cock was leaning heavily away from his body, the cowled head barely peeping out, the pulse of engorging desire readily visible. Stopping directly in front of Doyle, Bodie shoved him, so that Doyle overbalanced, ending up sprawled on the floor. Ungently, Bodie sat him upright, lightly kicking Doyle's legs apart, until the fragile genitals were exposed and vulnerable. Bodie lifted his foot, pressed the sensitive balls onto the floor, Doyle's shuddering gasp of arousal reward to them both. Then a change in the sound, and Bodie backed off, careful not to push Ray farther than was comfortable at this stage. He turned the pressure of his foot into a caress, rubbing the length of Ray's cock, softly lifting the hardness up to press into Doyle's belly.

Ray looked up, perspective distorted, Bodie's cock huge in front of him, Bodie's face seemingly far away. Helpless, the very helplessness fueling his own desire, he was washed by a tide of trust, and of freedom, no fear in this, not when it was Bodie towering over him, making being small a pleasure and not a penalty. His mouth dropped open in silent appeal, and he was rewarded, Bodie coming in closer, Bodie's groin right there at his face. It wasn't often that Doyle had dared indulge his taste for bondage, and so it was difficult for the first seconds, but then his own hunger overcame his lack of practice, and he had managed to get Bodie into his mouth without the guiding assistance of hands. Bodie was big, big enough to gag the inexperienced, but this was something Doyle had done many a time, although it was something unique, the combination of Bodie and bondage satisfying an emotional ache deep inside him. He moved his head, sucking and licking, determined to give Bodie pleasure back measure for measure. He felt hands firm in his hair, pulling him closer, Bodie's cock sinking farther into his throat, his nose pressed to the aromatic heat of pubic hair, his hands bound behind him, so that he was

totally dependent for balance upon Bodie, Bodie's hands holding him, Bodie's body supporting him. Bodie thrust into him, taking his breath away, and the first drop of panic reappeared.

But then Bodie eased from his mouth, stroked his hair back, and whispered how beautiful he was, and how gifted, and how pleased Bodie was with him, and Doyle felt only pride, and satisfaction, and the delicious pleasure of being able to enjoy sex without having to take any of the responsibility for making it work. Bodie was there for that, Bodie taking care of everything, Bodie lifting him to his feet, guiding him, hands caressing him, possessing him, until he was kneeling on the floor, his torso on the rumpled bed, heat from the fire on his flank, heat from the bed on his chest, teasing his nipples. Bodie was arched over him, belly to Doyle's bound hands, his breath warm on Ray's nape, and Doyle felt himself surrounded by protective strength: something he had feared as much as he had longed for it. And this was no anonymous encounter, some stranger used as prop for the most dangerous of his fantasies: this was Bodie, whom he knew, with whom he spent more hours of the day than not, with whom he could permit himself the riches of trust.

"All right down there?" Bodie asked, keeping the timbre of his voice stern, although his words were soft, and his hands firm with their bringing of pleasure.

"Yes."

Later, Bodie would push it into more blatant domination/submission, but today was to lay foundations that would let them build something permanent. It was what he needed, someone to come home to, someone who would always be there, someone he could trust enough to shout at him if he showed signs of turning into the bully his father had taught him to be. Crouching down behind Doyle, his balls brushing lightly against the sensitive hairs of his inner thighs, Bodie took a long, luxurious look at his partner, at the hands bound in leather, at the limber back bent over to display the round rump and there, in the cleft, the faintest dusting of hair, softening his view of the arse where he would be burying himself. Soon, he promised his aching cock, too far aroused to dare to touch himself unless truly necessary. He breathed deeply, turning reluc-

tantly away from the gorgeous display and fumbled through Doyle's bag that would have been surreptitiously packed—God, so few hours ago, when everything was still crumbling round his ears and he hadn't dared risk believing that Doyle cared about him at all.

And now look at him. Kneeling, utterly passive, waiting for Bodie, making a gift of his trust and, Bodie knew with a sudden surge of lust deep in his belly, of his love as well. Keeping the tremor out of his fingers, glorying in the power of having Doyle's happiness in his hands, Bodie slicked some gel onto the tight pucker of Ray's arse, sliding one finger inside immediately, sinking in up to the knuckle, Doyle arching abruptly against him, a hiss of arousal filling the air, from one of them, from both of them, Bodie was no longer sure, nothing existing for him save Ray, and the sensations of their bodies.

Bodie was inside him, finger pressing against his prostate, and Doyle wanted Bodie to fuck him, wanted to have Bodie inside him, mastering his passion and mastering his will, turning him to Bodie's pleasure, and Bodie's will. He had no fear of it now, only an exultant glow that he had made the right choice, that he had found the one person who could keep the defenceless core of him safer than he could himself. But he wanted more than Bodie was giving him, so he moved, deliberately provoking, confident that someone as experienced as Bodie would know what was behind it. And was rewarded, instantly, with the sting of a hand on his arse, red heat warming, blood flooding to fill the hollow left by the palm, and Doyle swore he could feel the individual prints of the fingers. He shifted again, disobedient enough to warrant another blow, and another, pummelling down on him, hard enough to hurt, the thrilling threat of Bodie's strength held back just enough to make Doyle feel incredibly safe. He moaned his appreciation and raised his rump, the heat on his arse far warmer than the nipping burn from the blazing coal fire. Just the way he liked to be, just the way he so rarely dared enjoy. He wriggled against the bedcovers, the rough nub of old-fashioned quilting seams scraping at his chest, a welcome discomfort, an added piquancy to the wonderfully masterful blows ringing down on his backside. The heat was rising, the pain receding now into pride-filled pleasure: he had taken his

man, had taken all that strength into himself, and because Bodie had such respect for him outside the bedroom, for once in his life he had no worries about the aftermath. All thoughts of the future were cast out of his mind so that all there was for him was Bodie, their pleasure, and his own exquisite submission.

Breathing heavily, Bodie surveyed his handiwork, the once-white buttocks stained a uniform blushing red, only the crack that separated the globes still white. Even that would change, once he was inside Ray, fucking him, his body plundering deep and belly slapping against the tender spread flesh. Soon, he thought, mindful of his responsibilities, wary of his violent heritage.

NOW! said his body, and he gulped air in, calming himself, trying to force himself back a little until he was in control enough that he could claim the body laid out so faithfully before him. Ray was writhing, and Bodie knew it was from the pain of his arse transcending into pleasure and the anticipation of being fucked. Knew, too, that Doyle would be flying high on being so firmly controlled, although if he knew his Ray, it wouldn't be long before this kind of thing wouldn't be enough for the nights when they needed such special love-making. There were things he would do then, when Ray was completely at ease—and thinking like this wasn't having the desired effect at all. In fact, it was serving only to make him hungrier, his balls up tight against his cock, belly hollow with lust, mind overfull with love.

"Ready?" he asked, one hand caressing the succulent swell of arse. There was no word to answer him, but Ray spread his legs a little wider and lifted himself, taking more of his weight onto his chest, a position which must have been uncomfortable, but emphasised to both of them how helpless Ray was.

Fingers delving briefly into the honeyed dampness of Ray's backside, Bodie scissored his fingers, Doyle's body stretching easily. Withdrawing, he guided his cock to the small opening, watching as the flesh parted for him, widening, swallowing him up, his largeness disappearing into that incredible smallness. He threw his head back, an animal cry of unadulterated pleasure hurling from his throat.

"So tight," he muttered, collapsing forward, leaning heavily on his mate, Doyle's trapped

hands scrabbling to touch him better. "So fucking tight, incredible, fucking incredible..."

Then they were both beyond words, reduced to guttural noises and liquid moans to express the carnal gratification of their love. Bodie thrust in deep, and felt Doyle clutch at him; Doyle cried out in mute despair as Bodie withdrew from him, and Bodie rammed himself home again. Taking and taken, owner and owned, it was all pleasure, was all the satin friction of clamouring ecstasy, was all the fulfillment of desires too long denied.

It couldn't possibly last long, and didn't, Bodie pouring his essence into Ray, Doyle fucking himself against the roughness of bedspread, his cum streaming from him as he felt kisses upon his neck, and Bodie's heat liquid inside him.

Yet it was far from over: only the physical act was complete, and slowly, bones like jelly, Bodie eased his cock from the addictive heat of Doyle's arse, then heaved himself to his feet. He gathered Ray to him, keeping him bound, giving Doyle the emotional pay-off to go with the sexual. "Under the covers with you," he said, laying Doyle sideways on the clean sheet, pausing to clean him inside and out, unable to stop his own smile as he thought of himself in there, leaving his mark on Ray forever. Finally content that they were both as clean as they were going to be without benefit of a bath, he clambered in beside his silent mate, tugging the heavy covers up over them. Now that the heat of passion had passed, he was aware of how cold they both were, Ray's feet freezing and his hands like ice on the rosy warmth of his well-spanked arse.

Wide green eyes stared at him, but Doyle held his tongue.

Bodie, molten with tenderness for this man who had the courage to face his own inner fears and take on a powder-keg for a master, stroked sweat-heavy curls away from the unexpressive face. Getting no response, he slid his hands down the strong muscles of Doyle's arms.

Doyle loved this, lying here in Bodie's arms, his own hands still bound, Bodie's hands caressing him, assessing his strength the way he would an opponent. It was precious to be so helpless and yet be so respected, Bodie treating him as he would have before Doyle had submitted to him. He had expected to regret doing

this, but instead, he was serene with the knowledge that he had finally taken the right decision. He smiled then, startling Bodie, who grinned back at him. The mood was broken, Bodie was back to being just plain old Bodie, and Doyle flexed his arms, testing both Bodie's reaction to him, and his own reaction to himself.

"Had enough?" Bodie asked him, undoing the belt without needing an answer.

Doyle surprised himself with his answer. "Don't think I'm ever going to have enough of you." Taken aback, he laughed out loud, rolling over until he had Bodie pinned under him, making it easier for his partner to free him. Rubbing the gorgeous red marks left by the leather binding, he waited for his fingers to get back to normal. Then he stroked the chafed ridges across Bodie's lips, a shiver of renewed desire going through him as a tongue-tip flickered moistly across his badges of courage. "Never said anything like that to anyone before," he mused, narrowed gaze focussed entirely on the pink tongue tracing his own reddened welts. "Never wanted to, in case it was true." He smiled, half blinding Bodie with his exuberance. "Nice now that it is."

"Nice?" Bodie teased, hands cupping the buttocks he had so lovingly marked. "After that, all you can do is call it *nice*? You need to have a quick word with Mrs. Whitehouse, mate."

"Nah. Our Maggie—bet she'd understand all this."

Bodie laughed at that, picturing the snooty maiden in a less than powerful position. "Now, now, don't be naughty, Ray."

"Why not? If I'm naughty—" He arched his arse eloquently up into Bodie's hands, his body speaking loud and clear.

"Liked that, did you?" Bodie asked, unbearably smug.

"Was all right, I suppose."

"All right? All right? You—" Then Bodie remembered the ecstatic cries, and the extremity of pleasure that he'd reduced Ray to. "All right?" he asked again, in a totally different tone, inviting whichever comment Doyle was setting them up for.

"Yeh, all right. For openers."

"Want more of it like that, then, do you?"

"Told you, I've done everything under the sun, just that I've never had someone I could

trust enough to come back for more. And I," he said threateningly, "have a lot of lost time to make up for."

Bodie, rubbing his sadly unresponsive cock against Doyle's limpness, muttered, "Well, you shall just have to be a good boy and wait."

Husky voiced, bedroom-eyed, Doyle licked behind Bodie's ear, a ripple of pleasure in his wake. "I'd rather be a naughty boy and get fucked."

Bodie wrapped himself round Ray, hugging him close, burying his face in curly hair. "No doubts?" he asked, unexpectedly unsure, his own doubts stirring unwelcomely.

"Not about you," Doyle whispered to him, languorously rubbing his body over Bodie's. "And precious few about me, with you there to keep me on the straight and narrow."

"So to speak," Bodie said, laughter spiking his voice as he found a lingering wetness of his seed, his finger sliding into Doyle's arse once more.

"Mmm, keep on doing that, and I shall have to—"

"Be half your age if you want to get it up again so soon. C'mere, let me kiss you until your cock catches up to your brain, you dirty minded little sod."

"Ooh, you say the nicest things, Bodie. You always this romantic?"

The comment, intended to be a joke, clunked between them like a brick through window pane. They had both been doing it, behaving as if this were the first time they'd done anything like this.

"Christ, listen to us!" Bodie said, embarrassed, a bit awkward. "Anyone'd think we'd never fucked before."

Doyle propped himself up on folded arms, Bodie's smooth chest his pillow. "Yeh, but it *is* the first time we've been intimate. And get that look off your face, mate. Shoving your cock up someone's arse can be about as intimate as shaking hands if you want it to be."

Bodie didn't want to talk about it, not like this. He wasn't quite ready to have all the times before relegated to meaninglessness. To think about it like that, all that waste—no, he wasn't going to. Doyle wasn't saying it to cause pain, not deliberately, not this time. He forced himself to let the tension go, denied the anger that was

always so quick to appear whenever his control of any situation slipped. Vulnerability was something he craved, but he'd learned that he could have it only vicariously in the willing submission of someone else. And he was abruptly, unquestioningly happy. He'd found that in Ray, and found that it was the way to unlock all that love he'd been hankering after for so terribly long.

"You look like a cat with canary feathers hanging out its gob," Doyle said, never much one for whispering sweet nothings.

"Yeh, well, got cause to be, haven't I?"

Doyle didn't need to ask why, filled with the same silly glee himself. "Should bloody well think so!" He rubbed himself questioningly against Bodie, disappointed when there wasn't so much as a flicker from either one of them. "Should've brought oysters," he muttered mournfully.

"Don't need them."

Doyle thrust downwards, encountering only softness. Miraculously, he refrained from commenting.

"Don't need them," Bodie said, hands roving over the downy smoothness of Ray's back, "because I've got you. And you," he nipped the tip of Doyle's nose, planting small kisses on the face that hovered over his, "come a lot cheaper."

Doyle opened his mouth to yell, and was silenced instead by a kiss that lasted a satisfyingly long time.

"Speaking of food," Bodie finally said, disentangling himself from the octopus embrace, "I'm starving. Fancy a bite?"

Doyle grinned at him, slithering quickly down his body until he was perched precariously close to the still-quiescent cock. "What was that you were saying?" he asked wickedly, teeth glinting crocodile sharp.

"Oi, it's you who likes that, not me, so get your arse back up here!"

Doyle was manhandled into position, carefully arranged to Bodie's liking, large hands skimming over the tenderness of his backside. Contentment filled him, enough that he was unwisely generous, finding himself offering to make Bodie something to eat. There was a twinge somewhere inside him, but Bodie was smiling at him, Bodie was kissing him, Bodie was approving of him. "I'll come down and give you a

hand, love.”

Doyle picked one of Bodie’s hands up, examining it, fitting it to the curve of his bum, measuring its size against his rosy flesh. “You’re bloody good at this, Bodie,” he murmured, a bit uneasy still with such calm discussion of such emotive subjects. “And I don’t just mean the sex part. You really knew when to push me and when to come over all tender to me as well.” He paused, curiosity really piqued, and decided that he had earned the right to ask. “Who taught you?”

“My dad.”

Said so casually, and sending shock waves through Doyle, a man who’d been a beat copper long enough to know the horrors of too many families. “Your dad? Christ, Bodie, I’m sorry—”

“You what? Oh, you idiot,” he cuffed Ray affectionately, then pinched his bum nice and hard. “Not like that, you daft bugger. He just had a temper on him—that’s where I got mine from—and he let it fuck his life up royally. I always swore I’d never be like him, but he was a master at manipulating, and I picked a few things up from what he did to us. But I don’t do it for the same reasons as him, Ray, so you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Bad, was it? Your childhood, I mean.”

Bodie shrugged as well as he was able with Doyle draped over him. “No worse than some peoples’ and a hell of a lot better than some. Most of it was brilliant, actually.”

Doyle lay there, staring at him, wondering at the strength it took to turn what would be misery to other people into something ‘brilliant’, and beatings at the hand of his father into something as loving as what they’d just done. Bodie’d made it all sound so fucking easy, which Doyle knew was a bare-faced lie. Still, they’d

embarked on something that was clearing away the old lies and protective walls, leaving them able to be open with each other. He’d find out the real truth soon enough. They could—his romantic wanderings were interrupted by a loud and lengthy rumble from Bodie’s underfed belly.

He looked at Bodie, then sighed and gave in to the mundane humour of the situation. “All right, hollow-legs,” he said, hauling Bodie out of bed, “food. Get your arse down to the kitchen and we’ll feed that pit of yours.”

And they were downstairs in the kitchen, well wrapped up in dressing gowns and with the open oven on full blast, before Doyle realised that they were back and forthing the way they always did, the only difference being the absence of acrimony. There were still things to be sorted out, he thought to himself as he deftly cooked up an enormous meal, Bodie sitting in a stiff-backed chair, swiping his rump whenever it came into reach, but it looked as if this was going to be a thoroughly enjoyable Christmas after all. He was smiling as he set a plate heaped with food in front of Bodie, grinningly aware that he was making Bodie a lovely wife—and relieved as hell that it was enough for both of them.

Confident of himself and newly comfortable with his own nature, he waited until the last butter-dripping potato had been chewed with evident satisfaction before he threw himself into Bodie’s lap, latched his arms around Bodie’s neck and, laughing, said, “Well, go on. Take me, I’m yours.”

Bodie did, and Doyle was, and so enrapt in each other, they were probably the only people in Wales that year who never even realised they were snowbound.

(End of the alternate version of Snowbound. Do not continue with ...the Worst of Times or Little Doyle.)



ON THIN ICE or SKATE EXPECTATIONS



And now for your pleasure, M. Fae's latest sports story. Since it's Christmastime things won't go swimmingly for our boys, but as Doyle coldly continues with very cutting remarks, the question becomes: can Bodie glide out of Doyle's dare?

With desultory skill, Murphy was launching blue-fledged darts at the dartboard, scoring Cow's Eye every time, the large glossy photograph now little more than a tattered remnant, the ancient cork of the dartsboard peeking through. Run out of darts, he heaved himself to his feet and meandered over to the board, grabbing his darts, then deciding that the foursome round the scarred table was marginally more interesting than defacing his boss, he wandered over to commit hara kiri with that lethal brew known as CI5 tea.

McCabe was the one carrying the conversational ball. "Yeh, but what'd you go and put more sugar in without asking me first? You know I always sugar first, then milk, then tea—"

"Always? Half the time when you make the tea, I get either no sugar or no milk because you're so sodding slow that if I don't grab my mug myself, it's gone stone cold—"

"Oh, shut up both of you," Murphy said,

cutting right through the acrimony of pure boredom, stabbing his darts into the loaf on the table so that he wouldn't lose them. "I'll take both the teas and you two can pour yourselves another, right?"

Christ, but he hated the Christmas season, when not even the IRA could be counted on to liven things up. Traditional 72 hour suspension of civilian attacks, so here they were, stuck in the CI5 restroom, with nothing to do and nowhere to go. He refused to let the bickering start up again, so he looked at the one most likely to start niggling if left undistracted. "So where are you going tonight then, Doyle?"

Doyle yawned, added another sugar cube to his leaning tower and mumbled, "Ice rink."

Four people turned as one to look at him, then guffawed. "Ice skating?" Lucas cackled. "You?"

"Yeh, me. You got something to say about it?"

Not even Lucas was bored enough to prod

Doyle when he used that tone of voice. “Who me? Nah, never. Very respectable pastime, is ice skating.” Doyle was looking like thunder, obviously taking exception to what Lucas recognised had been an unwisely amused tone of voice. Best to mend that before Doyle got started on him. “Your bird like ice-skating, does she?”

That was an even unwise thing to say.

Bodie winced: girls had been a touchy subject with Doyle for the past three weeks or so, ever since his last one had told him precisely what she thought of a man who could treat her so badly and had literally thrown him out of her house—and right into the biggest puddle this side of the Atlantic.

“No,” Doyle said with dignity, looking down his nose at his companions. “I’m not as immature as you lot—I’m perfectly capable of going off somewhere on my own to enjoy myself.”

What was that we were saying about being unwise? There was a chorus from around the table: “You’ll go blind doing that!”

“Want to borrow my magnifying glass?”

“Just don’t you go borrowing my shaver for your palms, mate.”

“Prats!” And he grabbed up his mug, walking off, slurping, loudly.

Of course, it was only a matter of seconds before Bodie had followed him, parking his bum on the sofa beside Doyle, his leg touching reassuringly down the length of Doyle’s.

“You ever been skating?” Doyle asked, a faintly acknowledged yearning prompting him to ask.

Bodie looked at him sharply, not expecting Doyle to continue the conversation of the table. “You what?”

“Have. You. Ever. Been. Ice. Skay-ting, Bodie?”

Not nice of Doyle, not nice at all to make fun of him like that when he’d been decent enough to come to keep him company. Plus, Bodie was as bored at everyone else, and a spat with Doyle was always fun. “Don’t be stupid.” Doyle had another noisy drink of tea, precisely because he knew the slurping drove Bodie round the twist. Bodie looked at him again. “Sissything, skating.”

Doyle gave him one of his slow grins, the devil in him wondering if this was the opportunity he’d been looking for. “You’re just saying

that cos you can’t skate.” Then his face lit up with glee as something occurred to him, deeper motivations pushed aside for the moment. “Bet that’s what it is! There’s something you can’t do and you’re too embarrassed to admit it.” Bodie was suddenly fascinated by the pattern of loose threads on the arm of the sofa, and Doyle burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s great—” He raised his voice, baiting friends one of his favourite hobbies. “Oi, you lot! Bodie can’t skate and he’s too scared to try it.”

“I am not scared!” Pure indignance, while a faint blush betrayed him. “Anyway, you never asked me about *goingskating*, you just asked me if I’d ever *beenskating*. Ought to learn the Queen’s English, you.”

“That’s nit-picking, Bodie,” Lucas shouted, pausing in their game of city scaping with breadcrumbs, sugar cubes, spoons and streets of murky brown tea. “You’re scared of making a pillock of yourself—”

“Bit late for that,” McCabe put in, moving the Victory Square over to beside King Dave’s Palace.

“Scared? Our Bodie? One of Sports And Social’s best? Nah, not him,” Murphy, taking his turn, wicked humour on the rise, digging up an event Bodie would prefer forgotten. “Only blokes who jump ten feet in the air because a wasp is after him would be scared to go ice-skating.”

“It wasn’t a wasp, it was a fucking hive!” Bodie shouted, but all he got was catcalling and laughter.

Doyle, naturally, was the worst offender, everything else forgotten in the delight of one-upping his partner and taking the mick with the best of them. “But I bet you are scared. Petrified, even. Bet you five quid you’re too fucking terrified to come ice-skating with me.”

“Don’t be a wally, Doyle. It’s cold out there, and you want me to freeze my balls off even worse at an ice-rink? You must be daft.”

Not daft, but that half-formed idea was back, egging him on. “Nah. But you’re scared.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you bloody are!”

“Am bloody not!”

Doyle smiled at him then, voice smooth as water, closing the trap he had so surreptitiously laid. “Then prove it.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Doyle, you’re as bad as

a kid. What is this—dare and double dare?”

Doyle was enjoying himself now, ten hours stand-by made up for by ten minutes of baiting Bodie and the scalp-tingling possibilities of telling a truth he hated keeping secret. “Fair enough. You go ice-skating, and then you can dare me.”

Now that made it interesting. “Right then, you’re on.”

Doyle jumped to his feet, half-full mug going on the floor where it would surely be spilt later adding to the moiré of stains on the carpet. He was in a hurry now, ready to get them out of there before he came to his senses and realised just how terrifying a thing he was doing. “Then let’s get going.”

“Now?”

“When else? Up, Bodie, shift your arse, twinkletoes, and let’s see you do your John Curry.”

“I know there’s not a lot of room in that thick skull of yours, but we are still on duty, you know,” Bodie said smugly, leaning back a bit more comfortably.

“No you’re not, you lucky bastard,” Jax said, making straight for the tea pot. “You get to go home to a nice warm bed and a nice warm bird—”

“Not tonight, he doesn’t,” Doyle said before anyone else could, then wincing as he inserted his foot firmly in his mouth and chewed. “Tonight, he’s coming with me.”

And with that, they left the restroom, to cries of “be gentle with him!” and “I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

Doyle, eloquent and elegant as ever, stuck two fingers round the door at them. But the hand was shaking, infinitesimally.

There were hordes of kids and mums and dads everywhere, apart from the cafeteria, which was overflowing with teenagers holding hands over the mugs of chicken soup and cocoa.

“Oh, very nice,” Bodie sneered, leaning casually on the counter, surveying the down-at-heels fixtures and the peeling paint job.

“Oh, pardon me,” Doyle muttered to him, pulling his shoes off. He’d had time enough to re-list all the things he’d listed to himself so many times before and he wasn’t quite as keen on his original idea as he had been. The things he

did when he got bored... He just hoped he wasn’t going to regret this one. “But the Savoy’s rink is closed to have the velvet carpet brushed.”

Bodie chose this moment to notice what Doyle was doing. “What’s that in aid of?” he asked, as Doyle plonked his shoes down on the counter.

Long-sufferingly, Doyle looked at him. “Can’t get skates on over shoes, can you? So you have to take your shoes off, don’t you? So then you hand them to the assistant and they give you skates in your size and keep your shoes behind the counter so they can’t get nicked. So give us your shoes—and I hope you put clean socks on this morning.”

“Me? I’ll have you know—”

“Listen, mate, I’m sorry to interrupt your billin’ an’ cooin’ wiv your boyfriend ’ere, but I don’t ’ave all day. Do you want a pair of skates or not?” The assistant was a bear of a man—a teddy bear, five three at the most, hirsute apart from his face and the top of his head, the sort of pugnacious man who would have acted the Cockney commando in ’40s films. He had one hairy-knuckled hand out demandingly, waiting for the shoes.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Bodie said, drawing himself up to his full height.

“All right, all right, so ’e’s your fuckin’ ’usband, I don’t fuckin’ care myself, do I? Does you want a pair of fuckin’ skates or not?”

“He does,” Doyle said, kicking Bodie, shutting that worthy up before Bob, whom he’d met too many times already and in too many circumstances that he most certainly did *not* want referred to in front of Bodie, despite his hare-brained notion earlier. “Give Bob your shoes, mate, else the place’ll be shutting before you set foot on the ice.”

That sounded like a hell of a good idea to Bodie, until Doyle winked at him and Bodie thought about the ribbing he’d get at work tomorrow if he winkled his way out of going on the ice tonight.

Ungraciously, he heeled his shoes off and dumped them on the counter.

“’Bout fuckin’ time, mate.” Bob disappeared for a second, returning with a couple of pairs of skates slung by their laces over his shoulder. “’Ere you go, Ray,” he said, ignoring Bodie, whom he seemed to think was beneath his notice. “You ’ave a nice time. I’m orf now, so one of

the ovvers—pillocks every last one of them, stupid bastards—they'll get your shoes back to you. An' don't you tell no-one you didn't pay, all right?"

"Thanks, Bob. Where are you off to then?"

Bob leered, quite a disgusting sight Bodie thought.

"Ome, to bed. An early night, like."

"In that case, *you* have a nice time. See you."

"Cheers, mate."

"Friend of yours, is he?" Bodie asked, carefully casual, not wanting to be caught prying into Doyle's life.

Tense, Doyle concentrated on what he was doing, half of him keeping his fingers crossed that Bodie hadn't clicked about Bob and the other half of him cursing his partners obtuseness. It'd be so much easier if he didn't have to actually come right out and state the facts baldly, easier on both of them, less chance of misunderstanding that way. "I'm friendly with him—comes in useful in here, saves me a fortune."

"The old, 'any friend of Bob's doesn't have to pay, we don't want our faces rearranged?'"

"Could say that. Here, get these on."

Bodie took the laces of the proffered, battered skates in one disdainful hand, then looked at Doyle. "Put these on?" he said, as if he were Howard Hughes confronted with used toilet paper. "These?"

Doyle was already seated on a once-red chair, and he grinned up at Bodie through a tangle of hair that should have been cut at least three weeks ago. "What, a big SAS ex-merc like you scared of a bit of athlete's foot? Nah, not you." He got to his feet, one hand on the back of the chair in front of him. "You'd never be scared of anything like that, would you?" He leaned in, whispered confidentially. "It's the verrucas you're petrified of, innit?"

"Doyle—" But Ray had already gone, one last sharp-toothed smile tossed over his shoulder as he launched himself onto the ice and sailed off into the crowd.

Grumbling unquietly, Bodie perched on the edge of the seat and set about lacing the skates up without getting himself tied up in knots. Task eventually accomplished—Christ, army boots were a lot easier than this stupid contraption of hooks and loops and laces—he grabbed the seat in front of him the way he'd

seen Doyle do, and levered himself to his feet. And discovered just how difficult it was to balance on the thin edge of a blade.

"Bloody hell!" He toppled, collapsing back into the chair, running his hands through his hair as if he'd really fully and honestly intended to sit back down. Doyle skated up the edge of the rink, elbows leaning comfortably on the rim of the rink barrier.

"Need a hand?" he carolled, loudly enough for several heads to turn their direction.

"I'm fine, thanks," Bodie grated through clenched teeth, looming to his feet once more and lurching the short distance to the ice, knuckles white with clutching the backs of seats in the passing.

"Fair enough," Doyle answered, settling down to wait, totally lacking the common decency to skate off a distance and do his laughing from afar. Oh, no, not Doyle. He didn't want to miss a single detail of this.

Bodie, one hand on each side of the gaping mouth to the rink, hesitated, staring horrified at the huge expanse of ice covered with enormous numbers of people. All of whom, he was convinced, probably from his partner's attitude, were all just waiting to laugh at him as he fell down.

Well, there was a cure to that. He simply wouldn't fall down. Holding on with one hand for balance, he stepped gracefully out onto the ice.

And fell, down. Hard. Doyle winced, then started laughing as he took in the sight of his super-cool partner chilling his bum on the ice, a circle of children forming to gawk.

"You all right, mister?" one of them asked.

"Of course I'm fucking all right!"

"Oh, my Mum'll wash your mouth out with soap for saying that!" This, from a little red-haired girl.

"Nah, my Mum'll make 'im put 50p in the swear box," a taller boy said, absently playing with one of his Rasta locks. "An' an 'ole extra pound for sayin' it in front of us."

Bodie gave them the look that had been known to cow terrorists, SAS squaddies and numerous baddies. The children laughed at him. Loudly.

"Go on, you lot, clear off," Doyle said, taking a friendly swipe at the nearest head. "Or your Mums'll hear where you lot 'ave been, won't

they?"

Threatened with a fate worse than death, the audience skated off with an ease that Bodie coveted jealously. Skate like that? He wasn't sure he could even get back up.

Eyes dancing, Doyle leaned over him. "Need a hand?" he asked with cloying sweetness.

Bodie seriously considered saying no, but admitted that that would be false pride coming after a fall, and if he didn't want to literally freeze his bum off, he'd better let Doyle help him. "Oh, all right, give us a hand," he muttered, hoping that Bob of the innuendo wasn't watching. Hoisted to his feet, he grabbed Doyle's shoulders and stood there, teetering.

"Where d'you want me to take you?" Doyle asked, face an inch from Bodie's. "I'll take you out to the middle, shall I?"

Bodie gave him a withering glower which bounced off Doyle like sunshine. "Back to the fucking wall."

"Language, language—not in front of the children, Bodie. Sure you don't want to go out to the middle?"

"Not on your life—and it will be on your life if you take me out there, Ray."

Doyle just smiled at him and started skating backwards, towing a terrified Bodie with him.

"Better look where we're going, Bodie, I wouldn't want to have an accident, would I? Might let go of you if something like that happened, mightn't I?"

Bodie swallowed hard and started looking where they were going. "Bit to your left. Farther, you prat!"

"Nice, this, innit?"

"Bear right," was all Bodie said.

"But it's good fun, isn't it?"

He got a very speaking look for that.

"Christ, you're as much fun as a wet weekend in Wigan. Come on, Bodie, you can manage obstacle courses and climb mountains, if you'd just relax you'd manage to learn skating."

"Oh, is that what you're doing? And here was me thinking you were hell-bent on making a fool of me."

"I'd never do a thing like that," Doyle said, all outraged innocence, big eyes and lies.

"Pull the other one, Ray, it's got bells on."

Doyle leaned forward and whispered, "Always thought you were kinky, mate. Doesn't

the noise get on your nerves when you're really going at it?"

"Oh, shut up and keep skating."

Doyle kept on skating, but when had he ever shut up because someone had told him to? "You know, you'd do a lot better if you relaxed," he said as he did a rather neat turn, reversing their direction and leaving Bodie hanging on to him for dear life.

"Relax? Relax, he says, when I'm surrounded by maniac children and stuck with a complete loony for a partner? Oh, yeh, right, I'll relax. The minute you take me back to that bloody wall, that's when I'll relax, *mate*."

"That bad, is it?" Doyle asked with what seemed like off hand curiosity, but he was already moving away from the centre of the rink.

"No, it's fan-fucking-tastic. What do you think, Doyle?"

"I think you're a coward because you won't even try skating cos it scares you witless. That's what I think."

"Oh yeh? And what's Cowley going to say when I call in sick tomorrow cos I've sprained my ankle on these stupid sodding skates?"

Doing a wonderful impersonation of a nanny, Doyle deposited Bodie at the safety of the waist-high wooden wall that surrounded the ice. "What I want to know is what you're going to say when I remind you that you don't give a toss what the Cow's going to say when you bugger off motocrossing?"

But he had skated off before Bodie could come up with a good comeback for that unpleasant little truth. Then the air round Bodie turned a delicate shade of blue as he realised that D had left him yards and yards and yards away from the nearest opening in the wall and he was going to have to skate what looked like miles to get off the ice. Slowly, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, hanging on to the wall with both hands, he began to haul himself to safety.

Doyle, supremely confident on the ice, whizzed past him, a friendly pat on the rump sending Bodie flying. Spinning in slow circles, he gradually came to halt. Which left him as effective as Bambi on ice. Every time he gained his feet, one of them would go skiting out from under him, and he'd land, thuddingly, on the ice—and on his knees, or his bum, or his front.

Stoically, reminding himself that, as that bastard Doyle had said, he had survived obstacle courses and SAS training, Bodie pulled himself up again, never quite able to relax enough to keep his balance. He was cold and wet and thoroughly pissed off when he decided that even if he had to crawl, he was going to get off this ice. Looking around to see if Doyle was near enough to help him—he was getting desperate enough to ask for a hand—he saw an unnervingly wobbling yobbo staggering his direction, sharp blades coming careening towards him. Bodie would rather face an insane sniper any day of the week. Cutting always made him squeamish—when it was done to himself, that is—more than bullets, something about the hissing slide of blade through flesh and bone making his teeth ache. He scrambled out of the way, narrowly escaping knocking the flailing youth flying.

“Here, let me give you a hand.” The offer came from a nondescript, routinely pleasant-faced man, about ages with Bodie, the hand stretched towards him dappled with signet ring, plain gold band and identity bracelet.

“Thanks, I could do with a bit of help.” He was pulled to his feet, guided back to the barrier, placed firmly and safely against the solid wall. The helping hand lingered longer than was strictly necessary for helping, that and other subliminal clues adding up in Bodie’s mind. The bloke was definitely on the lavender side, which even if he hadn’t realised before, he wouldn’t have been able to miss, thanks to the lecherous survey of his body.

Appreciative brown eyes measured him, a brow was arched, dark brown hair was straightened, and without a word being said, Bodie knew he had a companion for the night if he was interested. “Did your...friend abandon you to the kindness of strangers?”

That, Bodie decided, was what was known as a loaded question. “No, it’s just that’s he’s a really good skater and I’m still at the falling on my arse stage.”

“I could teach you, if you want me to?” Very, very discreet, still not a single untoward word spoken, but the offer was growing louder.

“I appreciate that, but...” He didn’t want to cause a scene, didn’t want to alienate this fellow and get into any aggro, not until he worked out

what the hell was going on here. He added lamely, “You know how it is—”

Then cringed, realising he’d just made it sound as if he was trying to find out the bloke’s name, and if he was doing that, then the fella would think he was playing hard to get instead of turning him down.

“Jon, Jon Blytheswood. And you?”

A hand touched, very lightly, on his forearm, testing his muscle, a smile showing approval. Maybe he wasn’t turning Jon down. Maybe he was playing hard to get and just hadn’t caught up with what his body had in mind.

“Bodie,” said a very familiar voice. “Plain Bodie. And I’ll give him a hand back to the seats, thanks all the same.” He was manhandled out of the way, Doyle manoeuvring him around Jon before the other man had a chance to move, and then the two partners were wending their way slowly round the perimeter of the rink.

“I was talking to him,” Bodie said, aggrieved, positive now that the option was no longer available that he would have gone home with Jon Blytheswood.

“You,” Doyle said, helping him over the sill, “were being eaten alive and you didn’t even know it.”

But I did, he almost said, biting back in the barest nick of time. He watched as Ray knelt down beside him, head downbent, something odd in the attitude; then it dawned on him what it was: guilt. The sod was feeling guilty about something. He sat placidly as his skates were unlaced and pulled off, this kind of service coming from Doyle worthy of a write-up in the evening paper. Then Doyle, as uncharacteristically silent as he was servile, sat down in the next chair, making short work of his own skates.

“I’ll only be half a tick. Bodie...” Whatever it was, Doyle obviously thought better of saying it, and disappeared off to fetch their shoes.

Left alone, Bodie had a good look around, and started wondering. On first glance, it was a perfectly average crowd, with perhaps more men than you would normally expect to see at an ice rink unless there was curling going on. But there were quite a few men on the ice, far more in the cafeteria, little groups coalescing, dissolving, rejoining. Nothing blatant, not at all, nothing that he could, as a CI5 agent, put his finger on. But as a man who liked men as much

as he liked women, he couldn't miss it. There weren't that many, perhaps twenty in all, but it was obvious to anyone who was in the know: there were men here to meet other men, and it was going on all around him. Small wonder Blytheswood had put inverted commas round the word 'friend' when he'd been talking to him.

Leaning back in his seat, Bodie wondered how many of the interested men here thought he and Ray were a couple. Everyone, probably, since they were going through one of their phases where the entire world and its granny were making queer comments to them. Even Cowley had compared them Derby and Joan the other day. A very pretty young thing strutted in front of him, and Bodie looked away, letting it show that he wasn't interested. The only thing he was interested in right now was the reason Doyle had brought him here, bet be damned. This wasn't the sort of place to bring your workmates.

Unless you were trying to come out to them subtly.

He sat bolt upright in his seat, thunderstruck. Ray? Just because he had never said he was gay or bi didn't mean that he wasn't, of course—God strewth, look at himself. And if the poor sod had thought he could turn this whole bet crap into a notice-if-you-want-to-otherwise-I-won't-say-anything situation... Which begged the question: notice what? That Doyle was ac/dc? Or gay, and functional with women purely for smokescreen? Or wondering about Bodie and interested in a 'further relationship' as the personal columns so coyly hinted.

"Here, wrap yourself round that." Doyle thrust a styrofoam cup of aromatic drinking chocolate into his hands. "You look proper frozen, mate."

"Nah, it's all right."

"Now you're off the ice anyway. Sorry, Bodie, it never occurred to me that you'd hate skating that much."

Bodie wondered if they were talking about skating or about the well-camouflaged underground in the place. "I never thought you'd be that involved in it. You don't look like a skater."

Doyle was tying his laces, glad of the excuse not to look up. "Cos I don't have those massive thighs you see on the East German team? Don't do it often enough for that."

"Don't you?" And he definitely wasn't talk-

ing about skating.

"What would I lie about a thing like that for, Bodie?" Doyle answered, missing the subtext to the conversation completely. All he could see was that his thick partner was too bloody blinkered or so fucking un-sympatico that he hadn't even noticed he was being very gently chatted up. And what did that say for his chances for telling Bodie about himself? And as for his fond notions of his partner coming to love him—how stupid could anyone be? "Come on, get your shoes on, mate, I want to get home." He was tired, very weary, calling himself every name under the sun for even thinking about bringing Bodie here. He couldn't believe he'd been stupid enough to even consider trying to tell Bodie about the other side of his life. After all, what had he expected? Bodie falling at his feet in eternal devotion.

Not expected, but wanted, certainly. Stupid, stupid, stupid, he said to himself, snarling at Bodie, his partner catching the flak from his own self-anger. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time: inveigle Bodie into coming here, let him see a few things—a damned sight more subtle than his usual haunts, that was for sure: he didn't think Bodie would've been best pleased to be taken for a drink in a private gay club. Admittedly, Bodie would definitely realise then that his partner wasn't exactly the straightest man on the squad, but God, he dreaded to think what the reaction would be. Trust Bodie to be exactly what he seemed—a perfectly straight bloke who'd gone through the services without once seeing a bit of buggery going on—instead of a well-convoluted bisexual man who was hiding behind this façade of straightness, the so-effective 'only a straight man would dare be this camp' routine. No hiding in plain sight. No secret depths waiting to be plumbed. Not even a willingness to experiment on the other side if the right man—Doyle, of course. Who else?—came along to show him how sweet it could be. Nothing. Nothing but a partner looking at him funny, and once Bodie realised what it all meant, blokes chatting up other blokes, the things Bob had said, and Doyle himself coming here so often that all the dodgy men knew him by name, but yet he hadn't done enough skating to build up his legs. Christ help him then.

“Penny for them?” Bodie asked of the disconsolate face.

“What? Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

Now what was Doyle so put out about? They were almost at the car and if he didn’t say something soon, then five minutes from now Ray would be dropping him off at his flat and that would be it. Once Ray clammed shut, that was it: not even Cowley could get him to talk.

“Listen, I’m starved, mate,” he said, his decision as spur of the moment as Doyle’s had been earlier that evening at work. “And I couldn’t half go one of those prawn cocktails you get from that Chinese take-away round your house.”

Any other night, or any other outcome from tonight, and Doyle’d have jumped at the chance. But he was too busy kicking himself to dredge up any enthusiasm for anything. They were in the car now, edging out into traffic, Bodie sitting beside him in blissful ignorance, and he was no nearer to finally coming out and telling Bodie the one thing that was hanging round his neck like a bloody albatross.

“Tell you what,” Bodie said, the very subduedness of his partner convincing himself that he was on the right track about Ray trying to tell him about the Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name, “I dare you to drive me to your place, feed me until I’m full, and let me use up all your hot water for a bath.”

“That’s not a dare, Bodie, so give it a rest, will you? I’m tired, I just want to go home—”

“Which is precisely what I’m suggesting, innit? The only difference is, this way you’ll actually get some food down you and maybe your bones won’t come through your skin.”

Doyle didn’t answer, using a right turn across traffic as his excuse for keeping quiet.

The brightly lit shops were streaming past and Bodie put on his best underfed orphan voice. “Come on, Ray, it’s Christmas Eve...”

Not much Doyle could say to that, was there? But that didn’t mean he had to be gracious about it. “Oh, all right then, I’ll get you your fucking prawn cocktail.” He desperately needed to be alone, to think about what he was going to do next. There were only two things he was sure of: he didn’t want his partner watching him with those perceptive eyes and he couldn’t keep quiet any longer. And if he weren’t careful, he was going to end up blurting it out one morning over

tea at work.

“Right, that’s all settled then.” A quick sideways glance as Doyle turned down the street where the Chinese restaurant had tucked itself away. “And don’t forget the bath after.”

“The mess you make, you’ll need a fucking bath. Okay, you go in and get the food, I’m not budging.”

“Don’t over-exert yourself, will you, Ray?”

“Look, Bodie, I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to be here, so just shut your fucking mouth and get back here with the food or I’ll be long gone.”

Bodie actually considered skipping food, but there were some things he wouldn’t do, not even for Raymond Doyle. And at least it would give him time to think what best to do.

Dinner, eaten in the living room in front of some mindless Christmas television programme, was a disaster. Doyle, stormy faced and sullen, was so demonstrably upset that Bodie wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised at the tiny amount of food eaten. There was actually enough left over for tomorrow night after work, Doyle not close enough to his family any more to make the long drive up to Derby unless he happened to be off for Christmas.

“D’you think the water’ll be hot enough by now?” Bodie asked, Ronnie Corbett’s barking laughter bellowing from the television as if Bodie had just told him a joke.

“Should be.” He’d be glad to get Bodie into the tub and out of his way. Then he could drive him home and that would be it. For another day, until work tomorrow, when he’d go through it all over again, trying to find the right thing to say to his partner. Thinking self-deprecating thoughts, automatically taking his shoes and socks off to curl his toes in the carpet pile, he didn’t notice when Bodie left, only noticed the silence afterwards. That was what was making it all so difficult: he feared that once he told Bodie, all he’d have left with his partner was that silence.

“Ray!”

Now what? Probably forgot to take a towel in. Well, if Bodie thought he was going to hang about while Bodie pranced around naked in front of him—he was absolutely right, he admitted, shaking his head at his own lustfulness. It was something they actually did quite often,

ON THIN ICE OF SKATE EXPECTATIONS

although he himself had been the one to curtail it the stronger the need for honesty had become. “What d’you want now?” he asked, propping himself on the doorjamb, arms crossed, weight on one leg. He was proud of himself: his voice hadn’t been husky, even though he was weak-kneed with desire. Bodie was gorgeous, pale expanses of skin highlighted by the pink of nipple, the blackness of hair and the darker pink of his cock, bobbing slightly in the waves made by Bodie twisting round to see him.

“Forgot a towel, didn’t I?”

“Typical. And before you ask, yeh, I’ll get you one.”

When he came back, he had the two-bar electric fire from his bedroom, and in a move that would have had the fire-master and the rest of the fire-brigade chopping his door down, he pulled the extension cord straight and positioned the glowing fire in the doorway. He came all the way into the bathroom, lowered the toilet lid and sat down, putting the towel on top of the washhand basin, as if tonight was exactly the same as any other night and not rippling with unvoiced tension. “Anything else you require, m’lud?”

“Not at the moment, Jeeves, my good man. Unless you’ve got an elastoplast?”

“What’ve you done to yourself now?”

“Must’ve cut myself on the ice—or on one of those bloody skates you made me wear.” He’d been thinking, knew now what he wanted to say. “Why’d you take me to the ice-skating tonight, Ray?”

Doyle shrugged, casually, although his heart was beating faster. Bodie had obviously started adding two and two to make five. This was it: this was the chance that he’d been both yearning for and dreading. Taking a deep breath, he took the metaphoric plunge. “Sounds stupid now, but I thought it was the easiest way of hinting at something I wanted you to know. I mean, God, this is fucking pathetic, but—I thought if you saw me there, if you found out I knew something as underground as a skating rink, for fuck’s sake, where blokes picked up other blokes...”

“You thought you wouldn’t have to actually tell me, and you wouldn’t be forcing me into reacting to your big confession.”

Doyle didn’t want to look at him. “Told you it was fucking pathetic, didn’t I?”

“But it worked, didn’t it?”

Doyle still wasn’t looking at him. “Then how come I’m sitting here having to tell you in so many words.”

“But you haven’t said anything yet, Ray.”

Doyle raised his head then, looking Bodie straight in the eye, and said it. “I’m gay.”

“Gay or bi?”

Suddenly horribly restless from the strain of it all, Doyle jumped to his feet, pacing the tiny bathroom. “Gay. I’ve tried going straight—Jesus, I tried so fucking hard! But I couldn’t stop myself looking at men, wanting them... Used to fantasise I was with a bloke most of the time I was with girls. So. There you have it, Bodie.”

Bodie soaped his chest with concentric circles of white bubbled, dotting clouds of soapsuds on his nipples, luxuriously rubbing the soft foam into the narrow line of hair on his abdomen. “Now that you’ve told me,” he asked, giving nothing away quite deliberately, wanting to hear the honest truth from Doyle before he said or did anything, “what d’you expect me to do about it?”

Doyle shrugged at him, then turned to face the wall, tension bunching the muscles in the back of his neck. “Dunno.” He turned abruptly, a sort of grin on his face. “Not knock my block off, I think I’d settle for that right now.”

Bodie looked far more innocent than he had had any right to be since the age of two. “Have I ever knocked your block off, Raymond? All right, so I’m not going to run screaming from the room every time you walk in. But is that enough for you?”

Doyle sat down heavily, rested his head on the sink. “What am I supposed to say to that? If I say yes, then have one too many one night and come over all affectionate, are you going to think I lied to you?” He wiped his hands over his eyes, bracing himself for the hardest part. “And what happens if I say no? I’d be lying then, but I’m used to not having enough with you, Bodie. It’s just another fact of life, like having a job where people keep shooting at me.”

“So basically what you’re saying is that you’re not going to change anything?”

“I’m not going to risk sending you running to Cowley asking for a new partner, am I?”

Bodie stretched his arm above his head and swathed soap along his side and up into his

armpit, acutely aware of Doyle trying so hard not to look at the way his pectorals flexed or the way his stomach muscles were flat and taut. Stretching, he lifted one leg—the right, hiding his genitals from Doyle’s not-looking looking. “Is it just the job you’re trying to keep going?”

Doyle had to clear his throat before he could say anything. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry: Bodie was being a proper pricktease, the way he was rubbing himself all over so sensuously it was making Doyle achingly hard. “Course not. I’m ashamed to admit it, but you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Bodie looked at him, pinning him, making Doyle look right at him again. “Do you love me?” he asked, and saw the painful bob of Doyle’s Adam’s apple, saw the anticipated pain lance through the other man.

Doyle wanted, fiercely, to lie. To say anything, make it a joke, change it so that tonight had never happened. He closed his eyes for a moment, but then opened them again, refusing to be ashamed of himself. “Yes. I do.”

Bodie had shifted again so that Doyle could see the dark patch of body hair and could watch, mouth suddenly dry, as Bodie soaped himself down there, peeling the foreskin back, washing himself carefully, rinsing himself off, every minute move of his hands and every glimpse of his cock devoured by Doyle’s hungry stare. Bodie wanted Ray to be frothing at the mouth for him, he wanted Ray so besotted that the truth would come out. “The way people love their friends and family, or—?”

He wanted to die. Bodie was toying with him, a lepidopterist with a new species to pin, wings spread, in the display case. “All right, you want your pound of fucking flesh, you can have it. I’m in love with you. Okay? You happy now?”

He was standing in the middle of the bathroom, chest heaving, nursing his ire to keep it warm, an armour against the pain of Bodie doing this to him.

Bodie, reclining in the bath, lifted up the index finger of his right hand. “This is the finger I cut at the rink.” He paused, taking a last look at his friend before he lost him forever. “Kiss it better for me?” he said, losing a friend and gaining a lover.

Doyle, however, hadn’t caught on yet. “Oh, that’s nice, that’s really nice. I pour my fucking

soul out to you, and all you can do is make fun of me. Kiss it better, Ray, play Mummy for me, you little fairy, is that what that is? Well, let me tell you—”

“Ray.”

“—that if you think I’m going to—”

“Ray! Will you shut up for a second and listen to me?”

Military training had its advantages, obviously. The parade-ground bellow shut Doyle up quite efficiently. “Thank you, Ray,” Bodie said, and now that Ray was silenced, he went back to his seductive bathing, palms scooping water up to reveal what soap had covered. “I’m not setting you up, you great pillock. That was meant to be a subtle invitation, although why I thought subtlety would work on you I’ll never know.”

Doyle, no idiot, had caught on and was beginning to smile as he took the step that brought him to the side of the bathtub, where he knelt to be closer to Bodie. “I can’t believe you’re saying this, Bodie.” Not yet touching, he dabbled his fingers in the warm bathwater, splashing water against Bodie’s skin, rinsing the bubbles off.

“Well, what I was trying to say, before I was so rudely interrupted,” Bodie was saying, splashing back, grinning ear to ear, “was that I was going to ask you to kiss my finger better, and then I’d hurt my mouth when I fell, and as for my poor bum...”

Doyle hadn’t expected an end to the evening like this. Acceptance, he had banked on, sloe-eyed curiosity he had hoped for. “Like that, do you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Bodie asked, leaning forward, dripping wet arms coming up to surround Doyle, neither one of them caring that Doyle’s good shirt was getting soaked and that water was dripping onto the carpet.

They both paused, just for a second, poised an inch apart, then they each moved forward, and kissed, for the first time. Not for a single instant were they hesitant, the kiss deepening immediately, tacit confession that they’d both wanted this for a long time and weren’t going to wait now that they had finally come out and admitted it. Without either one of them actually thinking about it, Bodie ended up on his knees, with Doyle plastered soppingly to his chest and the bath digging into them both.

“I think we should get me out of here before this bath does you a mischief, Ray,” Bodie murmured against the plush skin of Doyle’s neck.

Doyle didn’t bother to answer, too busy using his mouth to taste Bodie, licking the lingering remnants of water off his skin, closing his eyes when he finally got down to the taste of Bodie’s skin. Without letting go, he got them both to their feet, Bodie graceful here as he was lummoxing on ice, the two of them standing in the middle of the bathroom, Bodie for one glad of the illegal fire, heating him all down his back, apart from two patches, where it was Ray’s heat he could feel, stong hands on his backside, spreading his cheeks, fingers teasing him in between.

“Can’t get at you like this,” Bodie muttered, all fingers and thumbs as he tried to get sodden shirt and damp jeans out of his way.

“Here, give over, Bodie, you’ll have me singing soprano if you’re not careful. Slow down, slow down, we’ve got all night.”

“Oh yeh?” Bodie asked, flaunting his precipitous erection into Doyle’s hand.

But the tide of needing had turned, and now it was Doyle in command of the other man’s pleasure, Doyle the one to string the other man out on a tightrope of desire. Stepping back, Bodie’s hands clinging still to his shoulders, relinquishing only reluctantly, Doyle peeled his damp clothes off, making a show of it for Bodie, taking his time, playing with his skin under the purdah of cloth before letting Bodie see the way the hair of his chest curled round his nipples, or the way his muscles flexed when he pulled the shirt off. Unsmiling, eyes focussed entirely on Bodie, a current of lust crackling between them, he unbuttoned his jeans and pulled the zip down, tooth by tooth. As Bodie licked his lips in anguished anticipation, Doyle slid his hand inside, fondling himself, head dropping back, eyes slitting, as he pleased himself.

“Christ, get over here!” Bodie grabbed him, kissing him hard, tongue thrusting into Doyle’s mouth, shaking hands shoving jeans out of the way, then pulling Doyle in tight, groaning as their heat merged.

And Ray couldn’t touch enough of Bodie, his arms hurting with the need to hold Bodie tighter, closer, harder. He drowned himself in kisses,

covering Bodie with them, sucking on nipples, shivering in empathy as his caresses went through Bodie like lightning. They were pressed so closely together he could feel the pulse in Bodie’s cock against his own, hotness and hardness tautly held between their bellies. Doyle rubbed them together, his hips undulating, his skin flushed with sexual heat, sweat beading, dripping down between his pectorals, pooling in the the small of his back.

Bodie wanted more than this, his body demanding satisfaction. He wanted Doyle’s hands on his arse again, wanted those long fingers to spread him and explore him and make him ready. He wanted Doyle, was famished for the feel of him inside, in him deep, fucking him all the way to heaven. He seized Doyle’s hands, shoved them onto himself, arching his back until his backside was pushing into Doyle’s hands.

Doyle drew back a little, still caressing the lush globes of Bodie’s smooth arse, but looking carefully at Bodie. “Isn’t this all a bit sudden, Bodie?” he asked, a threnody running through his own mind: I told him I was in love with him and he didn’t say a thing.

“Sudden?” Bodie gasped, flabbergasted that Doyle would actually even contemplate chatting at this stage of the game. “If I was some bloke you’d just met five minutes ago in a pub, you’d be up my arse by now. You’re my best friend, known me longer than anyone but my family, and you’re saying it’s all a bit sudden? Christ, Doyle, what d’you want—me down on bended knee, proposing?”

“An’ what if I do?”

“Then I’ll tell you to fucking wait until we’re finished and get back here and fuck me *right now*,” his voice hoarse, his cock grinding into Doyle’s belly, his own hands voracious on Doyle’s body, then falling to his knees, tugging Ray’s jeans off, tongue laving every inch exposed to him.

Not hearts and flowers, but it would do Ray just fine. Eyes smiling, he brought Bodie back up to his feet: if he was to have the unexpected bounty of Bodie wanting him, then he wasn’t going to let it be as quick as any blow job in the backroom of some club. Tongue flickering tiny caresses round Bodie’s mouth, he slid his fingers between Bodie’s buttocks, index finger teasing

the anal mouth, the puckered muscle smoothing out into relaxation. One handed, knocking over a collection of aftershave and deodorants and toothpaste, he found the bottle of oil, then up-ended it, a thin sensuous line snaking down Bodie's spine, glittering in the bathroom light, until the slickness reached Doyle's fingers. He slathered some inside Bodie, stretching him, making him ready for the possession of his body.

Bodie pushed himself backward, pushing Doyle's fingers farther inside him until he could feel Ray's two fingers separate into discrete digits, pressing his prostate, manipulating him internally so that he was poised a caress away from orgasm. He mumbled, mouth open helplessly against the sex-tensed sinews of Ray's neck. But Doyle understood him, or perhaps understood the frantic thrust of his cock against Ray's belly, and withdrew his fingers with lingering attention. Bodie filled his lungs again and again, every breath inundating him with the heady smell of aroused male, intoxicating in and of itself, but a lesser stimulus, giving him time to slow down so that he didn't waste this first time with premature enthusiasm.

"Better?" Doyle asked, nipping sharply on Bodie's earlobe.

"Be better if you were in me," he answered, leaning back against the encircling strength of Doyle's arms, lowering his gaze to his partner's mouth, one trembling finger rising to define the succulent lips. "You're going to use that mouth of yours on me next time," Bodie said, and Doyle parted his lips, sucking Bodie's finger inside, tantalising it with a taste of what was to come next time. "C'mon, Ray, you're being a pricktease. Do me..."

Doyle kneaded Bodie's arse, stretching him open. "Does this mean you don't want me to take you into the bedroom, put clean sheets on and make sweet tender love to you?"

Bodie didn't bother to answer, instead kissing Doyle hard and then turning, supporting himself against the wall, presenting himself to be fucked. And he grinned, delighted, as Doyle swallowed audibly: it was quite, quite wonderful to be so appreciated. Provocatively, he wiggled his hips, and Doyle was suddenly hot against him, hard cock pressing into him. Almost moaning with the pleasure of that presence,

Bodie bent himself almost double, bracing one hand on his knee, the other stretching back between his own legs, for he wanted to feel Ray as Ray went inside him. The thick cock filled his hand, the skin so smooth against his fingers, the glans so hard against his arse. Shivering, he guided Ray inside him, eyes closing as he fed the long cock into himself, back arching as he was filled with the thrilling weight and heat and hardness of another man. Doyle was moving inside him, fast and ferocious with desire, and Bodie met him thrust for thrust. He stumbled, knocked to his knees by the force of their passion, and felt a stab of pain until Ray moved again, curling over him, hairy chest tantalising his back, whipcord arms wrapped around him, rigid cock deep inside him.

There was sweat running down Ray's face, dripping onto Bodie's neck, there, just where the short hair curled. He pressed his face there, sucking at the delicate skin, leaving his mark, branding Bodie for his own. He pushed his cock in deeper, the moist walls of Bodie's body clinging to every inch of him, every time he moved. His right hand fastened round Bodie's cock, pumping him in unison with every inward thrust of his hips, rubbing his thumb over the tip of Bodie's cock every time he half-withdrew from the tight confines of Bodie's arse. His balls were up tight against the base of his cock, pressing into the rounded curve of buttocks. One thrust, and another, and then he was dissolving, becoming a stream of cum that was flowing, fast and faster, into Bodie, his entire body still as it soared on the intensity of climax.

Ray went rigid above him, and Bodie felt the viscid heat erupt inside him, making Doyle slick, making the shuddering last thrusts of orgasm sheer heaven. Doyle's hand convulsed on his cock, the final caress he needed, and he came, his own cum splattering his chest, Doyle's cum filling him inside. Spent, he collapsed completely, going down in a tangle of sweat-slicked arms and legs, a heap of sated flesh.

It took them quite some time and a king's ransom in kisses and softly whispered murmurs of affectionate approval, but they did finally make it to the bedroom. They didn't see the need for electric blanket or anything else: so wrapped up in each other they were warm enough, and there were, already, the languid stirrings of

more passion curling in their bellies, so that they stretched voluptuously against the other, stroking their bodies together. Amidst the lingering kisses and possessive caresses they began to drift towards sleep, their bodies needing the time to recover that their minds did not.

Bodie, eyes closed, nestled in close against the wiry masculinity of his partner, cuddled in a bit closer, smiling as a kiss was dropped on the top of his head. Not what he'd expected from a five quid bet, but he wasn't complaining. In fact, now that he stopped to think about it, it was incredibly bloody stupid of them to have been so afraid of discovery that they'd even hidden this wonderfully salacious secret of their sexuality from each other. A pert nipple beside his mouth attracted his attention for a moment, and he sucked on it, playing his tongue against its pucker, excessively pleased with himself as Ray reacted even to that. He let himself drift a little more, thinking lecherous thoughts about how much fun they were going to have making up for all that lost time and all the truly delectable things they were going to do to each other. Almost asleep, he grumbled into Doyle's chest as he was dunted into near waking.

"Bodie."

No need to answer, was there? They were going to have weeks and weeks and months and months and years and years to talk to each other, so...

"Oi, Bodie! You asleep down there?"

Perhaps there was a need to answer after all. "Not for want of trying," he mumbled, barely open eyes watching the delightful way his breath riffled faintly through lush brown chest hair.

Doyle was, probably for the first time in his life, utterly disinterested in analysing a single thing. He was happy, and Bodie had even whispered words of love to him. He even knew now what it was like to be bedrock secure, completely and contentedly serene in the certainty that there was someone he loved and who loved him back. And not some stranger who would turn out to be totally different once he got to know them. This was Bodie, and they had

friendship to go with the passion. Doyle was even willing, again for the first time, to entertain the idea that he might just have found the one person he needed in life. There was nothing that could make his life more complete. Apart, perhaps, for one minor detail. "You haven't given me my dare, yet," Doyle said, one hand absently tracing down Bodie's spine.

Oh, shit, so not only was he going to have to talk, but he was expected to think as well? "Christ, Doyle," he said, sounding far more aggrieved than he actually felt, "don't you have any sense of timing at all?"

Doyle smacked him one on his bum, soothing into a flat-palmed caress. "That's not what you were saying a bit ago, is it?"

"Yeh, but I was distracted then. You serious about wanting your dare?"

"Course I am. I mean, look where my dare to you got us, so I think it's only fair that you contribute to this relationship."

"Did you know," Bodie murmured sleepily, "that you're so pleased with yourself, even your voice is smiling?" His jaw cracked as he yawned, and he rubbed his face contentedly against Ray's skin. "Quite entitled, when you think about it. But you want a dare, do you?" He couldn't help it: he yawned again, his eyes closing even as he said the first thing that popped into his head, something utterly impossible and therefore quite, quite safe. "Give me a bouquet of a dozen red roses bang smack in the middle of the restroom." He was giggling softly to himself, pleased as Punch, because not even Ray would do a thing like that. He'd done it: he'd finally topped Ray in a dare. Delighted, he repeated his brilliant idea. "Dozen red roses, in front of everyone."

And as Bodie finally slid into sleep, Ray Doyle was lying wide awake beside him, smiling as he worked out a way to present Bodie with his dozen red roses. In front of everyone. Eyes closing, he fell asleep contemplating whether or not his partner would blush redder than the roses.



S C R E W G E D
OR
NANNY'S
CHRISTMAS
CAROL



And finally, to bring our Dickensian Christmas to a fitting close, here is a very, very special reworking of that oft retold tale, A Christmas Carol..

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring...

Apart from Doyle, who was staring out his window with moody bad-temper, glowering at an innocent Christmas tree in the flat opposite.

Doyle hated Christmas. Hated its hypocrisy, hated its commerciality, hated it for the excuse it gave to so many bigots. Hated it even more for its spurious good cheer and fake games of happy families.

It was depressing, an absolute bugger of a day, and all he wanted was for it to be over. Typical, wasn't it? He'd rather Christmas didn't exist, but here he was, three days off, duty roster and sick-leave dovetailing to abandon him right there with time off for Christmas, the so-called festive season rammed down his throat like cod liver oil. Time-off? Seemed more like a prison sentence to him. Still, he consoled himself as he

twitched the curtain shut over the offensive view of seasonal festoonings, he was all set for the best time a man could have, given the circumstances and the mass hysteria of hypocrisy that gripped the nation for a few days self-indulgent slop. He had all the food he could ever eat, a bottle of gin and a generous supply of tonic, a nice bottle of brandy, not a Christmas tree or decoration in sight—not so much as a trace of tinsel to be seen, not in *his* flat—three new non-Christmas records so that he'd not have to put the radio on and be besieged by carols on the serious stations and whining Christmas hits on the pop one. His lone concession to the season: a present for himself, a brand new video, and several tapes to be watched thereon, protection against *Mary Poppins*, *Morecambe and Wise*, *Bruce Forsyth* and the entire Vienna Boys' Choir. Oh, yes, he was going to have a lovely time, in spite of the Yuletide greetings trickling syruply from

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every mouth.

He yawned widely, stretching his spine, then crawled into his well-warmed bed. Half-asleep already, he kicked a cooling hot water bottle out and pulled the duvet up round his ears. Oh, yes, he was going to have a nice few days off. Only thing that could make it better, he thought to himself, ambushed by a jaw-cracking yawn, would be if Bodie were with him. But Bodie had friends, was going to a big fancy 'do'—something regimental, Bodie's hearty, hand-rubbing good cheer still ringing in his ears—tomorrow, and it would be all Father Christmas, 'Jingle Bells', champagne and pâté and goose...

He cooied in deeper under the cover, rubbing his nose sleepily on the edge of his pillow and began to drift slowly, cosily, into sleep. Still, his thoughts wandered as the pillow was lethargically plumped into the right position, he was going to miss Bodie. Pity they couldn't have spent the time together...

Tick, tock, tick, tock, to-ock, as the small hand and the big hand met under the number two. Doyle stirred, vaguely aware of a breath of chilled air sneaking under the duvet to shiver him, someone walking over his grave. But it was far more real than that: feet brushing his calves, and he rushed awake, sitting up, putting the lamp on and aiming a blow quickly enough to make even Macklin pleased.

"Bodie!" He let his hand fall, rubbed his eyes, scratched at the rumpled hair on his chest, buried both hands in his hair and gave his scalp a good thorough scratch. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Bodie smiled up at him, more impish than his usual, and reached one clumsy hand up to stroke Doyle's exposed and cold-puckered nipples. "Come t'see you, haven't I but?" The Liverpool docks were stronger in his accent than normally, too, and Doyle was staring at him, trying to work out what was different—apart from the fact that his partner was lying here naked in bed with him, playing with his tits. "It's not half magic, coming in here with you, naked an' everything like. Getting t' kiss you..."

Bodie suited action to words, leaning up onto his elbow to get near enough to kiss.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, hang on just a tick." There was something funny going on

here. Something decidedly peculiar. Dream-like... Oh. Yeh. That was it. He'd been thinking about how much he wished Bodie was with him just before he'd put the light out. Must still be asleep then. "Where's your scar?" It seemed quite natural, as life always does, in dreams, to let Bodie caress his chest while carrying on a perfectly mundane conversation.

"What scar? Oh, you mean the eyebrow?" Bodie's hand went up self-consciously to the unmarred eyebrow, following the smooth line of it. "Oh, yeh, that. I don't get that for another year, like. Mebbe a bit longer, I'm not sure, not about how any of this works anyroad." Screened by long eyelashes, he looked up at Doyle, an unsure smile curling at the corner of his mouth. "But, you know, I'm here, like, and you're willing..."

Doyle blinked, hard, opening his eyes again, expecting Bodie to be gone and the remnants of a dream there in his place. But there was Bodie still, large as life and several years younger, an appealing hint of uncertainty in blue eyes Doyle knew only as self-confidant, self-satisfied or self-aggrandising.

"Come on, Ray, don't do this to me. Gi'e us a kiss, I won't bite, honest. Just a kiss..."

It had to be a dream. Bodie would never get into bed with him and ask him for a kiss. He might grab him under the mistletoe and give him a smacker in front of the entire squad—had done, in fact, only this morning—but he wouldn't come crawling into bed in the middle of the night begging for a little kiss... And without setting the alarms off. A dream, he reminded his befuddled brain. It was just one of those weird dreams that made no sense after but were heaven at the time. And as it was just a dream, there'd be no penalties for anything they did, would there? No Cowley, no complications, no Bodie regretting sleeping with him, no credo—don't get involved, never let yourself care—keeping Bodie and him apart.

Doyle leant down a little, his lips barely brushing dream-Bodie's, a slow, sweet caress that suited the ethereal mood, moonlit madness, romantic folly, wonderful foolishness drifting through him. Until Bodie grabbed him, hard, hauling him down, covering every microbe of his body, mauling him within an inch of his life. Startled out of his dreamy languor, Doyle lay

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breathless, taking the full brunt of Bodie's frantic passion. Hands and mouth and teeth and tongue and knees and belly—all of Bodie seemed to be all over all of him and all at once, giving him no second to catch up to this dervishing arousal. He tried to return the caresses, but before he could do more than touch a single finger to the head of Bodie's cock, quicksilver semen burst onto his belly and Bodie groaned into his mouth.

Then a flurry of embarrassed gaucherie, Bodie scrambling to wipe his cum up, elbows digging into every sensitive part of Doyle's body. And Bodie was talking, words at full spate. "Sorry, Christ, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Christ—"

"Christ won't even be here till tomorrow, so stop apologising." He was spread-eagled in the bed, Bodie mopping and wiping at him, the handsome faced absolutely beetroot. There were a lot of sarky comments he could make, but he remembered being like that himself, with his first bird, and after, with his first bloke. He laughed, but made it kind, using his hands to steady Bodie, trying to take the sting out of what must feel like total failure. "Bit quick on the uptake there. Desperate, were we?"

Bodie looked as if he wanted the ground to do him a favour and open up to swallow him. "It's just, well, like, you know, it just...well, it gets you like that and if you don't have it, like, right then, you know, right now, then you'll just—burst."

"Thought you just did." He recognised that tightening jaw as humiliation, not anger. Of course, nowadays, Bodie went straight from slight—imagined or real—to pure fury, but this was... A dream. Only a dream, one where he'd conjured up this young Bodie, this secret past of his partner that he'd wondered about so many times. "Here, it's all right, we've all been a bit like that some time or other. And you've got to admit, it's bloody flattering to have a fella that hot and bothered about you."

The shyness was there, although there was already a mizzling of the hard adult's mask to disguise it. "You didn't really mind, but?"

"Course not." Bodie did not look at all convinced, so Doyle followed both his own inclination and the one thing that would make Bodie believe him. He wrapped both hands round Bodie's burgeoning erection, the young man's

revenge for older men's skill. "You come up fast, don't you? And don't worry about it, the second one'll last longer, it always does. You must know that, don't you?"

Bodie's eyes were closing, his body coming to lie on top of Doyle, cock rubbing on cock, his hands stroking soft body hair, tangling in lush curls, exploring muscle.

Doyle let Bodie have the lead, taking his pleasure from the pressure of the body caressing his and from the expression of purest bliss on Bodie's face. He drew his dream down to kiss, languidly dipping into the other man's mouth, his hands strolling down to the slight plumpness of the buttocks: no battle-hardened body, this. No, the only hard thing about this Bodie was his cock, so wonderfully hard, and hot, and sliding on him deliciously. He moved smoothly, turning Bodie over without Bodie even noticing what was going on. With one well-muscled thigh, he spread Bodie's legs, Doyle himself gasping with a sudden fierceness of arousal, his skin tingling, Bodie's tender flesh warm on him. Murmuring encouragement, he slid his cock between Bodie's legs, then pressed them shut again, a tight tunnel for him to fuck. Slowly, he began to move, in and out, spitting on his hand to soothe his passage, then moving faster, giving Bodie a taste of what it could be like to be fucked.

He'd wanted to do this so often, an opportunity lost to him if only because he'd met Bodie so much later in life, virginity long gone, lost to someone that only Bodie remembered, someone never mentioned between them. Tenderly, that was how he'd fantasised he would have taken Bodie, if he'd had the chance. Slow and tender and sweet, making it something wonderful, something worth remembering fondly. And that was what he did now, rocking sweetly between Bodie's thighs, tip of his cock sliding under Bodie's balls to dip, such a sweet kiss, into the tiny mouth hidden between lush cheeks. His own precum was making him lovely and slippery now, and he couldn't help but increase the pace, gasping into the crook of Bodie's neck as he fucked him. Sweat slicked their chests, and Doyle could feel the tremor threaten Bodie. He raised his head, locking his gaze with Bodie's watching the moment approach, feeling his own arousal gather in his belly. He moved faster,

hand snaking between their close-pressed bellies to grip Bodie's weeping cock, pumping him in perfect harmony with the movements of their bodies.

When it happened, it happened together, as it always did in his dreams, and as it did every night, Bodie wrapped himself around Ray, and wept and laughed into his shoulder.

"God, that was incredible. Didn't know it could be like that..."

Heart gradually slowing, Ray stroked damp hair from sweaty forehead, kissed flushed skin lingeringly, and smiled indulgently as his fantasy spoke to him. This was the best of all his dreams, his favourite by far. And it was just coming up to one of the best bits, when Bodie confessed, blushing, that Ray had been his first, and what a wonderful lover he was...

"You're much better than the Purser was, I can tell you that, mate."

Doyle knew his mouth had just gaped. Wait a minute, it wasn't supposed to go like this...

"Course, you didn't fuck me, so I can't compare you to Frank, can I but? Mind, you were grand, abso-fucking-lutely brilliant! Oh, I liked that." Ingenuous eyes stared up at him. "Can we do that again soon? How long does it take you to get hard again like?"

"I thought you were a virgin!"

Bodie looked at him as if there were several extra heads sprouting from Ray's shoulders. "Don't be daft—I'm nineteen. And I've been at sea for three years, and in Africa. A virgin? What a daft notion."

Doyle wasn't quite so keen on this dream any more. "What kind of dream is this anyway? You're supposed to be a virgin, and—"

"Oh, it's not a dream, though, is it? It's real, lad, dead real."

"Shit, it's going to be one of those. I'll be having unicorns and elves dancing on the bottom of the bed next."

Bodie grinned at him. "Sorry, but I don't do fairies. 'S not what I'm here for anyroads. God, I was so nervous about chancing my arm with you. Was dead scared you'd tell me to sling my hook and belt me one. I can relax now, can't I?"

This was all getting rather peculiar, and Doyle wished he'd need to go to the loo or something, anything to wake his body up and let him get back to a decently obedient dream. He lay qui-

etly for a while, but nothing happened. Bodie was still grinning at him and the wind was still battering the windows outside and—

That was funny: he never usually noticed things like the weather outside, not when he'd just, to all intents and purposes, fucked his partner. And his partner never, but never, lay beside him, tickling the hair under his arm, and chatting away to him as if they fucked every night.

"D'you remember what it was like the first time?"

First time what? First time he'd had a loony dream? First time he'd fantasised about picking his partner's cherry? "What first time of what?"

"The first time you ever had sex."

"Course I remember. Sylvia, who used to sell choc-ices in the local flea-pit."

"Mine was on the ship. Dan Thurso, nice bloke. He was the Purser, and he took a shine to me for some reason and before I knew where I was, he had me well-fucked and happy." Dream Bodie laughed, sanguinely murdering all of Doyle's tormented imaginings of vicious gang-bangs on the gang-plank or multiple rapes in the jungle. "He was dead nice to me, really decent. Got me papers, introduced me to some blokes who helped me out later... But I want to know about you."

This was definitely not turning out to be one of his better nights. "I already told you, didn't I? Sylvia—"

"No, not that. What about your first fella? What was he like?"

Now that was weird. He couldn't for the life of him remember. Dave Sterling? No, he was already taking his art classes then, and he had known exactly what he was letting himself in for when he'd gone home with Dave. Before that... Steven? Wrong—Steven had been after Dave. It must've been someone at school, surely. But who the hell had it been?

"Have you honestly forgotten all about him?"

He looked at Bodie, saw a depthless age in eyes that should have been so very much younger, and it made him shiver. This was the strangest dream, coming complete with outside noise and the smell of damp jacket drying over the bedroom chair. But he couldn't shake himself free, couldn't wake himself up, simply because his body firmly believed it was already

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awake. He wanted nothing more than to roll over and get out of this bizarre dream, away from this young Bodie with the old eyes. But he found himself speaking, a compulsion to tell the truth.

"I haven't the faintest foggiest who it was."

Dream Bodie simply looked at him, with profound sympathy and the gentleness of a doctor telling a patient of death. Only one word. But it was enough.

"Mark."

And it was there, all of it. He could actually see it, a technicolour screen playing before his eyes. Mark, gorgeous, sweet, funny Mark, who'd had the big back garden where his dad used to rig tents up for them. The same back garden that they'd built a camp in, when they were old enough to be left alone in the dark. Mark, whispering to him in the quiet, secret night, asking him to come here, come over, I've got something to show you, come on, Ray.

And himself, crawling the distance between them, slithering into the nested blankets, trembling like a leaf when, into his unknowing hand, his first cock was put, terrifyingly sinful and hot with a life of its own.

How could he have ever forgotten Mark? They'd been inseparable, doing everything together: he could even see the day his own dad had christened them "Bill and bloody Ben". Then there they were, in grey school trousers and loosened maroon ties, coughing over their first Woodbine round the back of the rhododendron bushes. Almost a year later now, Mark's brother getting *Lady Chatterly's Lover* out of the library for them, and the two of them, sitting amidst the soil and the pots and the trowels in the potting shed, giggling nervously over the dirty bits. Giving their pricks names, the first nervous touching in daylight, too shy to look at each other until they'd wrapped themselves into an aching hug and come messily all over their Sunday best. And look who was bent over him when he came to after he'd run into the goal post when they'd been playing St. Timothy's. And then again, the next week when his mum couldn't visit because she had the flu and Dad was working: there was his friend bringing him grapes and a pile of American comics pinched from the newsagent's on Dunblane Street. On and on the pictures flowed,

a lifetime unscrolling before his mesmerised eyes. How could he have ever forgotten Mark?

"D'you remember the Christmas dance, the last year of school like?"

The voice startled him: he thought that Bodie had gone, in the way of dreams, vanished somewhere into his id, to be called up later, when sleep had put paid to the ego. But Bodie was still there, so incredibly young, with a bit of a tinge of the African sun to him and, unbelievably, a pimple marring the skin he always thought of as flawless. So young, but the eyes were mature beyond even the Bodie he'd seen in real life this morning.

"Well, *do* you remember that dance?"

"No." He didn't remember, and he didn't want to remember.

But dream Bodie was pointing, long finger aimed at the blank whiteness of bedroom wall, and Doyle didn't want to look. He did not want at all to see what Bodie was pointing to. But he looked. Unwillingly, but he did look.

It was himself, wearing the green velvet jacket that had once been all the rage, the one that had cost him half a year of Saturday jobs to buy. Preening in front of the mirror, trying to tame his curls to straightness, muttering swear words under his breath because he could not get his hair to look like Paul McCartney's. Couldn't even get it to look like Peter and Gordon's. Lying in bed watching himself, Doyle smiled at his own youthful folly, the earth-shaking issues that were so small when looked on from a distance of years and a job that had trained him to kill. But he'd been so very young then—God, had he ever looked that naïf? He laughed at himself: pure jail-bait, that's what he'd been. But on the wall, the image of himself was going out the door, whistling, a small present tucked into his pocket.

Oh God, he remembered that present. Cheap and nasty he might think it now, once he had bank cards and overdraft protection, but at the time, he'd thought it was the best, most glorious thing money could buy. Nothing much, just a watch. But he'd had it inscribed, blushing when he'd told the jeweller it was his sister wanted it done, for her boyfriend. But it'd been for him, to give to Mark. He'd even got a bow for it, a red one, and ribbon as well...

Outside the school. Streams of people going

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in, streamers of coloured paper hanging from the ceiling, the band assembled on stage, the girls tittering in a line down one side of the hall, the boys posing like tough guys or pop stars down the other. Mark, standing with some of the blokes from the football team, and the fella who had connections with the local hard cases. Himself, he could see himself, see the expression on his face change as Mark made a joke, a dismissing joke that ignored everything they'd ever been. Mark, making nasty comments about fairies and brown noses, anything to make his new friends laugh, giving this poor, wilting Ray warning glances to not betray them.

He could feel it all over again: standing there with that watch in his pocket, and Mark laughing and laughing and laughing, standing there with the very boys who'd been bullying them both for weeks, taunt after taunt after taunt. His heart had ripped into tatters, tears swimming in his eyes, humiliation burning vitriolically after. He could see it and feel it and he was there all over again as he'd run from school, out into the playground that only the lower forms used, along the street, running and running and running through the rain, his wonderful green velvet jacket ruined beyond redemption. And himself, face contorted with pain, taking the watch out of his pocket and hurling it far, far away, into the night.

Doyle knew what was coming next. He didn't want to see it, no, no, no—

Waiting. For Mark. Watching him weave his way out of the main gates, that girl Anne hanging onto both his arm and his every word, giggling up at him with flattering eyes. That was the first time he knew what it was to be alone in the adult world, unprotected, buffeted by the full brute force of pain and betrayal, and his own pathetic delusions shown up for what they were. It was also the first time he had ever wanted to kill. He had a knife—his brother's, borrowed in case there was any trouble between the Mods and Rockers—and the blade was sharp in his hand. Blood was beading from his thumb, where his flesh honed the cutting edge.

And then Mark was reeling, screaming and shouting and running away from the pain, just as he had run away from Mark earlier in the evening. Now the blood on his hands wasn't his own. And he liked that.

"Stop it," he whispered, horrified to feel the tears on his own adult face. "I don't want to see any more..."

Silence.

He looked around, but Bodie was gone, only the lit lamp and messy bed showing that Doyle had ever been anything but alone. The clock read quarter past two: fifteen minutes for half a life to be lived again. Cautiously, still shaken deeply, Doyle switched the light out and lay down in the dark, closing his eyes and his mind against the memories of what he had just seen. Dreamed, he reminded himself in the last seconds before sleep. I only dreamed it...

There was a faint click as the hands met again, this time under the number three. Abruptly restless, Doyle rolled over on to his back, then shifted again. Something was annoying him, something that was trying to wake him up. Someone. Someone blowing in his ear.

He opened one eye, and could vaguely make out the blurred shape of his partner. "Not you again," he muttered, not best pleased, the taste of his last trip down memory lane still bitter on his tongue. "What're you doing here this time?"

"You have to ask? Either my technique is slipping, or you're dead, mate." The blowing was replaced by a flickering tongue, sensation shivering delightfully through Doyle, all the way to his toes. Now he was being kissed, superbly, Bodie knowing exactly what he liked, and how he liked it, his every whim catered to. He was petted and pampered, confident finesse plying him with pleasure, until he was boneless with arousal. Thanks to the earlier Bodie's visit, Doyle could actually remember the last time he'd allowed anyone to take him so firmly, so completely, in hand. But Mark belonged to the past. This Bodie making love to him might well be nothing more than a wet dream, but he also belonged to the here and now, as current as his partner fussing and bothering over the mistle-toe this morning.

Doyle murmured his surrender and caught a glimpse of the unexpectedly tender smile that Bodie gave him. Another peculiarity of dreams: he'd always thought that Bodie would be as smooth as a spiv if they ever decided to bed each other. He'd never done more than daydream that Bodie could be so loving and over-brimming

with erotic delight, deciding that such romantic imaginings were the property of dreams alone. Obviously, he thought as Bodie kissed his way from earlobe to nape to nipple, he'd been spot on. Sighing contentedly, he stretched, every inch of skin alive to pleasure and to Bodie's touch. It was lovely, he thought, sinking more deeply into sensation, absolutely lovely: wet dreams where all he had to do was lie back and enjoy were his absolute favourites, and Bodie was giving him the best. Bodie's hands were busy on him, rubbing his balls, tingling his anus, kneading his backside, and all of a sudden, in the way of dreams, Doyle knew that Bodie had never been kissed enough by his men, had never had enough affection to go with the sex, so he reached down and soothed Bodie upward, nearer and nearer, until he could see him. Debonair delight personified, that was his Bodie, and Doyle was smiling as he kissed his friend, this man he only loved in his dreams.

"Love you," he said, saying the unsayable, thinking the unthinkable. "Love you better than I've ever loved anyone before."

"I should bloodywell think so," Bodie whispered into his skin, tongue laving lines of allure from his mouth to his ear and back again. Blue eyes were smiling brightly at him, and Bodie's palms caressed the planes of his chest as Bodie said, "You'll definitely love me *better* than anyone else, because I'm the one who'll be teaching you a trick or two." But there was no kidding around in the adoration on Bodie's face as he went back to making love to Ray.

He could fly, he knew he could. In fact, if this dream weren't so incredibly perfect as it was, he'd change it so that they were making love on a magic carpet, soaring through the skies of Sinbad's desert. It would take something as fantastic to come close to dreaming how wonderful it was to see that Bodie loved him. Humming quietly to himself—not the kind of thing he would normally ever consider doing in real life, given such a set of circumstances—he surrendered completely to the masterful hands playing his body and the exquisite lips paying him such homage. His cock was mouthed into a sucking throat, his cheeks smoothed apart and a finger delved enticingly inside him. Just like his dreams, down to the last detail, the way Bodie's finger circled inside him, the way Bodie's

tongue played over his balls, the way—Bodie fumbled with a tube of gel and prosaically lubricated him? Wait a minute—that didn't belong in a dream. Dreams weren't supposed to be realistic, they were supposed to be whatever he wanted them to be, practicalities be damned. So all these tawdry details—

Then Bodie was arched over him, and Bodie's cock was smugly erect at the entrance of his body, and all thought fled in the face of purest sensation. Doyle wrapped his legs round Bodie's hips, drawing his partner in deeper, luxuriating in the feel of Bodie deep inside, heat to match his own heat. It was superb to have Bodie moving in and out of him with such consummate skill, to feel that bulk and hardness plundering him. Flawless, perfect, catapulting him along, until Bodie slowed them down, making it last longer, taking Doyle and wringing him out, nothing left behind but mindless pleasure. Now he knew how a Stradivarius felt when played by the hands of a master, every sinew and nerve played to perfection. It was the most natural thing in the world to him, allowing Bodie absolute freedom over him. He moved where Bodie wanted him to, because his lover knew how to make him alive with arousal; he gave what Bodie wanted him to give, because Bodie gave back to him all the secrets of Bodie's well-hidden tenderness and love.

He smiled when he thought of that, of Bodie loving him. It was as plain as the nose on the other man's face, and even more appealing. Doyle couldn't help it: the love inside him was a tide rising to meet Bodie, to match his competitive partner, even in this, the sweetest battle. Lust and love were there in him in equal measure, nirvanic balance of the best things in his life. Bodie thrust harder into him, lifting his hips up off the bed, and Doyle groaned with Bodie's pleasure. Again, Bodie's cock sank into him, seeking the innermost depths of his body, Bodie's love-lush eyes finding the innermost depths of his heart.

Doyle pushed downwards to meet Bodie's cock, to bring his lover more completely into him, wishing he could devour Bodie and keep him inside forever. But Bodie was moving them now, bringing the passion to the fore, speeding them on the dizzying gyre of pleasure, the inexorable drive to orgasm.

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A pressure, inside him, just there, where Bodie knew he loved to be touched, and Doyle was dissolving into exquisite sensation, his seed pulsing from him to caress Bodie, his muscles squeezing Bodie, his body quivering as he felt Bodie erupt into him, bathing him with Bodie's essence. It was, quite simply, the best he'd ever had, and he was sleepy-eyed and languid as he came down from the high of orgasm, his hands stroking languorously on Bodie's trembling muscles. Perfect. Absolute perfection, best ever, and he was drifting again, slipping back into deeper sleep—

Until his dreaminess was sundered by the prosaic way Bodie was withdrawing from him, a handful of paper hankies being used to mop up the semen and liquified gel oozing from his arse, and that funny sensation that he sometimes had, as if he might have to make a very rapid trip to the toilet.

Not the way he liked his wet dreams to end at all.

Bodie was massaging the small of his back for him and the niggling need to run for the loo receded, but the dream was still too practical, for Bodie was surreptitiously checking him for damage, and wiping his own cock clean, and dabbing discreetly at Doyle's belly. Doyle decided that now was the moment to get this dream back in line before Bodie started asking him if he had piles.

This dream-Bodie, Doyle was quite happy to see, was willing to co-operate, ceasing his ministrations, and turning instead to soft-smiling caresses of him, stroking him here, and here, where he liked it best, just enough to keep him tingling delectably in the afterglow.

"Why'd we never do this before?" he asked, because in dreams, of course, Bodie always answered him honestly and never retreated into the waking world's deflecting humour. "Come on, Bodie, why'd you never go to bed with me before?"

"Eliot bloody Ness, that's why."

Well, dreams didn't always make sense, he supposed. "Why, you and him married or something?" And he tensed a little, half-expecting Eliot Ness and three hundred FBI men to come crashing into his sedate suburban bedroom, demanding to know why he'd slept with Eliot's beloved Bodie.

"Nah, nothing like that. It's just that's how I always thought of you."

In a fedora, raincoat and machine gun? Now that was weird...

"No," Bodie said, knowing what he'd been thinking, naturally enough, considering that none of this was real, which consoled Doyle considerably. "It's that you're like him—one of the Untouchables. You know, all conscience and devotion to duty—apart from the occasional blonde, 'course—and don't anyone dare touch. So I never did."

Doyle snuggled in a bit closer to Bodie's warmth, letting his partner cuddle him close, daring for once in his life to let someone bigger and stronger than he have the upper hand, instead of loudly declaiming how tough he was and how he didn't need anyone—

—and he could see himself through Bodie's eyes, another series of technicolour images parading on a screen. Himself, all scruffy hair and prickly temper, sharp-tongued and sharper-minded, holding the whole world at bay. He could see the way he moved—Christ, did he really wiggle his bum like a cheap tart?—and feel the way Bodie felt when he saw that, a sweet peircing in his groin and a hollow aching in his heart. So that was what it felt like to love someone and have them—

He saw himself turning a blind shoulder when Bodie had tried to tell him about that girl in Africa, the one Bodie had loved. Felt the rejection, felt the sadness of knowing that there wasn't going to be anything beyond good camaraderie on the job, and guarded friendship off it. Saw himself again, chatting some girl up—Debbie? Or was it Sue? And it was Bodie who provided the name: Debbie, dated her for two months, slept with her on the second date, came in to work the next morning sleek and well-sated, holding the secret pleasure close to his chest, not sharing any of it with Bodie, making Bodie feel as he was nothing, meaningless, compared to some girl who could give Doyle pleasure—then he could see himself in the gym showers, oblivious to the men around him, chilly glower shrivelling the one soul brave enough to smile at him, then nail in the coffin, nail in Bodie's hopes, that queer joke in the pub the night they'd gone for a pint with Murphy...

He realised that Bodie was crying. Quietly,

inside, never letting it show, but of course dreams always showed these things, didn't they? He reached out for Bodie, to tell him he was sorry, but Bodie was gone, that side of the bed cold, and empty, for Bodie hadn't been there, of course. It was only a dream, just his mind playing tricks on him. Stupid tricks, trying to tell him that big, bluff Bodie was pining away for the love of him...

He wasn't sure what woke him.

"Sorry," he said, meaning for being late, before his eyes were open enough for him to realise that the clock read 4.15, and his boss was sitting on the edge of his bed. Oh, Christ, no, he thought, the last two dreams *mélanging* in his mind, and the revolting thought of Cowley having sex with him surfacing like scum on a pond.

"We'll have less of that, laddie," and of course, if Bodie had been able to read his mind, then Cowley would probably be able to tell him what he was going to think before he had a chance to think it—and disapprove, just for good measure. "I'm not lusting after your body, so what little virtue you've got left is safe with me. Oh, no, I'm not here for your body."

Doyle stared up at him, as terrified as when he was five and first day of school and he'd been hauled in by the ear to explain to the Headmaster why he'd used his catapult to smash the Head's window. He shook the feeling off: he wasn't a child any more, and nightmares were reserved for when the job turned ugly and people turned uglier. "What d'you want?"

"What do you want, Mr. Cowley, sir."

He'd never noticed that Cowley looked like a gargoyle before, or that he wore a kilt, and had a *skean dhu* in his sock. "What do you want, Mr. Cowley, sir?" he repeated, and wanted to pull the covers up over his head, because he had a gut-racking certainty that Cowley was going to show him horrors worse than anything he'd ever so much as imagined before.

"I'm after Bodie."

He couldn't help it: he chuckled, out of sheer relief. Just another daft dream then, not a nightmare. "I'm afraid you've just missed him," he said, still laughing, although part of him was wondering why there was still not the faintest trace of streetlight coming in through the win-

dow and why London—London, of all places—had gone so quiet there wasn't so much as the sound of a car on a road or wind in the tree right outside his window.

"Who says you're still in London, laddie? Who's to say you're not in Limbo, forever cast out of either Heaven and Hell, because not even Auld Nick wants the likes of you? Or perhaps I've put a word in Upstairs and asked them to give you punishment to fit the crime."

The walls were rippling now, colours blending and flowing and separating, vague, sickening impressions of bodies torn apart by bullets and a bomb that wasn't defused in time, a child shot because Bodie didn't pull it in behind the protection of a wall, a woman screaming at him because her husband was dead, dead, dead—

"Who is she?" he whispered, as she wailed on and on, a banshee scraping its nails down his spine.

"Oh, her?" Cowley asked casually, not needing to turn around to see the distorted face. "Och, her, she's just some woman whose man was killed by a terrorist fire bomb. Burned to death in his furniture shop one Christmas Eve, and her at home with their four weans."

He could hardly breathe from the lump in his throat, tears threatening to strangle him, the woman's agony inundating him. "Why's she blaming me?"

"You always did have delusions of grandeur, Doyle." The voice was dry, as if they were in the office, discussing expense chits. "That's God she's blaming. Course, I don't think it's God's fault, myself, and you don't even believe in God, but she does, and she thinks it's His fault for there not being anyone available to answer the call for help."

Cowley's face loomed huge, filling Doyle's vision, fear gnawing a hole in his belly where his courage leaked out.

"But it's no-one's fault but yours, Doyle. If you'd had a partner with you on the other call not two shops away, he'd've been able to get to the furniture shop in time and defuse that bloody fire-bomb."

"But Bodie—"

"Bodie wasn't there. Left, six months before, and you were such a bad-tempered bastard I couldn't land you on anyone else. So I let you go

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solo, and because of that—”

The woman was gone now, literally dissolved into tears, because Doyle had lost track of everything but that one thing Cowley had said: left six months before.

“Bodie wouldn’t leave CI5! He’d never leave...”

But of course Cowley knew what he’d been about to say. “You? Aye, you’ve got a point there, laddie. How could he ever leave you when he’d never had you in the first place?” An impatient swipe of his hands, sweeping away Doyle’s protests before they could be thought. “And I’m not talking about all this sex palaver, either. Dreams weren’t worth a damned thing when he woke up in the morning, and he knew fine well that the most he’d ever get from you is a drunken tumble you’d never forgive him for. Oh, aye, I know all about it,” and his voice was knives, cutting Doyle, who could see that in his boss’ hands there was a claymore being fondled with absent blood-lust. “He came to my house one night and broke down and tellt me the whole sorry story. He begged me to let him leave, d’you realise that, Doyle? Begged me because he said you’d never understand or forgive him for what he wanted from you.”

Doyle was struggling to fight off the dreadful weight pressing him into bed, the heavy black cloud of nightmare compressing every bone in his body until he was in agony.

“Not a nice feeling, that, is it? But that’s what your Bodie went through. Not that he thought you’d care.” A swirl of his plaid, and the room was gone, London spread out beneath him, air whistling past his naked body, Doyle unconcerned with his nudity, so much a part now of this nightmare. Cowley was standing beside him immaculate as always, not a hair out of place, kilt disappeared, the more familiar, authoritarian sombre grey suit in its place. “Have you any idea at all where your partner is this Christmas morning?”

That was easy, that would make the nightmare go away. “In bed probably, and then he’s going to his big Regimental do with all his old mates.” He was proud of his answer, and the way he kept steady even though the wind was buffeting him, spiralling him lower and lower until he recognised Bodie’s street and Bodie’s car. Somewhere, it had become daylight, and there

was a squad of children playing in the street, showing off new bikes and prams and scooters. But they were flying in through the window—we’re going to crash! cover his face with his hands against flying breaking glass but there was nothing, only carpet beneath his feet and the faint smell of breakfasted-upon sausages in the air—and Bodie was sitting silently in his favourite armchair, tumbler of whisky in his hand, morning stubble on his jaw. The coffee table had been moved over under the window, a well-bedecked Christmas tree sitting there proudly glittering, paper decorations streaming across the ceiling, and leaning drunkenly against the door, an inflated Santa, complete with an inflated and severely red-nosed reindeer. Christmas permeated everything in the room, with the bleak exception of Bodie.

Of course it was a dream: that was why Bodie wasn’t reacting to him, but it was chilling, to have Bodie not see him, to have Bodie sitting there so miserably unaware. Doyle walked over to stand in front of him, despite what Cowley was saying to him.

“He can’t see you. As far as he’s concerned, you’re sitting at home all on your ownie-o, happy as a lark and not needing him.”

“But he shouldn’t be here,” was all Doyle could say, kneeling in front of Bodie, waving a hand in front of his face to break that abstracted, melancholy stare. Bodie took a sip of his drink, blinked slowly, stared at the twinkle of Christmas tree. Doyle followed his gaze and found himself looking at the fairy on top of the Christmas tree, one that had obviously been hand-made many a long year ago. Treasured, saved and kept despite Bodie’s endless gallivanting round the globe. And Doyle sank in the guilt of not even knowing where that hoarded, tatty family ornament came from.

He tried again to make Bodie see him, but Cowley was circling him like a hungry wolf, snarling at him with home truths. “A fancy regimental ‘do’, you said. Believed him, lock, stock and barrel. For goodness’ sake, I thought I’d trained you better than that, Doyle. Which regiment, did you ask yourself that? His SAS regiment—when he was an inch away from being chipped out of there for his attitude? Or the paras, perhaps. Ach, and that’s the bunch that he got three of them cashiered for coming

on patrol under the influence? Oh, I know, I've got it now." So sarcastic, dripping contempt. "His old pals from that wee spell he spent in the jail in the Congo." Abruptly, Cowley was looming over him, blue eyes chips of diamond, slicing him into tiny shreds. "Well, I've got news for you, laddie. There's not a soul that knows or cares where Bodie is, and he knows that fine bloody well. He knows there're plenty of folk who'd invite him along for a party after, who like him because he's a good laugh, but there's not a one of them who would ask him to join them for Christmas dinner. Not even his own partner, who hates Christmas and everything to do with it. Who laughed—" and Doyle could hear himself again, his laughter peeling down the corridor for everyone to hear and he saw the pain that Bodie had kept hidden from him and he wanted to weep, to cry how sorry he was, he never meant to hurt Bodie "—when Bodie invited him over for a wee bit lunch, just the pair of them thegither. But you were too busy being a misanthropic bastard and standing on your principles. Ach, your principles make me sick. Fine, fancy notions and not one of them worth the hot air you say them on. And you look at Bodie. You just look at him. And you know what it is that's going to happen to him and many another beside, all for the sake of you, *you*, not having to compromise your high ideals and lower yourself to having a bit of fun with a friend."

He had to make Bodie see him. Had to make Bodie hear, because he knew with utter certainty that it would be the death of his partner if Bodie were to leave CI5 and go roaming round a world that Bodie hated almost as much as it hated him. It burned him inside to know that his was the final betrayal that broke Bodie's back and made him give up on anything good ever being able to survive in his life. But Bodie wasn't listening, and Bodie wasn't looking, and Doyle started slapping at him—but his hand went right through Bodie, who only shivered, and took another drink of single malt anaesthesia. Doyle was begging now, pleading, not knowing what to do, how to make Bodie stay.

"I don't know why you're making such a spectacle of yourself, Doyle. The man cannae hear you and even if he could, what good would it do the pair of you?"

Doyle turned round, glaring at his boss, the

nightmare edge dulled to mere dislocated reality.

"And what would you be telling him if he could hear you? Are you planning on telling him that you might be persuaded to let him have sex with you?"

"An' what's wrong with that? It's what he wants, innit?"

"Is it?" Such a calm voice, as cold as a tomb, and the nightmare was crawling back on a scuttling of rat claws behind the walls, teeth gnawing to come and get him, Doyle catching sight of—things—out of the corner of his eyes.

"Och, don't be getting yourself in a fankle, Doyle, it's nothing but your own guilts and fears after your bones."

And the yaw opened, swallowing him, tumbling him into the middle of his worst fears. He could see—hear, even smell—Bodie being shot, lying to fester on the rotting floor of some far off jungle. Bodie, in a city gutter, a broken bottle of fortified wine spilling from his hand. Bodie again, walking away coldly, so horribly coldly, from the clutching hand of someone who had tried to love him. And he knew what Bodie was thinking. Knew that Bodie would love no-one and allow no-one to love him, not after what he'd gone through with Raymond Doyle.

He was fighting dark images—Bodie become Shotgun Tommy, Bodie in a half-zipped body bag, one pale arm flopping out in the indifference of death—shoving his own fears and possible truths aside, clambering over carpet pile gone six feet deep, worms and maggots feasting on a mountain of Bodies. The armchair, and Bodie, the living, breathing Bodie, and Doyle was screaming at him, shouting Bodie's name, desperate that Bodie should hear him, must listen, must not go away.

"I've told you, he cannae hear you, and unless you're going to be offering him something a wee bit better than a quick roll in the hay, it's not going to do him the blindest bit of good, is it? Well, Doyle? It's your fault he's sitting here, and it's your fault he's going to be turning up girning and greeting like a wean on my doorstep, so what are you going to do about it?"

And Cowley was bigger than Colossus, sitting regally upon a throne of judgement, red velvet and white ermine cascading from his shoulders, but then it wasn't fabric and fur, it was Bodie's blood and bones, and he wanted to make Bodie

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stay with him, to not go away, to not die, to not become this rotting corpse lying alone and bleeding.

Cowley's voice was thundering through him, making his teeth ache and his brain hurt. A sound too enormous to be heard, it could only be felt in the hollow spaces of his bones. "Upon your head be it!"

The world turned itself inside out, pulling him backwards, away from Bodie, his yells going unheard, Bodie sipping unhappily on his tumbler of whisky, as Doyle clutched at the white painted window frame. But he went through it, sucked back out through the window, dizzyingly spinning through the sky and it was dark again and he was drowning in a whirlpool of air and he was hurtling faster than his lungs could get air and—

—he was back in his own bed, covers tangled round his legs, luminous dial reading 5.45. It was a dream, he told himself, sitting up in bed, running his fingers raggedly through tuggy hair, trying hard to wake himself up and shake the nightmare horror off.

It was easy, funnily enough probably thanks to the daily and expected horrors of his job, to discard the cinematic images of Bodie drenched in tomato sauce—about as real as Heinz' 57, he told himself again and again, about as real as Heinz' 57—but he couldn't dislodge that image—memory? For it felt like a memory of a future yet to be—of Bodie sitting all alone and miserable in a Christmas grotto of a living room. And it was his fault. He knew that, dream or not. Even if Bodie did have a regimental do to go to, he'd still laughed when Bodie had given him that so-casual off the cuff invite to spend Christmas with him.

What if Bodie had wanted to make a move? What if that's what had been behind that request for company? What if real-Bodie really did want him and love him as much as the dream-Bodie did?

And what if real-Bodie did what he'd seen dream-Bodie do? What if his own Bodie gave up on the chance to settle down away from murder and mayhem—apart from Cowley-ordered murder and mayhem, of course—and ended up that rotted corpse he'd seen? Dreamt, he tried to tell himself, but the aftertaste of the nightmare

was bile on his tongue and a fistful knot in his belly. So different from the warm-eyed man who'd made love to him, he couldn't forget the man who had sat so alone and profoundly lonely.

It was nothing more than a dream, but he couldn't ignore it. Perhaps it was all his imagination, but he had not a single doubt whether or not Bodie wanted them to be more than 'just good friends'. A lot more than that, and something to last a very long time. Tinged with the hangover of his dreaming, he believed utterly in the insight he'd had, thinking that maybe it was just his subconscious telling him what it had noticed while his conscious mind was off on its hobby horse. But most of all, it was simply the picture of Bodie, sitting in that chair, surrounded by all the lonely trappings of a Christmas unshared. A confusion of bedding was kicked off, and Doyle was out of bed, flesh goosepimpling in the early morning chill, underwear trawled from the depths of drawers, jeans clattering off hangers, shirt dragged on and buttoned, haphazard luck guiding his fingers. Thick socks, boots discarded as being too time-consuming, old white trainers jammed on, jacket nabbed in the passing, and then he was out the door.

Turning, keys in hand to double-lock the door, his eye was caught by the tissue paper 'stained glass windows' Mrs. Abernathy's six-and-eight-year-olds had cellotaped to the landing window. Bodie had a thing about Christmas, something about... What was it Bodie had said, back at their first Christmas partnered together? Yeh, that was it. Bodie said he needed Christmas, something to remind him that it wasn't always that bad, that there were good times in the past and that people could sometimes rise above themselves and bury the hatchet for a few hours.

That tore it: if he was going to mend the fences and show—without hours of talking and weeks of probation—that he was serious about getting serious with Bodie, then he couldn't arrive empty-handed on Bodie's doorstep like a forgetful milkman. Yet there wasn't a single Yuletide frippery in his house. But, and he unlocked the door, re-opening it and slipping inside, there was something he could bring as a present: the good bottle of brandy he'd bought for himself. Bodie liked brandy. And there was that nice bit of cheese he had in the fridge, and

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those bloody expensive imported grapes he'd indulged himself with, Bodie would like those. The gin could go, too.

Five minutes, that's all it took for him to have his self-serving feast piled on his kitchen table, a cornucopia of goodies. Which left him with the problem of what to put it all in. He could hardly turn up with a couple of carrier bags from the local fruit shop, could he? After all, he had a enough fancies to fill a Christmas hamper—

"That's it!" he announced to the uncaring pile of food. "The hamper, that's what I'll use."

Quickly, into the bedroom, wicker washing basket upended, dirty clothes scattered all over the place. He took a cautious sniff, decided that all he could smell was wicker, and got that tablecloth his mum had given him for his first flat. Suitably draped in white with blue flowers and hand-embroidered at all four corners, he took the time to arrange the food and drink to look nice, the first flush of urgency past now that he was actually doing something concrete. It didn't take long, although pressing lift buttons and getting in or out before the doors closed on him proved a bit on the tricky side, the Milk Tray almost combining with the brandy to form chocolate liqueurs.

The streets were almost empty, only a few hardy or un festive souls braving the cold and the wet. The rain had stopped, at least for the time being, although there were wonderful huge puddles at the kerb which aquaplaned into reversed waterfalls. Pity there weren't any passers-by, but nothing in life was perfect. Face lit by the intermittency of street lights, Doyle drove on, trying to work out the best thing to say and the best way to say it, rehearsing opening lines and entire speeches again and again, brain spinning with the effort to find something appropriate for a man who was still romantic and naïf enough to believe in Christmas.

There might not have been room at the Inn, but there was definitely no room at the kerb. Cursing under his breath, he parked the car half-way down the street, struggling not to slip on the treacherously wet pavement, his basket heavy and unbalanced in his arms. Putting it down in the vestibule of Bodie's building, he was shutting the door quietly behind him, when he noticed something. The neighbour's house had a fair sized, fussed over garden, and right

bang smack in the middle, fishing in a fake pond, were a gaggle of gnomes. Christmas gnomes. Critically, Doyle looked down at his very full but very un festive gift basket, and imagined Bodie's face if he got him one of those preposterous garden gnomes and sat him in the middle, with maybe one of the Italian breadsticks rising from between its legs? Perfect compromise, he decided: Christmassy enough for Bodie, filthy enough for both of them. Without so much as a twinge from his conscience, he pulled the door to, basket inside, while he went outside to steal someone else's property. Well, they could always put it back tomorrow, once it got dark again. Be worth it to see Bodie grin at him.

Moving with all the considerable stealth Her Majesty's Government had trained him in, he traversed the slick pavement, transgressed the front gate, translocated himself from gravel path to grassy lawn, displayed transiliency across the pond, and then made himself transpicuous under a nicely weeping willow. There, right in front of him, was his target: a particularly fat little gnome who bore more than a passing resemblance to Jimmy Saville. A quick check to make sure no-one was nearby, and Doyle dispensed with his government training and matériel-appropriation, dropped the language, and simply nicked the plaster-cast statuette. It fitted, a trifle snugly, into his jacket, and all would have been well if he'd left well enough alone and gone upstairs to make his peace with Bodie. However, he caught a glimpse of the front door, and that gave him an idea: why not pinch some mistletoe—after a full-size gnome, that should be a walkover—and then just present himself on Bodie's doorstep? He could even hold the mistletoe over his head to make sure Bodie got the gist of what was on offer. Yes, no two ways about it: the mistletoe would do the trick. Cold water oozing in over the top of his shoe, he remembered what the gnome had been fishing in. The bloody ornamental pond. He was up to his knee in it, his shoe decidedly sodden, and Doyle was beginning to wonder if perhaps he might not be over-reacting to what was only a dream anyway. But then again, it being a dream didn't take away from the litany of what he'd done to Bodie and how Bodie must be feeling all alone for Christmas. Squaring his shoulders and shaking the last frond of pond

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weed from his shoe, Doyle twisted a sprig of mistletoe free from the Christmas wreath, tucking it behind his ear to leave his hands free to hang onto a gnome that didn't seem to want to leave its friends. Skirting the pond, he miscalculated and stopped in the bare nick of time, one foot up and one foot down.

Stuff the bloody gnome! He was going to toss it back into the pond and Bodie could make do with mistletoe and him. And it was then that he heard the unforgettable plod-plod-plod of a policeman walking his beat. Somehow, he didn't think that Cowley would appreciate the excuse of a dream with Cowley himself turning into a gargoyle as good enough to get himself caught stealing some poor bugger's garden gnome. Very cautiously, stifling all the appropriately rude words inside as his once-dry foot joined the other in a state of coldest wetness, he stood stock still, fingers crossed that the willow would hide him from sight and that the policeman would have had one Yuletide cheer too many.

Plod, plod, plod. Crunch, crunch, crunch as the constable crossed the gravelled repair work. Squelch, squelch, squelch as Doyle flexed his toes to make sure they were still alive. Then the sonorous footsteps retreated, and he was alone again with his gnome and Bodie's flat not twenty feet away. Sneaking quietly, he was quickly inside the relative warmth of the vestibule, arranging the gnome amidst his other, legitimate bounty. But climbing the stairs, he began to feel as stupid as the gnome, wondering what he was going to do if Bodie opened the door and some girl called out, asking who was there. If that happened... Shite, what would he say then? Pardon me, but I had this dream, you see—well, dreams, really, and you were in love with me in them and you were going to go running off somewhere insane if I didn't get you and me sorted out, and then you were going to die because you were miserable and depressed people are a bit on the careless side when it comes to being careful and—

Perhaps he should just turn round right now and go home. Stick the gnome back in its bloody pond, cellotape the mistletoe back on next door's wreath. Walk away and leave everything be, say hello to Bodie when they went back to work and pretend none of this ever happened.

Handswithering over the doorbell, he paused,

considering, thinking about how he'd feel if Bodie had a girl with him. Stupid, really, he supposed, to risk the partnership on a dream. That's all it had been, right? A couple of nice wet dreams followed by a doozie of a nightmare, not enough to risk the best working partnership for, was it?

And then he heard it, quite clearly: On your head be it! He whirled round, almost dropping the basket, but there was nothing and no-one there, just an echo of his dream, a wraith of shadow fading smokelike out the window: a finger of fog, perhaps, a shadow from a cloud passing overhead and covering the window for a moment. But it brought his nightmare back full force and before he knew he was going to do it, he had rung the bell and was left standing there in the hallway, waiting for Bodie.

Who answered, sleepy-warm and rumped, rubbing narrowed blue eyes in the too-bright light of the outside world.

Doyle, sickeningly, couldn't think of a thing to say. Excuse me, mate, but are you thinking of leaving me? So instead, he asked: "Doesn't the security system work at Christmas?"

Bodie shuffled aside, yawning enormously, waking gradually. "Didn't need to buzz through on the intercom—who else'd disturb a man's rest at this hour on Christmas morning, eh?"

Cowley for one, Doyle thought, the dream sinking onto his shoulders like cement, for Bodie's living room was precisely as it had been in his dream. Not bad, considering Doyle had never been in this new flat of Bodie's, and had no idea that Bodie had bought a new sofa to match that ridiculous big armchair. Unaware that he was both clutching his gift basket in his arms like Moses' mother and that Bodie was finally surfacing enough to be watching him with genuine concern, Doyle walked slowly over to the small Christmas tree sitting in all the same glory he'd already seen it in once before that morning. Sure enough, right where he'd known it would be, was a hand-made fairy, child-sized stitches showing at the hem, one sleeve hanging loose where the sewing gaped too large to hold it tidily in place. But the face on the old-fashioned wooden spool had been drawn by adult hands, and the pig-tails of yellow wool were far finer than the clumsy stitching and haphazardly glued-on sequins.

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“Funny little thing, isn't it?” Bodie was saying from right behind him. Doyle hadn't even heard him move, didn't know how long he'd been standing there, but obviously long enough for Bodie to be fully awake now, and indulgent.

“You made that, didn't you?”

He sensed Bodie nod, was aware of a combination of pride and sorrow in his partner. “Me and my mam made that with my sister the Christmas before she died.”

“You never told me you had a sister.”

“You never asked, did you? My little sister had leukemia before they even really knew what it was. She was getting iller and iller. She knew she was dying, but she kept on saying, not till after Christmas. Not till after—” The silence made Doyle turn round, breaking Bodie's mood. “Here, let me take that for you,” Bodie said, then his face lit up and he began to laugh with glee. Picking up the gnome, he could hardly speak for laughing. “Oh, Ray, you shouldn't have! A life-size statue of yourself, and in such a fetching outfit!”

It was easy again, to know what to say to Bodie, sliding back into their tried-and-true pattern. “I'm wounded, Bodie, struck to the core. That's not me,” and he sounded suitably upset, rewarded by a glimmer of guilt starting in Bodie's expression. “I don't know how you could say a thing like that to me—it's obvious it's Cowley.”

Bodie did a manful job of keeping his face straight, plunking the basket down and cradling the absurd gnome in his arms. “I shall treasure it always,” he murmured, carefully positioning the gnome at the bottom of the tree. “Until the man next door sends the boys in blue over, anyroads.”

Doyle sank down into the plush sofa, watching Bodie. “Glad you like it. Thought you deserved a present.”

“Thought you hated Christmas.”

Doyle shrugged, grinned. “Yeh, but you're like a kid with his nose on the sweet-shop window, how could I resist.”

Bodie smiled at him then, as sweet as the shop, but then it was gone, replaced by the more usual Bodie expression of distant affection. In fact, Doyle realised, if he hadn't been looking for it, then he'd never even have noticed it. He had to say something. Knew he had to say something.

But he'd never been good at anything but chat-up lines that didn't mean anything and no-one took seriously anyway. Still he was going to try to completely change their relationship with each other, and more than that. It would mean a change of lifestyle, even a change of the way they thought of themselves. Have a man as your lover, plan on staying with him through thick and thin, and certain labels would start to stick.

He wasn't sure if he was ready for that.

Then he looked up at Bodie, who was sitting in that armchair of his, and there was an open bottle of whisky beside him, and a tumbler that might have been full the night before and definitely would be before the day's end—were he to leave Bodie alone now. Instead of being defeated by possible labels, perhaps he should go by the adage about sticks and stones.

Bodie spoke before him, not quite looking at him. “I've a present for you as well.”

Doyle felt about two inches tall: Bodie must have bought him that present when he'd hoped that Doyle would come over for Christmas dinner. And got laughed at instead. “Well, hand it over, then,” he said, hiding his guilt behind their usual attitudes. “Is it inflatable, and if it is, did you get me a bicycle pump to go with it?”

“Sorry, nothing that juicy. I mean, it's not a big present or anything, just what my Gran would call a ‘minding under the tree’, you know, something to show you were...” he stumbled then, recovered, made a face to minimise the words farther, “being thought of.”

A small parcel was put into Doyle's hands, gaily gift-wrapped, complete with bow and Santa Claus tag. Making a great show of it, Doyle shook it, listened to it, felt it carefully all over, heaved a dramatic sigh of relief. “Least it's not a bomb.” After all that meticulous exploration, he simply ripped the paper from the present, revealing a dulled blue cover, faded gilt printing. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. He looked up quickly, caught the embarrassment and trepidation on Bodie's face.

There was an awkward pause, and then Bodie shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. You know, bit of a joke, what with you hating Christmas and all that...”

“You mean, what with me being a miserable bastard and too mean to buy my best mate a present.”

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Bodie waved an expansive arm at the heaped-high basket. "That's a pretty nice present, Doyle."

"Yeh, but I didn't buy any of that for anyone but me. Was planning on keeping it all for myself."

Bodie was looking at him strangely, obviously catching the odd undercurrent running through Doyle.

"What'd you come here for?" he asked in a softly patient voice, and Doyle looked at him, thinking about the things Bodie had been saying to him recently, recognising that Bodie had been waiting for this change between them for a very, very long time. "What made you turn up on my doorstep like that?"

"Believe me, mate, you wouldn't believe me." He hefted the book, grinning wryly at it. "And it's a very long story." Bodie was looking at him still, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't know how to say it, how to make Bodie understand, not without coming out with it

baldly, making it sound like one of their reports to Cowley. And that would be disastrous: it would change the atmosphere, and God knew how he'd end up screwing it up by phrasing things badly, and then he'd hurt Bodie's feelings and then they'd get into a fight, and then it would all go wrong anyway.

"Ray," Bodie said, leaving his armchair and coming to kneel in front of Doyle, comfortable as always when it came to emotions and his partner, an expression of such hope and love in his eyes that Doyle knew it was going to be all right if he left it to Bodie. "You trying to tell me something?" Then Bodie reached out, very gently, and took the forgotten sprig of mistletoe from behind Ray's ear.

He knew what to say to that.

"Yes."

And then Bodie leaned forward and kissed him, and it was just as sweet and just as perfect as he'd...dreamed it to be.
