

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 looming 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 your 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-

respond 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 stroppe 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.)

