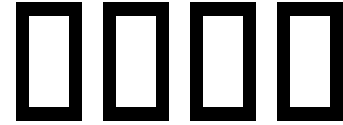
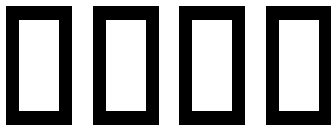


IF I FELL



*This is the final Professionals piece and the title, of course, is from the Beatles' song. As is to be expected in a story set immediately after the Ann Holly incident, the wee Scot must deal with Doyle's reaction to Bodie's bugging of his flat. You might think there would be fireworks and there are—but of a different nature entirely...*



*Author's note: this is set immediately after the events in Involvement.*

COULD BE ANY NUMBER of things brewing under that storm cloud, Bodie told himself, acutely aware of the sharp unease of Doyle sitting next to him. And finding out what wrath was nursing itself into that gathering storm wouldn't be pretty, and it'd be a far sight from pleasant. Nodding politely at the couple edging past their small table, Bodie managed to catch a glimpse of his friend's face, that instant long enough to confirm that the green eyes were still focussed on some inner distance, that the mouth was pursed as if after lemons. Oh, yes, there was something brewing in there, and if past experience was anything to go by, it was going to be either a brood to put an entire hen-house to shame, a flood of misery no Ark could ride out, or a binge well out of even Cowley's range. A tiny movement, stifled almost immediately, but Bodie was minutely attuned to all of Doyle's constrained tightness, and he saw the clenching of the fist before it was deliberately relaxed, the hand opened and brought up to fiddle, apparently casually, with the soggy beer-mat in its miniature ocean of spilled booze.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bodie observed his partner, nothing more, simply sat there beside Doyle quietly and watched and waited, as if Doyle were some mad bomber that had to be handled with care or else the entire city would end up blown to smithereens. An exaggeration, but not by

much, Doyle's rages infamous even in so seriously misfit a group as CI5.

"Ready for another?" Bodie asked, rising smoothly to his feet to push his way to the bar, not waiting for Doyle's answer: it would only be stropky, or nasty, or maudlin, a time-waster until Bodie would go and get what they both needed. With the press of people and the ineptness of a new barman, it took several minutes, time enough for Bodie to be eyeing their corner with concern, Doyle not safe to be let out on his own tonight, and this delay long enough to give the dozy bastard enough rope to hang himself and anyone else unlucky enough to get in the way of his mood.

Another few moments ferrying the drinks through the crowd, and Bodie could see him, Doyle sitting there like his very own tempest just waiting to happen. "Get your laughing gear around this," Bodie said with a fine dusting of irony, his own attention ostensibly on the flow of people around them.

At Doyle's side again, feeling like the proverbial sitting duck waiting to be hit. Five more minutes, Bodie promised himself, hackles rising in the reflected heat of Doyle's temper, five more minutes. And then if Ray didn't say something, then he would. Doyle could keep this simmering silence up for hours, and it always drove Bodie right round the twist, even though he usually wasn't stupid enough to let Doyle know that. Get on with it, he found himself thinking, stoking his own anger in sheer self-preservation, the only deflection that stood a chance against Ray Doyle's scything

tongue. Say it. Get it over and done with. It'd be ugly, but at least then it would be sorted. And all Bodie wanted was to get this sorted out, and get back to normal, put this last nasty episode behind them, dump it with all the rest of the crap they had to put up with.

Of course, sorting it out and putting it behind them was always supposing Doyle would see reason, and Bodie knew he himself wouldn't be feeling too reasonable if he'd been the one on the receiving end of CI5's institutionalised distrust. Wasn't a nice thing, bugging your best mate's bedroom. Spying on his fiancée wasn't exactly the done thing either—unless George Cowley had you at his less than tender mercies. Bodie took another good draught from his beer, savouring the taste, the drinking of his pint just something to do before Doyle started in on him. But Doyle, contrary to the end, was doing none of the usual things that led up to the recriminations and the eventual absolutions: instead of flicking, acid glances, and small, pointed comments, there was nothing but silence, distant, lowering silence, grating on Bodie's nerves like a tap dripping in the night.

It went on like that, Bodie waiting in silence, Doyle silently sitting, went on like that while groups of people came and went, sea on the shore, and Bodie and Doyle sitting there like pensioners watching the world go by. The jukebox worked its way through its entire repertoire, and the pub owner rolled his eyes and then rolled up his sleeves, wading in to save his once-promising barman. A young man objected to another young man stealing his bird, the argument escalating in a way Bodie would actually welcome, until the two young men threatened to come to blows, the young woman clobbering them both and stalking off in disgust. Too close to home, that, Bodie decided, friend enough to be grateful that Doyle had been too introspective to see that by-play.

More drinks, Bodie down to half-pints, Doyle up to double G&Ts, not that he seemed to notice, consuming them slowly, with the same abstract attention that he scrooged on the pub meal Bodie plonked down in front of him.

Food taken care of, Doyle yet to be. Still that silence, still that endless contemplation. With good reason, Bodie hated it when Doyle started thinking, the results always unsettling, always something that put Bodie on edge. He had long since given up sneaking measuring glances at his partner, Doyle

so lost in thought that Bodie could catalogue every pore uninterrupted. Bodie was staring now, at the set of Doyle's mouth, at the hooded eyes, at the tangle distance between himself and his partner. Between himself and the partner who just might be brooding himself up into a right tizz, perhaps enough righteous and self-righteous indignation to make Doyle march into Cowley's office and demand a partner who didn't crawl around under his bed spying on him.

Nothing given away by that thoughtful face, nothing to work with, only the silence that had become ominous in Bodie's ignorance.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, why don't you just say it?" Bodie demanded, his patience in tatters, barely keeping his voice within the limits of pub etiquette, depending on the presence of others to limit the damage Doyle would do to him, and still wishing the words unsaid the minute they left his mouth. He was more than half furious with himself for bringing it up here instead of getting Doyle back to the privacy of his flat, but once started, the flow of words was in full spate, pouring over Doyle's silence. "Go on, get it over with, 'stead of sitting there like the fucking Sphinx, go on, call me everything under the sun—"

Doyle blinked, turned, looked at Bodie. "What for?" he asked in a quite devastatingly reasonable tone of voice.

Incredulous, Bodie gaped at him, having been expecting a blast of typically Doylean temper, and getting, instead, this wary, guarded look, coolly impersonal.

"Oh, so it's going to be like that, then, is it?" Bodie said disgustedly, settling back against the leather-covered banquette because if he didn't, he was going to get up and walk out—and then who would fancy the chances of the partnership ever getting back on the old even keel? "The cold shoulder, accompanied by sudden showers of sleet, and patches of black ice to trip the unwary?"

Doyle glanced away, fiddled with his beer mat again, looked back at Bodie, his expression odd. "Nothing you did that I wouldn't've done, mate."

Not by a flicker did Bodie betray how uneasy all this controlled calm made him. Unhealthy, too, for Doyle to bottle it all up: made the explosion bigger and nastier when it finally came, always better to give Doyle an outlet, get him to rant and rave for a bit, and taking it out on Bodie was the best safety valve available. Standard behaviour, for them, a

familiar, reassuring pattern, but this quiet, this complete absence of outrage—what the hell was going on? “Are you trying to tell me you’re letting me away with bugging your bedroom? Wasn’t that long ago you were ready to hang, draw and bloody quarter me for that—”

A glimmer of what Bodie would have claimed was embarrassment on anyone but Raymond Doyle. “Yeh, well, I was fucking furious with you then.”

“And now you’re not?” Bodie sneered, far too well acquainted with Doyle’s temperament to believe this amenable reasonableness. Where the fuck was the explosion that would clear the air—this was like talking to a stranger, and that strangeness was threatening to pull the floor right out from under Bodie’s feet. “What is this, eh, Ray? Since when’ve you smiled sweetly and not bothered when someone’s spied on you and your bird?”

“Told you, it wasn’t anything I wouldn’t’ve done,” Doyle said, and where temper should have honed his voice to cutting sharpness, there was only a dullness that worried the hell out of Bodie.

“So I’ve got that to look forward to, have I? You crawling around on my bedroom floor, planting bugs, listening to every moan and groan, counting how many times the springs squeak?”

Doyle gave him a sidelong look, measuring, still laden with that unnatural calm. A shift in his expression, some emotion there, and Bodie wished this was some cheap novel so that he could read Doyle’s eyes. “Come on, mate,” he said, trying another tack, thumping Doyle affectionately on the arm. “What is it?”

Another one of those unnerving stares, another contemplative silence that left Bodie feeling horribly exposed.

“You like me, don’t you?” Doyle asked him, the question almost drowned out by the rugby louts singing along to the jukebox.

“Oh, petal, I simply *adore* you,” Bodie lisped, limper than Liberace, the humour not sounding anywhere near as forced as it felt.

“Stop prating about,” Doyle snapped, some habitual temper surfacing. “I’m serious and I mean it. You like me, don’t you?”

Bodie went cross-eyed, put on his thickest moron’s voice. “Uh, yeh, I fink so. A golly’s much better than any old teddy bear, innit?”

“Cept it’s all Paddingtons and Wombles nowadays, isn’t it?” Doyle said, handing the gift of

Bodie’s attempted humour back unopened. “Half the things you and me grew up with—out-of-date, that’s what they are.” Doyle stopped, hesitating, fingers skimming round the rim of his glass, the sound too faint to be heard amidst the raucous happiness of the pub. “Out-of-date. Like you and me.”

Christ, Bodie thought, heart sinking, *it is going to be one of those after all*. He could always turn that last comment into a joke, but it would be a waste of time, or worse, it could be incendiary, and a morose Doyle was still better than a bellicose one and far better than that calm stranger. “Here, have another drink—”

Doyle actually smiled at that, lifting his almost full glass in mocking salute. “You poor old bastard. Haven’t got the faintest what do with me, have you?”

Bodie, if he were feeling reckless and suicidal, just might dispute that.

“Get me drunk, take me home, pour me into bed and leave me to sleep it off. Is that it, Bodie? That your grand plan for the night?”

Uncomfortable, Bodie shifted in his seat, taking great pains to observe the crowd so he wouldn’t have to look at this smiling man he suddenly feared he didn’t understand at all. “Yeh, well, it’s always worked before so unless you’ve a better idea...”

“Yeh,” Doyle got to his feet, the G&T disappearing down his throat in one long swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing, Bodie needing to avert his eyes again, the lean lines of Doyle’s body lingering in his mind. “‘Course I ’ave a better idea. Skip the getting plastered, get me home, tuck me into bed, and at least that way I won’t have a hangover in the fucking morning, will I?”

That was more like it, Bodie hanging onto the sour snap of that voice, on familiar Doyle-ground now, this basic misanthropy easy, if unpleasant, to deal with.

“I’ll drive,” he said, filching the keys from Doyle’s hands, Doyle’s driving not fit for man nor beast when he was in this mood. “You can watch out for traffic wardens—”

Doyle gave him an unexpectedly affectionate smile, unnerving Bodie even more thoroughly than before. “—to make sure none of them get away,” Ray finished resignedly, falling into their old, old joke. “Come on, Batman, the Batcave awaits.”

In the car, Bodie’s hands light on the steering wheel, Doyle slouched beside him in a pose that

was usually artless, but tonight, it was measuredly artful, a careful display, like a museum exhibit of the way they used to be together, everything Doyle said sounding once removed, filtered and dusty like something put on for public remembrance. By the time they made it to Doyle's flat, Bodie's palms were sweating, and all his guilt and good intentions were long since flown. A world-weary Doyle he'd deal with, a furious Doyle he'd protect innocent bystanders from, but this precision-crafted calm was something that made all his instincts scream *run*. "See you on Wednesday then," he said, with Doyle's contrived casualness. "Pick you up as usual?"

"No." Doyle was unsmiling, reaching across Bodie to shove Bodie's door open, his after-shave and soap losing the battle with the stale beer and cigarette smoke from the pub.

"Oi, shut the door, Ray, it's fucking freezing—and now you've gone and got me drenched—"

"All the more reason for you to come up then, isn't it? We wouldn't want you to catch your death, would we?" It should have been light and friendly, if Doyle really did see the spying as being something Bodie had no choice over, or it should have been dark and portentous, heavy hints of what Doyle was going to do to him as soon as they were in the privacy of Doyle's flat and away from either witness or aid. It should not have been devoid of anything but what sounded like genuine concern.

Bodie took another look at Doyle's face, and conceded that if he didn't know what Doyle was going to do next, then his partner could well be a liability, and not only would he sound like a right fool explaining that his partner had scared the shit out of him by being nice, Cowley would also have his guts for garters if he left and then Doyle did something stupid. Such as going out as soon as Bodie had driven off, and getting himself into a public brawl somewhere. Shivering, the cold a perfect excuse to cover the unease crawling along his spine, Bodie got out of the car, following Doyle, watching his back, a horrible thought taking root. All this not-shouting—what if that was because Doyle had just had enough this time and was beyond mere fury? If that was it, if this whole being spied on like a criminal had been one callous manipulation too many, the one thing that Doyle couldn't forgive CI5 for... Doyle could resign, or just disappear. Or just as bad, Bodie thought, coming to a halt while Doyle unlocked the flat, all

this calm could be a front for Doyle having run out of resources, his innate bleakness too much for him, depression—Christ, Bodie thought, half ashamed that he'd forgotten, Ann just dumped him! First and only time Doyle had ever even hinted at marriage—

"Oi, Dozy! You coming in or are you going to stay there and drown?"

"Sorry," Bodie said, coming in, rain still dripping off his nose and down the back of his neck. "Was thinking..."

"And we shouldn't expect you to think and walk at the same time. Here," this as a towel came flying towards Bodie, "and take those mucky shoes off before you walk on my good carpet."

Muttering under his breath about Mrs. Mops masquerading as CI5 agents, Bodie did as he was told, really put out when he saw just how soaking wet he was.

And then Doyle was back in front of him, that strange expression back in his eyes. It made Bodie's flesh crawl: Doyle was looking at him assessingly, and for the first time, Bodie suspected he wasn't going to measure up. "Did you manage to miss *any* of the puddles?" was all Doyle said, despite the seriousness of his expression. "Go on, there's an extra dressing gown in the wardrobe."

Practical. Sensible, even. But going up those stairs, Bodie still couldn't shake the feeling that practicality and common sense had nothing to do with Doyle's suggestion. By the time he had stripped off and hurried himself into Doyle's big blue dressing gown, he could smell coffee and toast coming up from downstairs, a veritable symphony to a stomach that hadn't been fed anything but half-cold pub grub. By the time Bodie got down the stairs, Doyle was in the kitchen taking the last slices of toast out from under the grill, and Bodie grabbed the first slice from the mounding plate.

Doyle didn't even bother to pretend annoyance, just shoved the last of the newly buttered toast onto the plate. "This'll do the pair of us more good than the cat's piss and greasy pies in that pub."

Bodie would have agreed, but he had half a slice of bread in his mouth, butter melting, dripping out the corner of his mouth.

"Typical," Doyle said, rolling his eyes heavenward, "can't take you bloody anywhere, can I?"

Trying to grin round the toast, Bodie went to wipe his mouth. And froze.

That strange expression was back on Doyle's

face, and his fingers were there on Bodie's mouth, smoothing away the butter, taking longer over it than he should have. No, Bodie thought, unwilling and unable to go beyond that simple denial. No.

Doyle, moving away now, going through to the living room, Bodie following all unwilling, a fish already hooked. Doyle, speaking over his shoulder, so sure that Bodie would be right behind him, reeling Bodie in on a tacit promise that might yet prove a threat. "What I said in the pub..."

Not a topic Bodie wanted to get started on, not with the way Doyle was looking at him, nor the hints Doyle was dropping, nor with the unwelcome heat gathering in Bodie's groin. "Going to bug my bedroom," Bodie said cheerfully as if this were all a good laugh, "and sell them as how-to tapes to the filthy buggers at work—"

"No," Doyle said, staring at Bodie with more honesty than was comfortable, Bodie glancing away, glancing back, Doyle saying nothing more until Bodie was sitting down, looking right at him. "I meant, when I said that you liked me."

Bodie suddenly knew what quicksand felt like. He knew he was sinking, on ground that had looked familiar and normal and mundane, but was something entirely different. "Have to, don't I?" he blustered, trying to find some solid ground. "Don't have any choice, sheer self-preservation, what with the way we have to work together—"

"We're not talking about work, Bodie."

Bodie hadn't thought they were either, but it had seemed as good an escape route as any.

Doyle, obviously, wasn't going to let Bodie get away. "We're talking about *off* the job." A momentary pause, just long enough for Bodie to swallow hard, for Doyle to not blink, his eyes quite horrifyingly honest. "You like me, don't you?"

Bodie couldn't look away, mind skirting around Doyle's words by being acutely aware of just how green Ray's eyes were, and how they slanted, just a little, the right eye more than the left—from the time he'd had his cheekbone broken, maybe? And how unwavering that stare was. Choice time. Either answer, or get out now. Ray wanted—something—and the only way not to give it him was to leave. And Ray never forgave anyone who did that to him. "All right, all right, so I like you!" Bodie admitted with ill grace, confessing to that in the hope that it would satisfy Doyle. "Since when has bad taste been a crime?"

Doyle could be incredibly soft-spoken when he

chose to be, but it did nothing to disguise his implacability. "But it's more than that, isn't it, Bodie?"

Bodie swallowed, finding it suddenly difficult to breathe, to think, to do anything but feel like a donation to science, spread out, cut open, completely exposed.

"You love me, don't you?"

Eviscerated. The heart cut out from him and presented on a bloody silver platter. Bodie couldn't look at Ray—couldn't not look, knew he'd given himself away by the extremes of his reaction.

More intent than ever, Doyle leaned forward, elbows on the coffee table, stare fixed on Bodie. "You love me. And not just all-mates-together either, is it, Bodie?"

Bodie looked then, transfixed, body caught in fight-or-flight. Wanting to kill Doyle for saying it, because if no-one ever said it, then it might not be true. If no-one ever said it, then it could be ignored, called something else, lied about. He could strangle Doyle for speaking the unspeakable, or he could simply run away and never stop running. Fight, or flight. Neither, in the end. Settling, painfully, for surrender, and knowing it for the bravest thing he'd ever done. "And so what if I do?" he demanded, pride all the protection he had left. "It's a free country, at least that's what Cowley pays us to keep it, isn't it?" He shrugged, feigning what should have been nonchalance but showed itself for misery. "Anyroad, it's not as if it's ever got in the way, is it?"

Doyle was still staring at him, giving nothing, demanding everything. "Are you in love with me?"

"Christ, Shylock and his pound of fucking flesh!" On his feet now, pacing, to the window, the bookshelves, the coffee table and sofa between him and Ray.

"That's what this," he tugged on the lapel of the dressing gown, "is all in aid of. Get us both stripped down, so you can bugger good old Bodie—stupid old Bodie more like. Ann dumps you, and I get to play stand-in so's you can prove to yourself that you can't be as crap as she says you were—"

"Shut up, Bodie!" An explosion, the very thing Bodie had been waiting for all evening. "It's not fucking like that, and don't you go putting words in my mouth, right, mate?"

"Then if it's not that, then what the fuck is it? Suddenly decided you're bent, Ann prove that to

you, did she? Well, listen, mate, if you couldn't get it up for her then it was because she was a frigid—"

Doyle was over the sofa and at Bodie's throat before another word could be hurled. Hands clawed tight around Bodie's throat, Doyle was all but snarling. "You watch your mouth, mate. It wasn't like that, and Christ, but you get ugly when you're jealous, don't you?"

"Jealous?" Supposed to be incredulous, but hoarse, as much from emotion as Doyle's hand warningly round his neck. "What the fuck would I be jealous of her for? What did she get from you, eh? Roses? Nice and easy to give, because you didn't give her any of yourself, did you?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Bet you even fucked her with your little finger stuck out like a vicar's tea party. Send her a posh, polite thank-you card every time you got in her, did you? Or were you pretending to be such an upper-crust twit that you just held her hand and recited fucking poetry to her?"

"You don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about, you stupid crud—"

"Oh, no? I know she was a stuck-up bitch who didn't give a fuck about you. She was only interested in what she thought she could turn you into—"

It was the second time Doyle had punched Bodie over Ann.

"Feel better now, mate?" Bodie asked, much as he had the first time, slipping them back into the tried-and-true mannerisms of their old routine, the quicksand no longer sucking him under. He knew this Doyle, understood him, could handle him. Could put away the words they had both said, lock them up as if they'd never been spoken. It wouldn't be the first time they'd done that—slithering memories of weaknesses admitted in the dark, fears spilled out, failures confessed, sins laid bare—and they'd survive intact again.

But then Doyle was giving him that look again, and the quicksand was back, and Bodie was sinking in up to his neck.

"Christ, how did that happen?" Doyle ran his fingers through his hair, shrugged. "Sorry. Honest, I am." A sort of laugh, a wry smile. "Wasn't meant to go like this, you do realise that, don't you?"

"Then how was it supposed to go?" Edging away now, perching himself on the sofa, eyeing Doyle warily as his partner came round to sit beside him. Close. Too close. Bare knee through the

heavy dressing gown, lean muscular thigh, hair growing thicker as it disappeared into the shadow cast by the fabric.

"You know, you're half right about Ann—and about me an' all. Both of us looking for the same thing, thinking we could get it from each other. Stupid, really."

"I thought you'd hate her for what she did."

"No point, is there?"

"Yeh, well, no point in hating yourself for it, doesn't make any sense either, but that's not going to stop you, is it?"

Another one of those deprecating laughs, no hint of the filthy chuckle that could make Bodie's pulse race. "Not this time, mate. This time round, I'm too tired to hate anyone."

"Not even me?" Hearing the way he asked that, Bodie winced, and hurried on with: "Don't answer that."

"Since when've I ever listened to you anyway?" There was no sting to the words, Doyle maintaining this façade so well that it might yet prove to be the truth. He was slumped down, head tipped back against the back of the sofa. "Yeh, okay, so I'm really pissed off about it—but if it'd been you doing what I was doing, with a bird whose old man was under suspicion... Yeh, I'd've done what Cowley told me." He smiled then at Bodie, an undercurrent of warmth drawing Bodie in. "And I'd probably enjoy it more than you did."

There it was again, that undertow that in anyone else Bodie would assume was sexual, an invitation, but in Doyle—oh, no, he wasn't going to set himself up like that. Bad enough that he'd admitted what he had. Sheer insanity to offer visible proof as sacrifice to Doyle's uncertain mercies.

"Always been one of my kinks," Doyle was going on, as idly as if they were discussing their favourite beer. "Voyeurism," he added, by way of elucidation, as if Bodie's agile imagination needed any help, Doyle's eyes quick to note the slight movement under the blueness of borrowed dressing gown, and where Bodie would have expected—had always expected, those rare drunken nights when he'd dared think about it—contempt, there was more of that uncommon gentleness, more of what could only be described as affection.

"What are you after?" Bodie asked, shifting uneasily, fighting the urge to cross his legs, trying to be blasé about sitting here next-to-naked with his partner, a nascent erection troubling him with its

needs. “Come on, Ray, you’ve done the Spanish Inquisition bit, so why don’t we get down to brass tacks. You’re after something—”

“What makes you think that?”

“I know you, mate, that’s what makes me think that,” Bodie said with great confidence, thinking and feeling no such thing, an affectionate and willing Doyle not something that happened every day. “You’re setting me up—” and painfully, he could believe it, Doyle driven by the pain of losing Ann, needing proof, any proof, that he was still desirable, still every inch the man, and pathetic old Bodie was always hanging around. The image of himself as pining wallflower was both absurd and too close to raw nerves, either or both enough to inflame Bodie’s restless anger. “You’re sitting there chatting me up like one of your fucking Friday night scrubbers. Going to tell the lads how I was between the sheets? Give the lot of them your usual detailed report?”

“Bodie—” hurled out, more anger in that one word than Doyle had shown all evening, echoes of that dangerous time when his vitriolic resignation had looked like charity to an old man he could break between his hands. “Look,” Doyle said, holding on to his temper with visible difficulty, the lines of strain around mouth and eyes reminding Bodie that Doyle had had a hell of a day, a hell of a week, “all right, so I’m not doing much by way of coming up with the right words—and if I listened to a replay of all this, I’d even admit I’m probably fucking this up royally. But come on, Bodie, what’d you expect, eh?”

Bodie held his peace, looking away so that the bitterness of his expectations wouldn’t show, but when had Doyle needed to see the nakedness of his eyes to know him? He hunched into himself, ostentatiously shutting Doyle out, uncaring of how this minor self-preservation would look to his ever hyper-prickly partner.

Perhaps it was because Bodie had every reason to protect himself from Doyle that his voice was harsh with honesty sieved through tension. “You want me to trot out the usual patter I use on the birds? You want the dinner and the flowers—yeh, I’ll give you fucking roses, you don’t even need to bother asking—and I’ll whisper whatever sweet nothings you want to hear,” Doyle was going on, the words coming more easily now that he’d actually started saying them, and now that Bodie wasn’t looking at him like a man betrayed. “Only

thing is,” and he didn’t bother smiling at the back of Bodie’s head, but tried, unsuccessfully, to sound no more than amused, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to whisper to a bloke, do I?”

That was greeted by silence, and then Bodie slowly turning round to face Doyle once more. “Are you honestly trying to tell me,” Bodie finally asked, his disbelief getting the better of him, all this a far cry from the quick machismo of a ‘me-Tarzan’ fuck he’d been expecting from Doyle, “that you want to...go out with me?”

Doyle, to his credit, met the sneer with equanimity. “Yeh. D’you have a problem with that?”

Of course he had a problem with that. He’d barely even begun admitting to himself that his attraction for Doyle went above the belt-buckle, and here was Doyle threatening to carve his heart up like a Sunday roast, all in the name of getting over Ann fucking Holly. “Do I have a problem—Christ’s sake, Doyle! My best mate, my fucking *partner* is sitting there coming the Don Juan with me, and you have the cheek to ask me if I have a problem with that? Of course I have a fucking problem with—”

Doyle ignored the blusterings, putting them down for a last ditch effort designed to put him off the scent. “Bit over the top there, don’t you think?” He paused, eyes wide and bright, waiting until Bodie was staring at him, waiting until Bodie was unblinking, the hook embedded ever more deeply in Bodie’s flesh: “Considering what you’ve already admitted, anyway.”

A sudden rain of cold sweat clamoured on Bodie’s brow, and he swallowed the fear that rose in his throat. “Oh, you know me,” he tossed off with apparent flippancy, “say anything to get you going—” He trailed off then, Doyle’s steady glower refusing to yield, denying them both the comfort of lies. Bodie got to his feet, to go nowhere, simply to put a little distance between himself and Doyle, give himself the balm of not having to face Doyle right now, not over this. “Ray,” and his voice was gentle with the remembered surrender, that backhanded admission he’d made twisting his spine like rope, “I’ve always been the first to admit I’m a twisted bastard, so it stands to reason that I’d be a bit fond of you, doesn’t it?” A brief temptation to glance at Doyle assailed him, but this was hard enough without actually seeing it all register on Ray’s face. “And all right, so I’ve been round the roundabout more times than Zebedee, and I

probably wouldn't say no to fucking a bloke again, but..." A breath of laughter, cynical amusement that Ray Doyle could expect even this just handed to him, and that Bodie was co-operating with all the common sense of a lemming. "But all this whispering sweet nothings and bunches of roses—bit romantic, isn't it? Bit too romantic, as if it was love and all that crap."

"Thought we'd already established it was love"

Oh, they had, Bodie thought, beginning another surrender, sitting back down beside Doyle, yielding another skirmish to his partner. They'd established Bodie's weakness and Doyle's strength. Had come right out with the one thing Bodie had never asked for, never wanted. "Life's a funny thing, isn't it?" he said absently, propping his feet carelessly on the coffee table, dressing gown falling open half way up his thighs, all hints of sexual arousal fled in the face of all this emotion. "Just when you think you've finally sussed the whole thing out, all the plans laid, everything worked out—and then it hits you, right between the eyes." He leaned back, closing his eyes, closing his emotions down, closing off this frightening willingness to surrender to a man he had to admit he loved. "Love," he said disgustedly, as if the word itself were a foul taste in his mouth, "love. Worse than a fucking dum-dum."

Not, perhaps, the nicest thing to say, given the circumstances, given the man at his side.

"Oh, that's rich, that's really fucking perfect!"

Doyle snapped, and if Bodie had been looking at him, perhaps the expression on his face would have been shocking. "I'm sitting here, offering you—"

"Offering me *what?*" Bodie demanded nastily, eyes open now, glowering at Doyle. "I get to lay my heart at your feet like a fucking virgin sacrifice and what do you get? You get to fuck me, until you get over dear, precious Ann—"

"Shut up, Bodie, you sound like—"

"Like what? A pathetic fairy? A fucking queer? Well, guess what, if you want to fuck me all of a sudden and if you want me dripping hearts and flowers all over you, then that makes you just as big a pansy, doesn't it?"

Doyle opened his mouth, beautifully vicious retort honed and ready. Then he closed his mouth, forcing himself to reign in, to stop this before it degenerated into a fight they'd never recover from. "We neither one of us is a fairy—"

But Bodie still wasn't ready to let him finish a single sentence. "Speak for yourself, mate. But if we

go round fucking each other and having me gush all over you like a fucking lothario, then people, petal, are going to talk."

"So let them—"

"Let them? And does that include the Old Man? We'll let him talk, shall we? Gossip about us over tea and bickies with Betty? Be nice that, won't it?"

"What the fuck's got into you—"

"Not you, that's for sure."

"Oh, yeh, now I get it," Doyle said in the knowing way that was infuriating mainly because it meant he was right, "this is all about pride, isn't it? It's all about you being shit-scared because you've fallen for me, and you think you're going to just roll over and play doormat?"

Bodie knew he should come up with some witty response that would bring Doyle down a peg or two, but his brain was going ga-ga, too many secrets that he'd kept hidden from himself just hung out in front of him like so much washing.

"Don't be such a prat, Bodie! You'd never do anything like that—"

"It's the only way I'd do anything as stupid as get involved with you, isn't it? You get to fuck me, I get to gaze longingly into your eyes, and then you're off the rebound, and off and running with the first decent cunt you see."

The second time Bodie had said words to that effect, and this time, Doyle actually heard what Bodie was really saying. "That's not what's on offer here, mate," Doyle told him, inching that fraction nearer, his dressing gown pulling open, the skin of his genitals pale in the framing fabric. "I'm talking about more than fucking, not just sex."

"Oh, yeh? We've had the seduction," Bodie said coldly, pulling Doyle's dressing gown shut, proud of himself for resisting the temptation to touch, if only a little, if only an inch of that lush flesh. He cleared his throat, shoved his hands into the pockets of his borrowed dressing gown. "So as I said, we've had what passes as a seduction round here, so do I get the sweet nothings now? Going to tell me how much you're in love with me?"

Doyle couldn't miss the sarcasm of that, but he also heard the pain that was looming right behind. "Not yet. Because I don't."

"Oh, ta ever so," Bodie exploded, jumping to his feet, the truth being spoken hurting more than he'd feared. "Nice to know, you don't love me—"

"Yet, I said, Bodie. *Yet.*"

"Planning on it, are you? When? June's a nice



month, you pick then. Or save it, wait until Christmas, stick it in my stocking for me...”

“I’ll ram it down your throat—”

“Not a fucking chance, *mate*,” Bodie said dangerously, eyes glittering with the violent pain roiling inside. Doyle had followed him, was within easy reach, and Bodie could have killed him for being loved enough that he could say even things like that without fear of being hurt. “You won’t be shoving anything down my throat.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, I didn’t mean that and you know it! I’ve told you, I’m not talking about sex—”

“No?” Asked coolly enough to freeze even this heated exchange.

“All right, so I’m not talking *exclusively* about sex. And I’ve told you, I’m not in love with you—”

“Yet, yeh, I heard you. Just waiting to see when you’re planning the big event for.”

“You’re a difficult bastard,” Doyle said, calling the kettle black. “Why can’t you shut up for once and listen to me?” Because, the flicker of expression on Bodie’s face reminded him, Bodie was shit-scared, and Doyle couldn’t blame him. “Ann...” he began, couldn’t think of a way to say it, tried again. “When I said earlier, about me and Ann both looking for the same thing but from the wrong people—it’s true. It’s what I was thinking about in the pub, how we’re always so busy looking for things we don’t see them when they’re right in front of our faces.”

“So you’re looking for love then, are you?” Bodie said with a reasonableness that unnerved Doyle in a way Bodie would recognise from recent personal experience. “And seeing as how you didn’t find it with Ann...”

A longish pause, and then Doyle finally continued. “If I fell for you...”

“If? Thought you were just deciding on the date a minute ago.”

“You’re not making this easy are you? Yeh, I know, I know,” he added immediately, “I’m not helping either. C’mon, sit down, might as well be comfortable if we’re going to be spilling our guts.”

“Ooh, Ray, you’re such a romantic.” No humour in that, only warning, of what not even Bodie was entirely sure, his emotions churning around in his belly, refusing to be properly ignored as they ought.

“If I fell for you... I’d have to be sure—from the very start—that you’d love me more than her.”

The sheer gall of that took Bodie’s breath away,

and perversely, warmed him, the whole attitude so precisely Doyle.

“Because I couldn’t stand it—the pain, you know, really loving someone and then them not loving me back.” He didn’t quite smile, but his mouth quirked in recognition of his own whistling in the dark. “I’d be fucking miserable if I went through all this with you, all the adjustments we’d need to make, loving you—and it coming to nothing.”

Quite terrifyingly, hope began to mingle cheerfully with the emotions souring Bodie’s stomach. “So what you’re saying is that you *want* to be in love with me—”

Doyle smiled then, leaning forward.

And the rest of Bodie’s thought completed itself, and if Doyle had known it, then his own hope would have faded as quickly as Bodie’s. Oh, yes, Bodie could see that Doyle would want to love him, because in Doyle’s eyes—in Bodie’s too, honesty a hard taskmaster—Bodie was a safe bet, someone tried and true, as reliable as only a partner on the job could be. A safe bet, a safe haven, somewhere for Doyle to lick the wounds this whole *débâcle* with Ann had left him with. Somewhere for Doyle to recover his confidence and when he did that, then where would Bodie be?

In the same shoes Doyle was wearing today. Except... Doyle hadn’t loved Ann the way Bodie had a horrible suspicion he loved Doyle. It would be more than lost hope and a few shattered dreams for him, once Doyle left.

“Bodie?”

Brought back to the subject of his thoughts, not really wanting to hear any more of this, tired of the talking and the thinking, and the prescient fears and pain all those ponderings brought with them, Bodie could see the whole thing far enough, could quite happily walk out then and there. If he could only forget what he’d admitted to himself and Ray. If he could only drag his own eyes away from the possibilities brimming in Ray’s. If he could only quell his own hopes, his own desires, the aching need inside him that he was afraid Ray would satisfy.

“I mean,” Doyle was saying, “I already trust you everywhere else, so if I were to trust you in our private lives—” a tightening of his mouth, the losing Ann too recent to so blithely dismiss. “Would you promise?” he asked suddenly, a question that should have been insult, but was

turned into compliment by Doyle's uncomfortable need for reassurance, his leaning on Bodie a rare privilege.

"Promise what?" But looking at Doyle, realising that all that potential for love and belonging might be his for the asking, Bodie knew he'd promise the moon, the stars and Cowley's first born if he had to marry the old bastard himself to do it.

"Promise not to walk out on me. Promise not to muck me about. Christ, Bodie, look at what just happened with Ann—and she's not the first, not by a long chalk. But you and me... I could trust you, and I can understand you. And you won't run and hide, will you? It's just..."

"Just what?"

"This love lark. I always thought I had it down pat, you know, flowers, candlelight—but it's more than holding hands, innit?"

That assessing gaze was back, and perhaps, Bodie thought, just perhaps, he'd measure up after all. "It's a lot more."

"Learned that in Africa, did you? From the girl you loved, the one Krivas..."

"Yeh, the one Krivas..." Bodie trailed off with Doyle's own attempt at tact, an edge of mockery in his voice. "It was a long time ago, Ray, and—"

"Not that long ago you wanted to kill Krivas with your bare hands for what he did to her."

"Not that long ago you wanted to do the same thing to me for what I did to Ann."

"Yeh, but that's different. You had Cowley on your back—"

"I still wish I hadn't done it."

"And been fired? Then where would that have got us? Bad enough you doing it, but it'd've been a hell of a lot worse if McCabe or Stuart had done it." The gesture unpremeditated, the effect unplanned, Doyle rubbed the back of his hand affectionately across Bodie's cheek. "Did a lot of thinking in that pub tonight, and as far as I'm concerned, all that's closed, so shut up about it, Bodie."

"Fair enough," Bodie said relatively steadily, although his heart was pounding, his cock was stirring, and he wanted to die from embarrassment at being so moved by so minor a caress. But it was the fact that it was Doyle, and that Ray was being sincere, not some calculated movement guaranteed to have the desired effect. Proof, then, that Ray at least liked him in the right way, that Ray might mean all this guff about falling in love with someone he could trust, someone who would under-

stand... "Were you serious about never doing anything with a bloke?"

"When did I say that?"

"When you said you didn't know what to say to a bloke—"

"Didn't know what to say, didn't mention anything about keeping to the straight and narrow."

"You never? When?"

"Thought we were having a serious discussion here?"

"Oh, we are, we are—I take discussing sex very seriously. Go on, when have you done it with men?"

Doyle shrugged, more uncomfortable than he would have thought. "Just the usual, you know, a bit of diddling about when I was a teenager, bit of experimenting with some of the people I met doing art. Nothing once I'd decided to go into the police, so..." And then, before Bodie could side-track them: "And what about your misspent youth then?"

"Misspent? Never missed in my life, I'll have you know." Took note of the way Doyle was looking at him, shook his head in amusement. "You actually want an answer, don't you? You been reading Shakespeare again, Shylock? Well, next time, try one of the comedies, will you?"

"Thought you'd prefer the sonnets."

"Don't," Bodie said very clearly, very calmly and with the weight of serious threat behind it, "make fun of me. Not about this. Not ever."

"Wasn't trying to."

Not yet, Bodie thought to himself, pessimistic reality muscling its way in to spite it all. "Good," he said lamely, for once believing Doyle, wary of this new version of a Doyle who wouldn't press home the slightest advantage. But then, and pessimism began a slow retreat, Ray'd hardly been like that with his precious Ann, had he? Been all over her, coming across like a knight in shining armour from one of those women's books, clutching Ann protectively to his manly bosom...

Would be nice, sometimes, to have someone to lean on. Someone like Ray, someone he already trusted, knew he could rely on. Perhaps even when it came to love... After all the tension, he felt as if his face would crack when he smiled, albeit so small a smile. "So here you are, on the rebound, never shown the slightest bit of interest in any fellas before, let alone me. You don't love me, but

you fully intend to. That about it, Ray?"

"Yeh, well, technically speaking, you could put it like that. But—" he broke off, broke the parity of their gaze, fiddled with the tie belt of his dressing gown, finally faced Bodie again, his own eyes narrowed, weighing up everything he knew about this man, from how loyal a friend to how deep still waters could run. "Suppose I should tell you—think I'm already half-way to being in love with you as it is. If you were a bird, Christ, I'd've married you ages ago."

"And if you had, what about when you met Ann? If I'd been a bird and you'd married me—dump me just as quick, would you?"

"Wouldn't've needed her, would I? Told you, the two of us were looking for something and we thought the other one could give it us."

"And now you think you were looking in the wrong place, and you've decided to give me whirl, eh?"

"Stop trying to twist it, Bodie. You can kill something before it even starts with an attitude like that."

"Loose lips sink ships?"

"Something like that."

Another longish pause, neither one of them really looking at the other, each one of them doing some thinking of his own. Again, it was Bodie who broke the silence. "If I do all this, you know, promising you can trust me, seeing you through all this—what's in it for me?"

"You what? Christ, mate, you're the one in love with me, I should've thought it was obvious!"

"Oh, I get to worship you with my body?"

"Told you, it's more than sex, Bodie. If I can trust you, if I can depend on you enough to give you love—then you have me. The two of us, together."

"For how long?"

Doyle shrugged, unwilling to go that much out on a limb. "For as long as we both want it."

"For as long as we both shall live?" Delivered with a veneer of cynicism so thin, even Bodie could hear the hope and the love in his voice.

"For as long as we survive the job."

"So not for long, then."

"Forever, Bodie," Doyle said fiercely, convincingly. "I don't fuck about with a bit of time here and a couple of months there."

"Forever. Supposed to be a long time, forever. But it might only be a couple of months for us."

"Then we'll have to make it count, then, won't we?"

"I don't know, Ray," Bodie said tiredly, body resonating with Doyle's closeness, mind reeling from the volte-face his life and his partner had taken today. "I just don't know."

"You love me, don't you?"

There wasn't even any point in denying it any more. "Yeh."

"And I'm looking for that, from someone I can trust, someone I can depend on."

Bodie, eyes closed, didn't see it coming, was unprepared for the touch of Doyle's breath against his cheek.

"And you'll promise?"

Each word brought Doyle's lips delicately against Bodie's, and right then, he would have promised his soul to the devil. Promising to love Ray was simplicity in itself. "I promise," he said, and opened his mouth, feeling for the first time, the caress of Ray's tongue against his own, Ray inside him, touching him, making promises of his own. Oh, yes, this was the sort of promise Bodie could live with. He brought his arms up, wrapping them around Ray, shifting them until Ray was kneeling astride him, heavier than he looked, pressing himself into Bodie. Bodie was losing himself in the luxury of Doyle's mouth, wet slickness caressing the inside of his mouth, another promise, of other things to come, other parts of Doyle that Bodie would welcome into his mouth.

He couldn't stand all this cloth between them, and fumbled with it, the coherent part of his mind grateful to Doyle's blatant planning as simply tied dressing gowns slid open, and then he could feel it: the heat of Ray Doyle's skin against his own, chest hair against the almost total smoothness of his own chest, the hair rubbing against his nipples, bringing them to sensitive erection. And then, Doyle moved again, and the last of the fabric was shoved aside, and Bodie felt Doyle's cock against him, semi-erect and rubbing restlessly along Bodie's own hard length.

"Like that?" Doyle asked, canting his hips and pressing harder against Bodie, grinning when Bodie groaned wordlessly but with a wealth of expression. The grin faded, replaced by a look of intense concentration as Bodie's hands slid down between their bellies, and took Doyle in his hands, thumb teasing foreskin back and forth. "Ohh, yeh," he said, instinct taking him into Bodie's rhythm,

fucking his cock in the tight tunnel of Bodie's fist. "That's it, Bodie, you keep on doing that..."

Not a chance, as far as Bodie was concerned. Submerged beneath Doyle's lean strength and lithe body, Bodie wasn't going to settle for a mutual wank—not that it was mutual. He opened his eyes then, needing to see Ray, and took his friend's hand, wrapping it around his own cock, almost dissolving from the sheer joy of having Ray touch him like this, of having Ray so obviously enjoying this, from Ray milking his cock, and leaning closer and kissing him again.

"Let me suck you," he said into Ray's mouth, and smiled, allowing this newly confessed love to show when Ray's breath caught on a pulse of excitement. "Up you come," he whispered, urging Ray with his hands, stopping him briefly to feed on brown nipples that peaked from a perfect pattern of body hair. Felt the nudge of cock against his own chest, the urgency of desire seeping damply against him. Couldn't hold Ray back, heard the near-sob of need, and then the snub head of Ray's cock was pushing between his lips, catching briefly on his teeth, and then was in him, thrusting too quickly, making him gag, Ray immediately pulling back, his hands a caressing apology on Bodie's throat. Slowly, now, Ray's cock entered him, hesitating, stomach muscles trembling, until Bodie reached up and finally got his hands on that luscious backside, fingers splayed, fingertips instinctively seeking Doyle's centre, rubbing there as Ray's cock rubbed against his tongue, the tight muscle of Ray's arsehole gradually responding.

Deeper now, fingers and cock, Bodie opening his throat up with well-remembered expertise, one finger carefully penetrating Ray's body with all the awe of a new experience, reaching inside a man Bodie had considered untouchable, inviolate, and who was now opening up to him, every tiny movement of Bodie's finger eliciting a gasp from Doyle. Farther inside now, Doyle's fucking Bodie's mouth a steady, heart-stopping rhythm, Bodie's finger fucking Doyle in perfect harmony.

"M gonna come," Doyle muttered, fingers scrabbling to tangle themselves in Bodie's too-short hair.

Bodie sucked him harder, fingerfucked him harder, driving Doyle on, devouring him until he felt Ray explode inside him, cum filling his throat, swallowing it down, sucking Ray dry until the cock in his mouth began to diminish. It was taken from

him then, and Ray was kissing him again, tasting himself in Bodie's mouth, his hand tight and demanding round Bodie's cock, milking him while his tongue fucked Bodie's mouth and his other hand twisted Bodie's nipple, inciting him, hurrying him on towards orgasm, staring intently as Bodie succumbed to the pleasure, cradling him until the last pulses faded, only then letting go.

Doyle opened his mouth to say something, was silenced by Bodie kissing him again, with a fiercely sweet intensity that held all the promise in the world. "Bed," he said when Bodie freed his mouth long enough for him to catch his breath and find his voice again. "Come on, you, I'm too old to fuck on the sofa."

Bodie held him for a moment, looking into his eyes, kissed him gently once more as if reluctant to yield him for even so short a journey as going up the stairs. "Bed," he murmured eventually, indulging himself in another caress along the length of Ray's supple back, his hands already learning to map every vertebra. "And then you can fuck me through the mattress."

The thrill of that shuddered through Doyle, bringing the first pulse of new arousal to his cock. "Or you can fuck me," Doyle said, being fair.

"Nah," Bodie said easily, content because he wanted Doyle inside him, "it's been too long since you last had someone up the bum."

"And it hasn't been for you?"

Bodie's smile was slow, and wicked, and knowing, making Doyle laugh, his chuckle filthier than ever, his cock responding with the same enthusiasm. "Going to tell me all about it?"

"Want me to?"

"I want every gory detail," Doyle said, one hand straying between Bodie's legs to tease at his arsehole. "But first of all," and he swooped down, taking Bodie briefly, stunningly, in his mouth, releasing him too quickly for both of them, "we're going upstairs, where I'm going to fuck you legless."

"Then lay on, MacDuff."

"I'd rather lay you, Bodie, so shift your arse, and get up those stairs."

"After you."

Doyle stopped then, smiling at the hunger in Bodie's eyes. "Dying to finally get an eyeful of my arse without my jeans getting in the way?"

"What d'you think?"

"I think," and he was already turning, hurrying

over to the stairs, "I'd better get us into the bedroom before I end up fucking you on the coffee table."

In the end, they almost didn't make it to the bedroom, the sight of Doyle's naked arse twitching upstairs in front of him more than Bodie could stand. He reached out as he had so many times before, but now it was bare skin that met his hand, and a grin tossed over Doyle's shoulder gave him tacit permission. He slipped his hand between Doyle's buttocks, fingers cradling the tender swell of Ray's testicles, Doyle almost losing his balance, giving Bodie what little excuse he needed to gather Ray close, kissing him again, hands roving over every delectable inch.

"Bed, Bodie," Doyle said, firmly putting an end to both the escalation of amities and any possibility of a stairway encounter. "And if you don't get a move on," Doyle said, deliberately provocative, "I shall start without you."

Bodie moved, pushing past Ray, the two of them scuffling and giggling down the hall, until by the time they had reached the bedside, they were kissing again, and Bodie couldn't get his fill of Ray's skin, couldn't stop lingering over the play of muscle over bone, all that strength, almost enough to match his own, and an inner strength that might well prove more than his equal. The idea excited him as another man's superiority over him so rarely did, there being no threat in Ray's power, only an equality that would translate to parity in bed, him yielding to Ray this time, another time, Ray would be his, those muscular flanks parting to allow penetration, Bodie's cock sliding home as lushly as Ray would fill him.

On the bed now, Ray on top of him again, covering him, Ray's legs between Bodie's, Ray's fingers between his cheeks, Ray's finger inside him, his own body so eager it needed no encouragement to open for Ray, his arsehole widening hungrily, his body a tumult of need and lust, no room for thought, only for Ray, and the touch of flesh on flesh, and the wordless intensity of their passion. The rustle of sheets was subsumed by the fainter sound of skin sliding on skin, and of Ray wetting his cock with saliva, the hard flesh glistening in the overhead light.

Bodie looked down then, his own cock taut against his belly, getting in the way of what he wanted to see. He leaned up on his elbows, and Ray noticed, smiled in understanding. Kneeling

between Bodie's legs, Doyle reached up with his free hand and caught Bodie by the nape, the press of his hand hot and damp. "Can you see me now?" Doyle asked, voice harshened by lust. "Can you see my cock? I'm going to put that in you," he murmured, snatching a deep kiss from Bodie. "I'm going to put that so fucking deep inside you, you'll never forget what it felt like. You'll be mine, Bodie," he said. Together, they watched Doyle guide his cock to the opening of Bodie's body, stopping as the moist head pressed snugly against Bodie's arsehole. "See me, Bodie? This is you promising me, Bodie," he whispered, and now Doyle was watching Bodie watch as Doyle's own body claimed Bodie for his own. Flesh slowly sank deeper into flesh, until Doyle had disappeared, his cock buried in Bodie, his pubic hair damp and curling against Bodie's balls, the pulse of Bodie's body all around his cock like a heart.

"Oh, god," Bodie groaned, falling back on the bed, lifting his hips, Doyle moving inside him now, too slowly, too carefully, not enough for this knot of passion and need that suffused him. "Harder, Ray, fuck me harder, come on, come on—ohh..."

Thrusting into him, driving harder now, sweat slicking skin, dripping from one to the other, Bodie's cock seeping passion, Doyle's hips moving with a rippling of muscle, his hand moving even faster, blurring hard and fast on Bodie's cock, passion peaking more slowly this time, giving them longer to savour the touch of the other's body, longer to rejoice in this sweetly building pleasure.

Orgasm then, Bodie spilling his seed, whiteness glistening on the black of his pubic hair, in the dark brown of Ray's body hair, on the pale flesh of Doyle's hand. Bodie growing still for a moment, and then Doyle's cock was thrumming deep inside him, his body turning inside out with echoing pleasure, Ray's experience his own, the hard thrusting inside him catapulting Ray to orgasm, the wet heat inside him shuddering through Bodie in exquisite awareness.

Collapse, then, too much too soon after the last time, which had been their first time. Ray recumbent across Bodie, Bodie limp under Doyle, the two of them curling together naturally, fitting together comfortably, a minor scuffle with the bedclothes until they were both warm, each of them then sinking rapidly towards sleep. Vaguely wishing that whoever had remembered to put the light on hadn't, Bodie stirred slightly when he heard Ray

laugh, Doyle held closely enough in his arms that his own body trembled with Ray's good humour.

"What?" he mumbled, more than half asleep, and awash in a great sea of contentment.

"Just thinking," Doyle said, kissing Bodie's nearest nipple, licking the flesh, giving Bodie a very different tongue-lashing from the one he'd been expecting what could be a lifetime ago.

"What about?" Bodie said round a yawn, wishing he didn't feel like a wrung-out dishcloth, because Doyle's tongue was doing some wonderful things to him.

"'Bout Ann."

Sleep receded slightly, not that Doyle noticed, snuggling in closer, wrapping himself all the tighter round Bodie, giving an enormous yawn, eyes drifting shut.

"What about Ann?"

"If she knew about this," a lazy hand snaked down to where Bodie's cock was still slightly damp from cum, "about me fucking you an' everything," too sleepy now to laugh, a low-wattage chuckle instead, "she'd cry. Prob'ly burst into tears when she hears we're a pair."

"Yeh," Bodie said faintly, not wanting to believe what he'd just heard, desperate to reject all the implications inherent in what Doyle'd just said. "Yeh, yeh, she'd cry, all right. Quite a blow to a woman, eh? Bad enough to drive her fella right into the nearest bloke's bed..."

But Doyle said nothing, had drifted off before Bodie had finished, hadn't heard what Bodie had said. Couldn't deny the inference.

Couldn't admit to it either, Bodie told himself, post-coital sleepiness kicked out the bed by the cold adrenalin of fear.

It made sense, a nasty little voice told him, even as Doyle made himself more comfortable, sliding off Bodie to curl in behind him, Doyle's front plastered down Bodie's back, Bodie turning on his side, feeling Doyle cuddle in closer.

It did, actually, make sense, doubt seconding fear. After all, Bodie knew Doyle was so much on the rebound, the poor bastard was still bouncing. A quick look at the alarm clock, and Bodie realised it had been scarcely fourteen hours since Ann had dumped Ray. Not even a day, and look at where Ray was now: in a someone else's bed, someone as opposite to Ann as it was possible to be and still stick to his own species. Couldn't possibly have picked anyone more different, unless he'd gone for

someone coloured, and Jax was in Bristol, safely out of reach.

What was that he'd been thinking earlier on, about good old Bodie who'd always be there? Bodie, who was a complete mug, everyone knew he let Doyle away with murder.

Yeh, but was Bodie willing to let Doyle away with this?

Making it sound as if rubbing Ann's nose in it was the real reason for Ray being in bed with him. But then again, Ray could be a vindictive little bastard, and it'd be typical of him to see his own happiness as a weapon to get back at someone who'd hurt him. Could be something as simple as that, now that Bodie stopped to think about it.

All that talk about not being in love with him yet—half-way there, optimism piped up, fuelled by the echoing sensation of Doyle deep inside Bodie's body, by the warmth of the other man so close against Bodie's back.

True, Bodie conceded, and after today, he couldn't pretend that he didn't love Ray Doyle enough to at least try to work something out with him. So what, he thought bracingly, if Ray wasn't completely in love with him? And so what if Ray was on the rebound? Good relationships had been built on less, and at least they liked each other—fond of each other, even, as well as Bodie being in love with Ray. And they understood each other, understood the job and the insanity that became normality for them, for the inversions of their world compared to the cosy safety of lace curtains and chintz cushions. And the sex, god, the sex, he thought, his heart beating that little bit faster, his cock giving as much enthusiasm as it could manage. The sex had been superb, the best since Janine in Africa.

Funny what love could do for animal rutting, wasn't it? Bodie smiled to himself, doubts temporarily assuaged, easy enough done with Ray wrapped round him like a limpet, one hairy arm slinging itself round Bodie, Doyle mumbling affectionately in his sleep.

Must be having sweet dreams, Bodie thought happily, settling himself down for sleep, wriggling around a bit to pull the covers up over them again, thinking that Ray's propensity for next-to-no bedclothes was going to have to be one of their priorities to sort out. The other things, too, such as Ray falling in love with him. Toe-rag probably already had, years ago, just had never conceded it

to himself. Just like Bodie himself, Bodie thought comfortably, slipping off towards sleep. A right pair, that's us.

Behind him, he could still hear Ray mumbling away to himself, and smiled. Until he heard one word, one distinctive word.

Ann.

And it was accompanied by Doyle cooing in closer, holding Bodie all the more tightly, hips pressing into Bodie's in a way that couldn't be mistaken. No arousal, oh, no, too soon for that. But it was obvious what Doyle was dreaming about. Painfully obvious.

Under the glare of the unforgiving light, Bodie lay awake, and thought.

NEXT MORNING, sitting on the corner of the bed, watching Doyle surface slowly from sleep. Watching sleepy eyes being rubbed away, watching wake-up yawns, watching as Doyle scratched an itch on his bum.

I won't have that arse, Bodie thought dispassionately, shutting himself off, closing down the emotions, distancing himself from Ray Doyle.

"Morning, sunshine," Doyle smiled, stretching luxuriously, making a display of himself for Bodie's benefit.

Little slut, Bodie thought. Bet he'd do that for Cowley if he thought it would get his expense chit signed. Or if he thought it would make dear little Ann cry.

"You're up bright an' early," Doyle was saying, still sleep-ruffled and not quite with it yet. "An' I'll be up myself in a minute too," he went on, voice sultry, eyes heavy with the beginnings of desire, shifting to wry amusement as Nature demanded her due, "as soon as I've been to the loo."

"Coffee's made," was all Bodie said, moving aside to let Doyle get out of bed, bending down to pick up Doyle's black watch a good enough excuse to get him out of Doyle trying to kiss him.

Presented with Bodie's well-fucked arse contained in the rare sight of tight denim, Doyle couldn't resist the temptation of palming one firm buttock on his way past. Unseen, Bodie clenched his fist to stop himself from ramming the randy toad's tonsils out his backside. Treating him like one of Doyle's endless stream of meaningless birds, just another cunt to be fucked and abandoned. Slapping Doyle's watch down on the pile of clothes which he had folded with military precision while

Doyle was still dead to the world, Bodie told himself fiercely that he wasn't going to be another notch on Raymond Doyle's fucking belt, oh, no, not he. In fact, he'd show Doyle a thing or two.

Had, a small voice reminded him. Showed him more than a thing or two last night.

The thought was stamped out ruthlessly, Bodie's face impassive, as blandly determined as only a soldier can be.

I am not upset, he reminded himself. I do not give a flying fuck about Ray Doyle, he told himself, going downstairs, methodically chewing his way through a breakfast that was barely warm from being forgotten. But he was not upset, and he was not hurt. Or so he told himself anyway.

"That looks good," Doyle said, coming into the kitchen, breezily naked and sure of his welcome. He leaned down, putting Bodie's averted face down to embarrassment. Kissed him on the cheek, and was nearly bowled over when Bodie erupted from his chair, going over to the sink with all the grim determination of an executioner with a deadline. "And good morning to you too, mate," Doyle said under his breath, a bit worried now, although he had expected there to be problems, Bodie being Bodie. This didn't exactly look like typical morning-after awkwardness, either. Still, he wasn't going to jump to conclusions—had almost bugged everything up doing that yesterday. Something else he'd bugged yesterday: small wonder Bodie was a bit off this morning. Could unnerve a bloke, letting another man fuck him like that. And Bodie had sucked his cock too, a memory that made Doyle warm all over and brought the first flush of blood to his cock. Back to bed, that's what they both needed, Doyle decided, thinking about Bodie admitting that he was in love with Doyle, thinking about Bodie a mindless, boneless wreck under him, fucked into next week, so absolutely vulnerable. Definitely need to get him back upstairs, let Bodie take the lead, re-establish the evenness of the partnership.

"Bodie," he whispered, going right up behind his partner, not at all liking the way Bodie's back tensed visibly at his nearness, "why don't you leave the domesticity, and come back to bed with me? Hmm?"

Doyle was going to kiss him, Bodie just knew it. Could feel him coming closer, could feel Doyle staring at him, Christ, could just about feel the heat from his nakedness.

He was not, he reminded himself, interested in playing catcher for Doyle on the rebound. Did not choose to be Doyle's stopgap and scapegoat until Ann forgave him and came back to him in another flood of tears. When she finds out, Doyle had said last night. Not 'if'. Bastard had probably already planned a way of making sure she found out. Probably came up with the idea when he was sitting in that pub brooding himself up into this fine frenzy of substitute fucking.

Well, no more. Behind him, Doyle was murmuring, and Bodie could feel Doyle's breath on his nape, could feel the other man's heat all down his back. "You don't mind if I borrow your bike, do you? Only, my car's still at HQ," he hurried on, wiping his hands on the dish-towel, sliding neatly out from Doyle's sphere of influence without actually being touched. "Anyway, I've a day's leave, so I thought I'd look up an old mate of mine."

"An old mate?" Doyle asked him, holding on to his temper, thrown by this iciness that was both far more and far less than he'd expected the morning after they'd made love for the first time. "From the Army?"

Bodie turned on Doyle with a sneer he hadn't used since their earliest teaming. "SAS, copper."

That did it. "So it's going to be like that, is it, big man? Doing your Action Man on me—"

"Thanks for the loan of your bike," Bodie said coldly, cutting off even the faintest hint of discussion about what they'd done last night, and tacit denial of anything Bodie might have said yesterday. "Saves me having to go home and pick my own bike up, and I'm anxious to see my old mates. You know how it is," he went on, carefully hammering in every nail until the last night was firmly in its coffin, "combat situations—man forms real friendships with the blokes he serves with. See you in the office tomorrow, then, shall I?"

And not waiting for an answer, but leaving, quickly, grabbing the bike keys from the kitchen drawer, looking back to make sure that Doyle had got the message loud and clear, almost faltering when he saw the confusion of anger and hurt written all over Doyle's expressive face.

But I don't care, he told himself, climbing astride Doyle's bike. Last night was a fluke, one of those stupid mistakes a man's entitled to make. Anyway, he'll survive—can always phone Ann if he's that bothered. Or do what he always

does, ring up one of his other bints.

But not *me*, he thought, revving the bike ruthlessly, spoiling many an early morning dream.

A flicker of movement, and the bike died, Doyle palming the small brightness of the key. "Inside," Doyle said harshly, glaring right into Bodie's face. "I want you inside this fucking minute."

"Give me the key, Doyle."

"Not a chance, big man. If you think I'm going to let you go tearing out of here like a bat out of hell, then you're off your head. Come on, back inside before P.C. Plod nicks me for lewd behaviour."

That was when it dawned on Bodie that Doyle had come after him so quickly, the idiot was still naked. Served the bastard right.

"Fuck off, Doyle," he said nastily. "Before you give the worms a superiority complex."

"I'm staying right here till you come back inside with me. And you'll be cracking jokes out the other side of your mouth if Cowley has to bail me out because my partner wasn't looking after me."

"So you need a nursemaid now, do you?"

"I think you need a fucking minder. Now get off the bike and get inside."

"Give me one good reason why I should."

"I'll give you three. One: you've obviously got a bee in your bonnet about something and we need to sort it out if we're going to make this work. Two: Cowley. And number three, the best reason of all: me. You won't like what I'll do to you if you walk out on me, mate."

"Sort it out?" Bodie sneered, getting off the bike and strolling back into Doyle's flat. "Walk on water as well, do you?"

"I'll walk on you if you don't watch it," Doyle nearly shouted, locking the door behind the two of them. Turning, he faced Bodie, sharp eyes noticing that Bodie was doing a strict 'eyes front and centre' routine. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Silence, mutinous and mulish, a brick wall not even commanding officers had been able to dent.

"Come on, Bodie. After last night—Christ, last night was incredible, but now this morning, you won't even look at me."

Bodie did exactly what Doyle was complaining about.

"Look at me, Bodie."

Nothing.

"I said, look at me." Doyle grabbed him by the jaw, twisting Bodie's face round until the blue eyes



finally looked at him. “That’s more like it. Now you can talk to me. Go on, Bodie, tell me what’s got you running out of here doing your Marlon Brando.”

“You should know.”

“Oh yeh? And if I did, would I be asking you? So even though you think I *should* know, how about filling *me* in on all the important details.”

The sarcastic edge made Bodie want to hit him. “Ann,” he snarled, shoving Doyle aside, storming into the living room, caged there by the softness of modern urbanity. “Ann fucking Holly.”

“Now you’ve lost me. What’s Ann done between last night and this morning? The phone didn’t ring, and—”

“The phone didn’t ring,” Bodie mocked nastily. “No, it didn’t have to. Ann didn’t do anything, *mate*. You just opened your big fucking mouth.”

“So now it’s all my fault, is it? Right. Fine. Fair enough. I’m the baddie. Right. So what is it I said? Eh? Was it when I said I was already half-way in love with you? Or was it when I told you how fucking wonderful you were?”

Those were two of the many things Bodie didn’t want to think about right now, not when he was trying to get out while he still could. “It was when you snuggled up against my bum and called me Ann.”

Doyle looked pole-axed. “Christ, mate,” he said, and even Bodie couldn’t argue with the man’s sincerity, “I’m sorry. That must’ve been a pleasant surprise.” Doyle wiped his hand through his hair, sighed heavily. “I don’t even remember what I was dreaming about.”

Bodie wasn’t about to be sweet-talked, not that easily. Not at all, he told himself, clinging on to the memory of what Doyle had said last night, and how it had felt to know he, Bodie, was nothing but the rebound and the revenge. “Last thing you said before that was how much Ann would cry *when* she found out you’d gone off with a fella.”

“Yeh, I remember saying that. Well, it’d serve her right. She was one of that sort, you know, ‘Ooh, some of my best friends are *queers*’, and she deserves it just for that.”

Drily, almost without visible or audible emotion. “Thanks a lot.”

“Come on, I didn’t mean it like that. All right, all right, I did. But come on, you know I’m a malicious bastard when I get started.” A slanted look at Bodie then, judging, guessing what was going on behind Bodie’s stoicism. “One of the things about you that

made me think it could work with you.”

“What, you being a malicious bastard? Think I’m a masochist then, do you?”

“I meant that you already know the worst about me, and you love me anyway.”

“Do I?”

“Oh, yeh, Bodie, you still do. The way you know me—it’d take more than me whispering her name in the night to make you go off me.”

“Well you did more than whisper her name—”

“So I gloated a bit because she’d still be a mess because she didn’t have me, and I’d stopped kidding myself.”

Quiet, devastating calm, the absence of overt anger more worrisome than anything else. It was when Bodie went quiet the real trouble began.

“You rubbed against me, and you called me Ann.”

“And you expected me to drop women, just like that?”

“I expected you to fucking drop Ann, just like that. Just the way she dropped you.”

“Oh, Christ, we’re in trouble already.”

“Quick, aren’t you?”

“Will you pack it in? How the fuck are we supposed to stand a chance if all you’re going to do is stand there on your fucking hobby horse throwing stones?”

“Yeh, well, us innocent ones are supposed to throw stones, aren’t we?”

“Innocent?” Doyle came right up to Bodie, a surge of adrenaline rushing through him at the banked anger he saw in Bodie’s eyes, “And who was it, mate, who made being in love with me sound like a fate worse than death?”

“At least death’s over quick and once you’re dead, that’s it.”

Deep breath drawn the better to deliver his invective, Doyle hauled his temper back under rein, forced himself to calm down, to back off, give them both breathing space. Forced himself to think, Bodie the bull in the china shop, not him. Right. Stop. Think. Put yourself in Bodie’s shoes.

“Would it help,” he said carefully, “if I told you I love you?”

“Only if it were true, and as it’s not, no, I really don’t think any more lies would help at all. Thanks all the same.”

“But it is true.”

“Just not yet,” Bodie drawled, sounding bored, a sure tip-off to his inner turmoil. “Or just not all the way.”

“And how am I ever going to do that if you don’t give me a chance?”

“Oh, yeh, good old doormat Bodie. He’ll let you walk all over him and just lie there while you kick him.”

“All I’m talking about, is trying to explain that—”

“Yesterday your pride had taken a knock, and I was a convenient hole to fill until you felt better.”

“And I’ll just bet that’s half of all this, isn’t it? Yeh, Ann’s got something to do with it all right, but when you calm down, you’d see I wasn’t using you any more than you were using me.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t come the outraged innocent with me, Bodie. Don’t forget, you know me, but I know you just as fucking well. You used me, yesterday, because Ann had hurt me, and you thought I was on the rebound, so might as well fuck me while the going was good.”

Very much standing on his dignity, such truth having no place beside the genuine love he felt for Doyle. Didn’t feel for Doyle, he reminded himself belatedly. Did not feel love for Doyle. And if he repeated it often enough, he might even get to believe it. “Good enough theory, but shot down by one major detail. I didn’t fuck you, did I?”

“Would you feel better if you had?”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid.”

“Oh, it’s not stupid. It’s not easy to tell someone what you told me yesterday. And then you sucked my dick for me, and then you let me fuck you. Bet that bothers you today.” The uneasy flicker of expression gave Bodie away. “So go on, tell me. Would you feel better if you fucked me?”

“Is that an offer?”

Smiling, cocking his hip, genitals thrusting forwards. An offer, on his own terms, him very much in control. “Yeh, it is.”

“The way I feel, Doyle,” Bodie whispered with blatant self-control, “I wouldn’t fuck you, I’d rape you.”

“Couldn’t be rape, because I’m willing.”

“Yeh, but I’m not, and in my mind, it wouldn’t matter if you got down on your knees and begged me, I’d still be fucking raping you.”

“Would it help, Bodie?” Standing his ground, eyes wide and honest and very, very green.

“Would it help?”

“What if it would?”

“Then do it.”

“Into pain, are you?”

“Sometimes.”

“Well, this would be more than a bit of pain. This would be me ripping you apart.” A sneering chuckle, a dismissive glare. “And try explaining that one to Cowley.”

“Easy enough done.” Doyle shrugged, leaned against the wall. “Coming home late from a pub, taking a short cut down an alley, some skin’eads mistake me for a queer because of my hair or my bracelet, the way I walk, something. They jump me, I fight them off, but one of them gets me from behind, and then it’s all over. Too many of them for me to get clear, too dark to see anything. Case closed.”

“But we’d know.”

“Cowley would an’ all, but there’s nothing he could do if I don’t tell him.”

“Should’ve known, shouldn’t I?” Bodie smiled, a parody of his usual affectionate grin for his friend. “Make me an offer I can’t refuse and then blackmail the balls off me.”

“Oh, fucking hell!” One deadly hand thudding into the wall, coiled temper exploding. “That’s not what I meant either! Will you fucking *listen* to me?”

“Why don’t you listen to yourself and hear what you’re offering me. Emotional blackmail. I’ll love you one day, Bodie, honest!’ Or job blackmail. ‘Oh, rape me, rape me,’ and then you’ve got me by the short and curlies forever. Never mind asking what’s the matter with me, we should be asking what the fuck’s wrong with you.”

“I’m scared, all right?” Doyle yelled, the truth coming out before he had a chance to stop it. Then, quieter. “I’m so shit fucking scared, I don’t know what do.”

“Scared? You? What do *you* have to be scared about? Go on, pull the other one.”

“I’ve never been in love before, Bodie. Never trusted anyone that much, not once. Never been willing to take the chance to give someone that much power over me.”

“Never?” Bodie demanded, insidious hope creeping past all his self-defences. “Not Ann, not Esther—”

“Esther?”

“Oh, how soon they forget. Remember Esther? The policewoman from Hong Kong.”

“Yeh, yeh, just wasn’t thinking about her right this minute, funnily enough.”

“Yes, you must remember Esther. Lived with her as man and wife, didn’t you? Played houses. So

don't try to tell me—"

"But I never said I was in love with her, did I?"

That brought Bodie up short: Doyle had never said he was in love with any of them, not even Ann.

But Doyle had said he was half-way in love with Bodie. And he'd said he was scared.

"But what about last night and you snuggling up to me and calling me Ann? What about that?"

"I don't fucking know—for Christ's sake, Bodie, I was asleep at the time. How the hell do I know what was going through my mind? Could've been anything—"

"Could've been you wishing you were with her."

"Yeh, could've been. But I tell you, mate, if I was still wanting to be with her, after what it was like with you, then I'll be in seeing our Doctor Ross so fast her head won't stop spinning for a week."

Bodie didn't comment, just looked at Doyle for a second, then walked over to the window, looking outside at the small garden and thinking. Thinking about Doyle, a man who killed for a living, but move him into a flat like this, and the first thing he did was plant a herb garden and stick a few plants in. Well-cared for too, that small garden. Took time to nurture things, did Doyle.

'Cept this thing with Ann. That hit with all the slowness of a tornado, and Doyle hadn't done a thing to save it.

"Bodie..."

"What?"

"We never said this was going to be easy, did we?"

"And never a truer word was said."

"So we get to choose here and now. Sort things out, or split up every time we have an argument."

"'Nother flaw in there. If we split up after an argument, there won't be an 'every time' to argue."

"After what we've done, and after what we've said—what we've *both* said—d'you think we'll ever be able to stay apart?"

"No problem."

"You look me in the eye when you say that, and I just might believe you."

Resolutely, Bodie stared out the window.

"Didn't think so."

Outside, some birds were vying for the seeds in the bird feeder, squealing and squawking, climbing all over each other to get to the abundant food.

Inside, Doyle was moving around in the kitchen,

less what was called a comfort eater, more a comfort cook, recipe books his first refuge.

Slowly, reluctantly, his mouth set in an uncompromisingly straight line, Bodie went into the kitchen. "Ray."

Saucepan put carefully into the sink, Doyle turned to face Bodie, nothing in his attitude showing that he was even aware that he was still totally, beautifully naked. "Yeh?"

"Do you love Ann?"

"No. I wanted to, but it's not the same."

"You say you want to love me—what if you can't, the same way you say you couldn't with Ann?"

"Yeh, but I've got a head start with you, haven't I?"

"Have you?"

"What's it going to take to prove any of this to you? Come on, Bodie, tell me what you need, and if I can, I'll give it you."

"I need to be sure."

"Oh, god," Doyle groaned, shaking his head, turning back to the sink and clattering the pot around viciously. "You had to go and ask for about the only thing I can't give you."

"Why not?"

"Because who can prove anything to anyone? If we could prove that all this would work, d'you think I'd be this fucking scared?"

"Last night," said doggedly, stubborn refusal to let Doyle talk rings around him and to stop himself from giving in to the hope that would not go away, "I proved it to you."

"Only because I already believed it. That's the difference. I know I can trust you, and I know you can love someone right. But you and me—we don't know that about me, do we?"

"No."

Such a bleak word, to hang there with such finality.

"You sound..." Doyle began, stopped what his hands were busying themselves with, was finally self-conscious enough to sort-of casually drape a dishtowel in front of himself. "That sounded as if you're not willing to give this a chance."

"And if I'm not?"

"I don't know, Bodie," said with incredible weariness and the dawning of misery in his eyes, green shading dully to grey. "I just don't know."

"Would you go back to Ann?"

"Christ, Bodie, what do you think?"

"I don't think you would."

Doyle looked at him in surprise, which was pretty much the way Bodie was feeling himself.

"Even if this is only you on the rebound—"

"After the years we've been together? After the length of time I've had to think about trying this with you? Fat fucking chance."

"The length of time? Since yesterday?"

"Yeh, well, it was my bright idea to try and sort things out, actually tell the truth and all that, wasn't it?"

"Yeh, Ray, it fucking was. What are you getting at?"

A shrug that did nothing to convey innocence. "We'd hardly been partners half an hour before I thought you'd fallen for me. So I wondered what it would be like—the sex bit, first, of course. Then wondered what it would be like to settle down with you."

"All this time, and you've been wondering? Oh, thanks, mate, thanks a lot. And if Ann hadn't dumped you, would you ever've got round to telling me?"

"Dunno. No, don't look at me like that, I'm telling you the truth, even though it'd probably be safer to lie to you. But that's the truth, the god's honest truth."

"Christ, Ray, I don't know what to do with you!"

"Give it another go?" Doyle asked, coming closer to Bodie, their unerring instincts together guiding him. Bodie backed off a step, but Doyle had already seen the expression in his eyes, knew that this round, for the time being at any rate, was his. "Course," he went on, rubbing the side of his nose, "you could always fuck me."

Bodie glowered at him.

"Then again," Doyle shrugged, "you can still rape me if that's what you fancy."

"You're serious," Bodie finally said, incredulity dripping from him as his own insecurities faded enough for common sense to weasel its way in.

"You're actually serious, you mad fucking bastard."

"That's me!" making it light, essaying a smile that actually managed to wangle a glint of humour from Bodie. "And yeh, for the record, I am fucking serious."

"You know where that leaves us, don't you?"

"Shit scared and quaking?"

"Apart from that."

"Where?"

"Back where we started."

"No—" said quickly, Doyle poking Bodie in the chest for emphasis. "Not back at the beginning. We just proved—*both of us*, Bodie—that we can't just walk away from this. And that we're willing to try. We're nowhere near the beginning any more, Bodie."

"But still no guarantees."

"No. Not for either one of us."

"So it's just the two of us."

"That's right."

"This is all there is, for us, isn't it?"

Doyle didn't need to answer that, saw the knowledge in Bodie's eyes. Who else could there ever be for the two of them?

They ran out of things to say then, and stood staring at each other for a time.

"Now what?" Bodie finally asked.

"Well, I don't know about you," Doyle whispered confidingly, and Bodie was kind enough not to comment on the real fear still lurking behind the *bonhomie*, "but I'm freezing my balls off standing here. So why don't we go back upstairs..."

"And go to bed."

"Come on, Bodie," Doyle said, grabbing Bodie by the hand, yielding gracefully when Bodie turned the move on him so that Bodie had his arm round Doyle's shoulder and was hurrying him towards the stairs, "let's get you up the stairs so you can fuck me into next week."

It wasn't everything, but at least it was a beginning.

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