

BAAAHH HUMBUG!

OR

BLEAK HOUSE



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Distributor and rotor are both bugged.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

getting dark!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you have dogs of your own?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He made his escape then, dodging around

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And the car?"

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

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

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

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

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

pallid and pinched.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You asleep?" he asked.

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

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

the making of penance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's not fair—"

"And what you did was?"

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

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

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

"With you always copping feels, yeh, I had

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You tell me."

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

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

"What else could it be?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"See a lot of him?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What a rotten fucking bastard!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fancy a few carols then?"

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

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

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

"Bodie..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You."

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

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

No reaction, but for Doyle wiping his face,

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Will you shut up and listen?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thought you wanted me to talk to you?"

"Sorry. Carry on."

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

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

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

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

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

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

what I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And what if I'm not willing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Promise? Word of honour?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

