

# ON THIN ICE or SKATE EXPECTATIONS



*And now for your pleasure, M. Fae's latest sports story. Since it's Christmastime things won't go swimmingly for our boys, but as Doyle coldly continues with very cutting remarks, the question becomes: can Bodie glide out of Doyle's dare?*

With desultory skill, Murphy was launching blue-fledged darts at the dartboard, scoring Cow's Eye every time, the large glossy photograph now little more than a tattered remnant, the ancient cork of the dartsboard peeking through. Run out of darts, he heaved himself to his feet and meandered over to the board, grabbing his darts, then deciding that the foursome round the scarred table was marginally more interesting than defacing his boss, he wandered over to commit hara kiri with that lethal brew known as CI5 tea.

McCabe was the one carrying the conversational ball. "Yeh, but what'd you go and put more sugar in without asking me first? You know I always sugar first, then milk, then tea—"

"Always? Half the time when you make the tea, I get either no sugar or no milk because you're so sodding slow that if I don't grab my mug myself, it's gone stone cold—"

"Oh, shut up both of you," Murphy said,

cutting right through the acrimony of pure boredom, stabbing his darts into the loaf on the table so that he wouldn't lose them. "I'll take both the teas and you two can pour yourselves another, right?"

Christ, but he hated the Christmas season, when not even the IRA could be counted on to liven things up. Traditional 72 hour suspension of civilian attacks, so here they were, stuck in the CI5 restroom, with nothing to do and nowhere to go. He refused to let the bickering start up again, so he looked at the one most likely to start niggling if left undistracted. "So where are you going tonight then, Doyle?"

Doyle yawned, added another sugar cube to his leaning tower and mumbled, "Ice rink."

Four people turned as one to look at him, then guffawed. "Ice skating?" Lucas cackled. "You?"

"Yeh, me. You got something to say about it?"

Not even Lucas was bored enough to prod

Doyle when he used that tone of voice. “Who me? Nah, never. Very respectable pastime, is ice skating.” Doyle was looking like thunder, obviously taking exception to what Lucas recognised had been an unwisely amused tone of voice. Best to mend that before Doyle got started on him. “Your bird like ice-skating, does she?”

That was an even unwise thing to say.

Bodie winced: girls had been a touchy subject with Doyle for the past three weeks or so, ever since his last one had told him precisely what she thought of a man who could treat her so badly and had literally thrown him out of her house—and right into the biggest puddle this side of the Atlantic.

“No,” Doyle said with dignity, looking down his nose at his companions. “I’m not as immature as you lot—I’m perfectly capable of going off somewhere on my own to enjoy myself.”

What was that we were saying about being unwise? There was a chorus from around the table: “You’ll go blind doing that!”

“Want to borrow my magnifying glass?”

“Just don’t you go borrowing my shaver for your palms, mate.”

“Prats!” And he grabbed up his mug, walking off, slurping, loudly.

Of course, it was only a matter of seconds before Bodie had followed him, parking his bum on the sofa beside Doyle, his leg touching reassuringly down the length of Doyle’s.

“You ever been skating?” Doyle asked, a faintly acknowledged yearning prompting him to ask.

Bodie looked at him sharply, not expecting Doyle to continue the conversation of the table. “You what?”

“Have. You. Ever. Been. Ice. Skay-ting, Bodie?”

Not nice of Doyle, not nice at all to make fun of him like that when he’d been decent enough to come to keep him company. Plus, Bodie was as bored at everyone else, and a spat with Doyle was always fun. “Don’t be stupid.” Doyle had another noisy drink of tea, precisely because he knew the slurping drove Bodie round the twist. Bodie looked at him again. “Sissything, skating.”

Doyle gave him one of his slow grins, the devil in him wondering if this was the opportunity he’d been looking for. “You’re just saying

that cos you can’t skate.” Then his face lit up with glee as something occurred to him, deeper motivations pushed aside for the moment. “Bet that’s what it is! There’s something you can’t do and you’re too embarrassed to admit it.” Bodie was suddenly fascinated by the pattern of loose threads on the arm of the sofa, and Doyle burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s great—” He raised his voice, baiting friends one of his favourite hobbies. “Oi, you lot! Bodie can’t skate and he’s too scared to try it.”

“I am not scared!” Pure indignance, while a faint blush betrayed him. “Anyway, you never asked me about *goingskating*, you just asked me if I’d ever *beenskating*. Ought to learn the Queen’s English, you.”

“That’s nit-picking, Bodie,” Lucas shouted, pausing in their game of city scaping with breadcrumbs, sugar cubes, spoons and streets of murky brown tea. “You’re scared of making a pillock of yourself—”

“Bit late for that,” McCabe put in, moving the Victory Square over to beside King Dave’s Palace.

“Scared? Our Bodie? One of Sports And Social’s best? Nah, not him,” Murphy, taking his turn, wicked humour on the rise, digging up an event Bodie would prefer forgotten. “Only blokes who jump ten feet in the air because a wasp is after him would be scared to go ice-skating.”

“It wasn’t a wasp, it was a fucking hive!” Bodie shouted, but all he got was catcalling and laughter.

Doyle, naturally, was the worst offender, everything else forgotten in the delight of one-upping his partner and taking the mick with the best of them. “But I bet you are scared. Petrified, even. Bet you five quid you’re too fucking terrified to come ice-skating with me.”

“Don’t be a wally, Doyle. It’s cold out there, and you want me to freeze my balls off even worse at an ice-rink? You must be daft.”

Not daft, but that half-formed idea was back, egging him on. “Nah. But you’re scared.”

“I am not!”

“Yes you bloody are!”

“Am bloody not!”

Doyle smiled at him then, voice smooth as water, closing the trap he had so surreptitiously laid. “Then prove it.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Doyle, you’re as bad as

a kid. What is this—dare and double dare?”

Doyle was enjoying himself now, ten hours stand-by made up for by ten minutes of baiting Bodie and the scalp-tingling possibilities of telling a truth he hated keeping secret. “Fair enough. You go ice-skating, and then you can dare me.”

Now that made it interesting. “Right then, you’re on.”

Doyle jumped to his feet, half-full mug going on the floor where it would surely be spilt later adding to the moiré of stains on the carpet. He was in a hurry now, ready to get them out of there before he came to his senses and realised just how terrifying a thing he was doing. “Then let’s get going.”

“Now?”

“When else? Up, Bodie, shift your arse, twinkletoes, and let’s see you do your John Curry.”

“I know there’s not a lot of room in that thick skull of yours, but we are still on duty, you know,” Bodie said smugly, leaning back a bit more comfortably.

“No you’re not, you lucky bastard,” Jax said, making straight for the tea pot. “You get to go home to a nice warm bed and a nice warm bird—”

“Not tonight, he doesn’t,” Doyle said before anyone else could, then wincing as he inserted his foot firmly in his mouth and chewed. “Tonight, he’s coming with me.”

And with that, they left the restroom, to cries of “be gentle with him!” and “I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

Doyle, eloquent and elegant as ever, stuck two fingers round the door at them. But the hand was shaking, infinitesimally.

There were hordes of kids and mums and dads everywhere, apart from the cafeteria, which was overflowing with teenagers holding hands over the mugs of chicken soup and cocoa.

“Oh, very nice,” Bodie sneered, leaning casually on the counter, surveying the down-at-heels fixtures and the peeling paint job.

“Oh, pardon me,” Doyle muttered to him, pulling his shoes off. He’d had time enough to re-list all the things he’d listed to himself so many times before and he wasn’t quite as keen on his original idea as he had been. The things he

did when he got bored... He just hoped he wasn’t going to regret this one. “But the Savoy’s rink is closed to have the velvet carpet brushed.”

Bodie chose this moment to notice what Doyle was doing. “What’s that in aid of?” he asked, as Doyle plonked his shoes down on the counter.

Long-sufferingly, Doyle looked at him. “Can’t get skates on over shoes, can you? So you have to take your shoes off, don’t you? So then you hand them to the assistant and they give you skates in your size and keep your shoes behind the counter so they can’t get nicked. So give us your shoes—and I hope you put clean socks on this morning.”

“Me? I’ll have you know—”

“Listen, mate, I’m sorry to interrupt your billin’ an’ cooin’ wiv your boyfriend ’ere, but I don’t ’ave all day. Do you want a pair of skates or not?” The assistant was a bear of a man—a teddy bear, five three at the most, hirsute apart from his face and the top of his head, the sort of pugnacious man who would have acted the Cockney commando in ’40s films. He had one hairy-knuckled hand out demandingly, waiting for the shoes.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Bodie said, drawing himself up to his full height.

“All right, all right, so ’e’s your fuckin’ ’usband, I don’t fuckin’ care myself, do I? Does you want a pair of fuckin’ skates or not?”

“He does,” Doyle said, kicking Bodie, shutting that worthy up before Bob, whom he’d met too many times already and in too many circumstances that he most certainly did *not* want referred to in front of Bodie, despite his hare-brained notion earlier. “Give Bob your shoes, mate, else the place’ll be shutting before you set foot on the ice.”

That sounded like a hell of a good idea to Bodie, until Doyle winked at him and Bodie thought about the ribbing he’d get at work tomorrow if he winkled his way out of going on the ice tonight.

Ungraciously, he heeled his shoes off and dumped them on the counter.

“’Bout fuckin’ time, mate.” Bob disappeared for a second, returning with a couple of pairs of skates slung by their laces over his shoulder. “’Ere you go, Ray,” he said, ignoring Bodie, whom he seemed to think was beneath his notice. “You ’ave a nice time. I’m orf now, so one of

the ovvers—pillocks every last one of them, stupid bastards—they'll get your shoes back to you. An' don't you tell no-one you didn't pay, all right?"

"Thanks, Bob. Where are you off to then?"

Bob leered, quite a disgusting sight Bodie thought.

"Ome, to bed. An early night, like."

"In that case, *you* have a nice time. See you."

"Cheers, mate."

"Friend of yours, is he?" Bodie asked, carefully casual, not wanting to be caught prying into Doyle's life.

Tense, Doyle concentrated on what he was doing, half of him keeping his fingers crossed that Bodie hadn't clicked about Bob and the other half of him cursing his partners obtuseness. It'd be so much easier if he didn't have to actually come right out and state the facts baldly, easier on both of them, less chance of misunderstanding that way. "I'm friendly with him—comes in useful in here, saves me a fortune."

"The old, 'any friend of Bob's doesn't have to pay, we don't want our faces rearranged'?"

"Could say that. Here, get these on."

Bodie took the laces of the proffered, battered skates in one disdainful hand, then looked at Doyle. "Put these on?" he said, as if he were Howard Hughes confronted with used toilet paper. "These?"

Doyle was already seated on a once-red chair, and he grinned up at Bodie through a tangle of hair that should have been cut at least three weeks ago. "What, a big SAS ex-merc like you scared of a bit of athlete's foot? Nah, not you." He got to his feet, one hand on the back of the chair in front of him. "You'd never be scared of anything like that, would you?" He leaned in, whispered confidentially. "It's the verrucas you're petrified of, innit?"

"Doyle—" But Ray had already gone, one last sharp-toothed smile tossed over his shoulder as he launched himself onto the ice and sailed off into the crowd.

Grumbling unquietly, Bodie perched on the edge of the seat and set about lacing the skates up without getting himself tied up in knots. Task eventually accomplished—Christ, army boots were a lot easier than this stupid contraption of hooks and loops and laces—he grabbed the seat in front of him the way he'd

seen Doyle do, and levered himself to his feet. And discovered just how difficult it was to balance on the thin edge of a blade.

"Bloody hell!" He toppled, collapsing back into the chair, running his hands through his hair as if he'd really fully and honestly intended to sit back down. Doyle skated up the edge of the rink, elbows leaning comfortably on the rim of the rink barrier.

"Need a hand?" he carolled, loudly enough for several heads to turn their direction.

"I'm fine, thanks," Bodie grated through clenched teeth, looming to his feet once more and lurching the short distance to the ice, knuckles white with clutching the backs of seats in the passing.

"Fair enough," Doyle answered, settling down to wait, totally lacking the common decency to skate off a distance and do his laughing from afar. Oh, no, not Doyle. He didn't want to miss a single detail of this.

Bodie, one hand on each side of the gaping mouth to the rink, hesitated, staring horrified at the huge expanse of ice covered with enormous numbers of people. All of whom, he was convinced, probably from his partner's attitude, were all just waiting to laugh at him as he fell down.

Well, there was a cure to that. He simply wouldn't fall down. Holding on with one hand for balance, he stepped gracefully out onto the ice.

And fell, down. Hard. Doyle winced, then started laughing as he took in the sight of his super-cool partner chilling his bum on the ice, a circle of children forming to gawk.

"You all right, mister?" one of them asked.

"Of course I'm fucking all right!"

"Oh, my Mum'll wash your mouth out with soap for saying that!" This, from a little red-haired girl.

"Nah, my Mum'll make 'im put 50p in the swear box," a taller boy said, absently playing with one of his Rasta locks. "An' an 'ole extra pound for sayin' it in front of us."

Bodie gave them the look that had been known to cow terrorists, SAS squaddies and numerous baddies. The children laughed at him. Loudly.

"Go on, you lot, clear off," Doyle said, taking a friendly swipe at the nearest head. "Or your Mums'll hear where you lot 'ave been, won't

they?”

Threatened with a fate worse than death, the audience skated off with an ease that Bodie coveted jealously. Skate like that? He wasn't sure he could even get back up.

Eyes dancing, Doyle leaned over him. “Need a hand?” he asked with cloying sweetness.

Bodie seriously considered saying no, but admitted that that would be false pride coming after a fall, and if he didn't want to literally freeze his bum off, he'd better let Doyle help him. “Oh, all right, give us a hand,” he muttered, hoping that Bob of the innuendo wasn't watching. Hoisted to his feet, he grabbed Doyle's shoulders and stood there, teetering.

“Where d'you want me to take you?” Doyle asked, face an inch from Bodie's. “I'll take you out to the middle, shall I?”

Bodie gave him a withering glower which bounced off Doyle like sunshine. “Back to the fucking wall.”

“Language, language—not in front of the children, Bodie. Sure you don't want to go out to the middle?”

“Not on your life—and it will be on your life if you take me out there, Ray.”

Doyle just smiled at him and started skating backwards, towing a terrified Bodie with him.

“Better look where we're going, Bodie, I wouldn't want to have an accident, would I? Might let go of you if something like that happened, mightn't I?”

Bodie swallowed hard and started looking where they were going. “Bit to your left. Farther, you prat!”

“Nice, this, innit?”

“Bear right,” was all Bodie said.

“But it's good fun, isn't it?”

He got a very speaking look for that.

“Christ, you're as much fun as a wet weekend in Wigan. Come on, Bodie, you can manage obstacle courses and climb mountains, if you'd just relax you'd manage to learn skating.”

“Oh, is that what you're doing? And here was me thinking you were hell-bent on making a fool of me.”

“I'd never do a thing like that,” Doyle said, all outraged innocence, big eyes and lies.

“Pull the other one, Ray, it's got bells on.”

Doyle leaned forward and whispered, “Always thought you were kinky, mate. Doesn't

the noise get on your nerves when you're really going at it?”

“Oh, shut up and keep skating.”

Doyle kept on skating, but when had he ever shut up because someone had told him to? “You know, you'd do a lot better if you relaxed,” he said as he did a rather neat turn, reversing their direction and leaving Bodie hanging on to him for dear life.

“Relax? Relax, he says, when I'm surrounded by maniac children and stuck with a complete loony for a partner? Oh, yeh, right, I'll relax. The minute you take me back to that bloody wall, that's when I'll relax, *mate*.”

“That bad, is it?” Doyle asked with what seemed like off hand curiosity, but he was already moving away from the centre of the rink.

“No, it's fan-fucking-tastic. What do you think, Doyle?”

“I think you're a coward because you won't even try skating cos it scares you witless. That's what I think.”

“Oh yeh? And what's Cowley going to say when I call in sick tomorrow cos I've sprained my ankle on these stupid sodding skates?”

Doing a wonderful impersonation of a nanny, Doyle deposited Bodie at the safety of the waist-high wooden wall that surrounded the ice. “What I want to know is what you're going to say when I remind you that you don't give a toss what the Cow's going to say when you bugger off motocrossing?”

But he had skated off before Bodie could come up with a good comeback for that unpleasant little truth. Then the air round Bodie turned a delicate shade of blue as he realised that D had left him yards and yards and yards away from the nearest opening in the wall and he was going to have to skate what looked like miles to get off the ice. Slowly, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, hanging on to the wall with both hands, he began to haul himself to safety.

Doyle, supremely confident on the ice, whizzed past him, a friendly pat on the rump sending Bodie flying. Spinning in slow circles, he gradually came to halt. Which left him as effective as Bambi on ice. Every time he gained his feet, one of them would go skiting out from under him, and he'd land, thuddingly, on the ice—and on his knees, or his bum, or his front.

Stoically, reminding himself that, as that bastard Doyle had said, he had survived obstacle courses and SAS training, Bodie pulled himself up again, never quite able to relax enough to keep his balance. He was cold and wet and thoroughly pissed off when he decided that even if he had to crawl, he was going to get off this ice. Looking around to see if Doyle was near enough to help him—he was getting desperate enough to ask for a hand—he saw an unnervingly wobbling yobbo staggering his direction, sharp blades coming careening towards him. Bodie would rather face an insane sniper any day of the week. Cutting always made him squeamish—when it was done to himself, that is—more than bullets, something about the hissing slide of blade through flesh and bone making his teeth ache. He scrambled out of the way, narrowly escaping knocking the flailing youth flying.

“Here, let me give you a hand.” The offer came from a nondescript, routinely pleasant-faced man, about ages with Bodie, the hand stretched towards him dappled with signet ring, plain gold band and identity bracelet.

“Thanks, I could do with a bit of help.” He was pulled to his feet, guided back to the barrier, placed firmly and safely against the solid wall. The helping hand lingered longer than was strictly necessary for helping, that and other subliminal clues adding up in Bodie’s mind. The bloke was definitely on the lavender side, which even if he hadn’t realised before, he wouldn’t have been able to miss, thanks to the lecherous survey of his body.

Appreciative brown eyes measured him, a brow was arched, dark brown hair was straightened, and without a word being said, Bodie knew he had a companion for the night if he was interested. “Did your...friend abandon you to the kindness of strangers?”

That, Bodie decided, was what was known as a loaded question. “No, it’s just that’s he’s a really good skater and I’m still at the falling on my arse stage.”

“I could teach you, if you want me to?” Very, very discreet, still not a single untoward word spoken, but the offer was growing louder.

“I appreciate that, but...” He didn’t want to cause a scene, didn’t want to alienate this fellow and get into any aggro, not until he worked out

what the hell was going on here. He added lamely, “You know how it is—”

Then cringed, realising he’d just made it sound as if he was trying to find out the bloke’s name, and if he was doing that, then the fella would think he was playing hard to get instead of turning him down.

“Jon, Jon Blytheswood. And you?”

A hand touched, very lightly, on his forearm, testing his muscle, a smile showing approval. Maybe he wasn’t turning Jon down. Maybe he was playing hard to get and just hadn’t caught up with what his body had in mind.

“Bodie,” said a very familiar voice. “Plain Bodie. And I’ll give him a hand back to the seats, thanks all the same.” He was manhandled out of the way, Doyle manoeuvring him around Jon before the other man had a chance to move, and then the two partners were wending their way slowly round the perimeter of the rink.

“I was talking to him,” Bodie said, aggrieved, positive now that the option was no longer available that he would have gone home with Jon Blytheswood.

“You,” Doyle said, helping him over the sill, “were being eaten alive and you didn’t even know it.”

But I did, he almost said, biting back in the barest nick of time. He watched as Ray knelt down beside him, head downbent, something odd in the attitude; then it dawned on him what it was: guilt. The sod was feeling guilty about something. He sat placidly as his skates were unlaced and pulled off, this kind of service coming from Doyle worthy of a write-up in the evening paper. Then Doyle, as uncharacteristically silent as he was servile, sat down in the next chair, making short work of his own skates.

“I’ll only be half a tick. Bodie...” Whatever it was, Doyle obviously thought better of saying it, and disappeared off to fetch their shoes.

Left alone, Bodie had a good look around, and started wondering. On first glance, it was a perfectly average crowd, with perhaps more men than you would normally expect to see at an ice rink unless there was curling going on. But there were quite a few men on the ice, far more in the cafeteria, little groups coalescing, dissolving, rejoining. Nothing blatant, not at all, nothing that he could, as a CI5 agent, put his finger on. But as a man who liked men as much

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as he liked women, he couldn't miss it. There weren't that many, perhaps twenty in all, but it was obvious to anyone who was in the know: there were men here to meet other men, and it was going on all around him. Small wonder Blytheswood had put inverted commas round the word 'friend' when he'd been talking to him.

Leaning back in his seat, Bodie wondered how many of the interested men here thought he and Ray were a couple. Everyone, probably, since they were going through one of their phases where the entire world and its granny were making queer comments to them. Even Cowley had compared them Derby and Joan the other day. A very pretty young thing strutted in front of him, and Bodie looked away, letting it show that he wasn't interested. The only thing he was interested in right now was the reason Doyle had brought him here, bet be damned. This wasn't the sort of place to bring your workmates.

Unless you were trying to come out to them subtly.

He sat bolt upright in his seat, thunderstruck. Ray? Just because he had never said he was gay or bi didn't mean that he wasn't, of course—God strewth, look at himself. And if the poor sod had thought he could turn this whole bet crap into a notice-if-you-want-to-otherwise-I-won't-say-anything situation... Which begged the question: notice what? That Doyle was ac/dc? Or gay, and functional with women purely for smokescreen? Or wondering about Bodie and interested in a 'further relationship' as the personal columns so coyly hinted.

"Here, wrap yourself round that." Doyle thrust a styrofoam cup of aromatic drinking chocolate into his hands. "You look proper frozen, mate."

"Nah, it's all right."

"Now you're off the ice anyway. Sorry, Bodie, it never occurred to me that you'd hate skating that much."

Bodie wondered if they were talking about skating or about the well-camouflaged underground in the place. "I never thought you'd be that involved in it. You don't look like a skater."

Doyle was tying his laces, glad of the excuse not to look up. "Cos I don't have those massive thighs you see on the East German team? Don't do it often enough for that."

"Don't you?" And he definitely wasn't talk-

ing about skating.

"What would I lie about a thing like that for, Bodie?" Doyle answered, missing the subtext to the conversation completely. All he could see was that his thick partner was too bloody blinkered or so fucking un-sympatico that he hadn't even noticed he was being very gently chatted up. And what did that say for his chances for telling Bodie about himself? And as for his fond notions of his partner coming to love him—how stupid could anyone be? "Come on, get your shoes on, mate, I want to get home." He was tired, very weary, calling himself every name under the sun for even thinking about bringing Bodie here. He couldn't believe he'd been stupid enough to even consider trying to tell Bodie about the other side of his life. After all, what had he expected? Bodie falling at his feet in eternal devotion.

Not expected, but wanted, certainly. Stupid, stupid, stupid, he said to himself, snarling at Bodie, his partner catching the flak from his own self-anger. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time: inveigle Bodie into coming here, let him see a few things—a damned sight more subtle than his usual haunts, that was for sure: he didn't think Bodie would've been best pleased to be taken for a drink in a private gay club. Admittedly, Bodie would definitely realise then that his partner wasn't exactly the straightest man on the squad, but God, he dreaded to think what the reaction would be. Trust Bodie to be exactly what he seemed—a perfectly straight bloke who'd gone through the services without once seeing a bit of buggery going on—instead of a well-convoluted bisexual man who was hiding behind this façade of straightness, the so-effective 'only a straight man would dare be this camp' routine. No hiding in plain sight. No secret depths waiting to be plumbed. Not even a willingness to experiment on the other side if the right man—Doyle, of course. Who else?—came along to show him how sweet it could be. Nothing. Nothing but a partner looking at him funny, and once Bodie realised what it all meant, blokes chatting up other blokes, the things Bob had said, and Doyle himself coming here so often that all the dodgy men knew him by name, but yet he hadn't done enough skating to build up his legs. Christ help him then.

“Penny for them?” Bodie asked of the disconsolate face.

“What? Oh, nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

Now what was Doyle so put out about? They were almost at the car and if he didn’t say something soon, then five minutes from now Ray would be dropping him off at his flat and that would be it. Once Ray clammed shut, that was it: not even Cowley could get him to talk.

“Listen, I’m starved, mate,” he said, his decision as spur of the moment as Doyle’s had been earlier that evening at work. “And I couldn’t half go one of those prawn cocktails you get from that Chinese take-away round your house.”

Any other night, or any other outcome from tonight, and Doyle’d have jumped at the chance. But he was too busy kicking himself to dredge up any enthusiasm for anything. They were in the car now, edging out into traffic, Bodie sitting beside him in blissful ignorance, and he was no nearer to finally coming out and telling Bodie the one thing that was hanging round his neck like a bloody albatross.

“Tell you what,” Bodie said, the very subduedness of his partner convincing himself that he was on the right track about Ray trying to tell him about the Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name, “I dare you to drive me to your place, feed me until I’m full, and let me use up all your hot water for a bath.”

“That’s not a dare, Bodie, so give it a rest, will you? I’m tired, I just want to go home—”

“Which is precisely what I’m suggesting, innit? The only difference is, this way you’ll actually get some food down you and maybe your bones won’t come through your skin.”

Doyle didn’t answer, using a right turn across traffic as his excuse for keeping quiet.

The brightly lit shops were streaming past and Bodie put on his best underfed orphan voice. “Come on, Ray, it’s Christmas Eve...”

Not much Doyle could say to that, was there? But that didn’t mean he had to be gracious about it. “Oh, all right then, I’ll get you your fucking prawn cocktail.” He desperately needed to be alone, to think about what he was going to do next. There were only two things he was sure of: he didn’t want his partner watching him with those perceptive eyes and he couldn’t keep quiet any longer. And if he weren’t careful, he was going to end up blurting it out one morning over

tea at work.

“Right, that’s all settled then.” A quick sideways glance as Doyle turned down the street where the Chinese restaurant had tucked itself away. “And don’t forget the bath after.”

“The mess you make, you’ll need a fucking bath. Okay, you go in and get the food, I’m not budging.”

“Don’t over-exert yourself, will you, Ray?”

“Look, Bodie, I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to be here, so just shut your fucking mouth and get back here with the food or I’ll be long gone.”

Bodie actually considered skipping food, but there were some things he wouldn’t do, not even for Raymond Doyle. And at least it would give him time to think what best to do.

Dinner, eaten in the living room in front of some mindless Christmas television programme, was a disaster. Doyle, stormy faced and sullen, was so demonstrably upset that Bodie wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised at the tiny amount of food eaten. There was actually enough left over for tomorrow night after work, Doyle not close enough to his family any more to make the long drive up to Derby unless he happened to be off for Christmas.

“D’you think the water’ll be hot enough by now?” Bodie asked, Ronnie Corbett’s barking laughter bellowing from the television as if Bodie had just told him a joke.

“Should be.” He’d be glad to get Bodie into the tub and out of his way. Then he could drive him home and that would be it. For another day, until work tomorrow, when he’d go through it all over again, trying to find the right thing to say to his partner. Thinking self-deprecating thoughts, automatically taking his shoes and socks off to curl his toes in the carpet pile, he didn’t notice when Bodie left, only noticed the silence afterwards. That was what was making it all so difficult: he feared that once he told Bodie, all he’d have left with his partner was that silence.

“Ray!”

Now what? Probably forgot to take a towel in. Well, if Bodie thought he was going to hang about while Bodie pranced around naked in front of him—he was absolutely right, he admitted, shaking his head at his own lustfulness. It was something they actually did quite often,

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although he himself had been the one to curtail it the stronger the need for honesty had become. “What d’you want now?” he asked, propping himself on the doorjamb, arms crossed, weight on one leg. He was proud of himself: his voice hadn’t been husky, even though he was weak-kneed with desire. Bodie was gorgeous, pale expanses of skin highlighted by the pink of nipple, the blackness of hair and the darker pink of his cock, bobbing slightly in the waves made by Bodie twisting round to see him.

“Forgot a towel, didn’t I?”

“Typical. And before you ask, yeh, I’ll get you one.”

When he came back, he had the two-bar electric fire from his bedroom, and in a move that would have had the fire-master and the rest of the fire-brigade chopping his door down, he pulled the extension cord straight and positioned the glowing fire in the doorway. He came all the way into the bathroom, lowered the toilet lid and sat down, putting the towel on top of the washhand basin, as if tonight was exactly the same as any other night and not rippling with unvoiced tension. “Anything else you require, m’lud?”

“Not at the moment, Jeeves, my good man. Unless you’ve got an elastoplast?”

“What’ve you done to yourself now?”

“Must’ve cut myself on the ice—or on one of those bloody skates you made me wear.” He’d been thinking, knew now what he wanted to say. “Why’d you take me to the ice-skating tonight, Ray?”

Doyle shrugged, casually, although his heart was beating faster. Bodie had obviously started adding two and two to make five. This was it: this was the chance that he’d been both yearning for and dreading. Taking a deep breath, he took the metaphoric plunge. “Sounds stupid now, but I thought it was the easiest way of hinting at something I wanted you to know. I mean, God, this is fucking pathetic, but—I thought if you saw me there, if you found out I knew something as underground as a skating rink, for fuck’s sake, where blokes picked up other blokes...”

“You thought you wouldn’t have to actually tell me, and you wouldn’t be forcing me into reacting to your big confession.”

Doyle didn’t want to look at him. “Told you it was fucking pathetic, didn’t I?”

“But it worked, didn’t it?”

Doyle still wasn’t looking at him. “Then how come I’m sitting here having to tell you in so many words.”

“But you haven’t said anything yet, Ray.”

Doyle raised his head then, looking Bodie straight in the eye, and said it. “I’m gay.”

“Gay or bi?”

Suddenly horribly restless from the strain of it all, Doyle jumped to his feet, pacing the tiny bathroom. “Gay. I’ve tried going straight—Jesus, I tried so fucking hard! But I couldn’t stop myself looking at men, wanting them... Used to fantasise I was with a bloke most of the time I was with girls. So. There you have it, Bodie.”

Bodie soaped his chest with concentric circles of white bubbled, dotting clouds of soapsuds on his nipples, luxuriously rubbing the soft foam into the narrow line of hair on his abdomen. “Now that you’ve told me,” he asked, giving nothing away quite deliberately, wanting to hear the honest truth from Doyle before he said or did anything, “what d’you expect me to do about it?”

Doyle shrugged at him, then turned to face the wall, tension bunching the muscles in the back of his neck. “Dunno.” He turned abruptly, a sort of grin on his face. “Not knock my block off, I think I’d settle for that right now.”

Bodie looked far more innocent than he had had any right to be since the age of two. “Have I ever knocked your block off, Raymond? All right, so I’m not going to run screaming from the room every time you walk in. But is that enough for you?”

Doyle sat down heavily, rested his head on the sink. “What am I supposed to say to that? If I say yes, then have one too many one night and come over all affectionate, are you going to think I lied to you?” He wiped his hands over his eyes, bracing himself for the hardest part. “And what happens if I say no? I’d be lying then, but I’m used to not having enough with you, Bodie. It’s just another fact of life, like having a job where people keep shooting at me.”

“So basically what you’re saying is that you’re not going to change anything?”

“I’m not going to risk sending you running to Cowley asking for a new partner, am I?”

Bodie stretched his arm above his head and swathed soap along his side and up into his

armpit, acutely aware of Doyle trying so hard not to look at the way his pectorals flexed or the way his stomach muscles were flat and taut. Stretching, he lifted one leg—the right, hiding his genitals from Doyle’s not-looking looking. “Is it just the job you’re trying to keep going?”

Doyle had to clear his throat before he could say anything. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry: Bodie was being a proper pricktease, the way he was rubbing himself all over so sensuously it was making Doyle achingly hard. “Course not. I’m ashamed to admit it, but you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Bodie looked at him, pinning him, making Doyle look right at him again. “Do you love me?” he asked, and saw the painful bob of Doyle’s Adam’s apple, saw the anticipated pain lance through the other man.

Doyle wanted, fiercely, to lie. To say anything, make it a joke, change it so that tonight had never happened. He closed his eyes for a moment, but then opened them again, refusing to be ashamed of himself. “Yes. I do.”

Bodie had shifted again so that Doyle could see the dark patch of body hair and could watch, mouth suddenly dry, as Bodie soaped himself down there, peeling the foreskin back, washing himself carefully, rinsing himself off, every minute move of his hands and every glimpse of his cock devoured by Doyle’s hungry stare. Bodie wanted Ray to be frothing at the mouth for him, he wanted Ray so besotted that the truth would come out. “The way people love their friends and family, or—?”

He wanted to die. Bodie was toying with him, a lepidopterist with a new species to pin, wings spread, in the display case. “All right, you want your pound of fucking flesh, you can have it. I’m in love with you. Okay? You happy now?”

He was standing in the middle of the bathroom, chest heaving, nursing his ire to keep it warm, an armour against the pain of Bodie doing this to him.

Bodie, reclining in the bath, lifted up the index finger of his right hand. “This is the finger I cut at the rink.” He paused, taking a last look at his friend before he lost him forever. “Kiss it better for me?” he said, losing a friend and gaining a lover.

Doyle, however, hadn’t caught on yet. “Oh, that’s nice, that’s really nice. I pour my fucking

soul out to you, and all you can do is make fun of me. Kiss it better, Ray, play Mummy for me, you little fairy, is that what that is? Well, let me tell you—”

“Ray.”

“—that if you think I’m going to—”

“Ray! Will you shut up for a second and listen to me?”

Military training had its advantages, obviously. The parade-ground bellow shut Doyle up quite efficiently. “Thank you, Ray,” Bodie said, and now that Ray was silenced, he went back to his seductive bathing, palms scooping water up to reveal what soap had covered. “I’m not setting you up, you great pillock. That was meant to be a subtle invitation, although why I thought subtlety would work on you I’ll never know.”

Doyle, no idiot, had caught on and was beginning to smile as he took the step that brought him to the side of the bathtub, where he knelt to be closer to Bodie. “I can’t believe you’re saying this, Bodie.” Not yet touching, he dabbled his fingers in the warm bathwater, splashing water against Bodie’s skin, rinsing the bubbles off.

“Well, what I was trying to say, before I was so rudely interrupted,” Bodie was saying, splashing back, grinning ear to ear, “was that I was going to ask you to kiss my finger better, and then I’d hurt my mouth when I fell, and as for my poor bum...”

Doyle hadn’t expected an end to the evening like this. Acceptance, he had banked on, sloe-eyed curiosity he had hoped for. “Like that, do you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Bodie asked, leaning forward, dripping wet arms coming up to surround Doyle, neither one of them caring that Doyle’s good shirt was getting soaked and that water was dripping onto the carpet.

They both paused, just for a second, poised an inch apart, then they each moved forward, and kissed, for the first time. Not for a single instant were they hesitant, the kiss deepening immediately, tacit confession that they’d both wanted this for a long time and weren’t going to wait now that they had finally come out and admitted it. Without either one of them actually thinking about it, Bodie ended up on his knees, with Doyle plastered soppingly to his chest and the bath digging into them both.

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“I think we should get me out of here before this bath does you a mischief, Ray,” Bodie murmured against the plush skin of Doyle’s neck.

Doyle didn’t bother to answer, too busy using his mouth to taste Bodie, licking the lingering remnants of water off his skin, closing his eyes when he finally got down to the taste of Bodie’s skin. Without letting go, he got them both to their feet, Bodie graceful here as he was lummocking on ice, the two of them standing in the middle of the bathroom, Bodie for one glad of the illegal fire, heating him all down his back, apart from two patches, where it was Ray’s heat he could feel, stong hands on his backside, spreading his cheeks, fingers teasing him in between.

“Can’t get at you like this,” Bodie muttered, all fingers and thumbs as he tried to get sodden shirt and damp jeans out of his way.

“Here, give over, Bodie, you’ll have me singing soprano if you’re not careful. Slow down, slow down, we’ve got all night.”

“Oh yeh?” Bodie asked, flaunting his precipitous erection into Doyle’s hand.

But the tide of needing had turned, and now it was Doyle in command of the other man’s pleasure, Doyle the one to string the other man out on a tightrope of desire. Stepping back, Bodie’s hands clinging still to his shoulders, relinquishing only reluctantly, Doyle peeled his damp clothes off, making a show of it for Bodie, taking his time, playing with his skin under the purdah of cloth before letting Bodie see the way the hair of his chest curled round his nipples, or the way his muscles flexed when he pulled the shirt off. Unsmiling, eyes focussed entirely on Bodie, a current of lust crackling between them, he unbuttoned his jeans and pulled the zip down, tooth by tooth. As Bodie licked his lips in anguished anticipation, Doyle slid his hand inside, fondling himself, head dropping back, eyes slitting, as he pleased himself.

“Christ, get over here!” Bodie grabbed him, kissing him hard, tongue thrusting into Doyle’s mouth, shaking hands shoving jeans out of the way, then pulling Doyle in tight, groaning as their heat merged.

And Ray couldn’t touch enough of Bodie, his arms hurting with the need to hold Bodie tighter, closer, harder. He drowned himself in kisses,

covering Bodie with them, sucking on nipples, shivering in empathy as his caresses went through Bodie like lightning. They were pressed so closely together he could feel the pulse in Bodie’s cock against his own, hotness and hardness tautly held between their bellies. Doyle rubbed them together, his hips undulating, his skin flushed with sexual heat, sweat beading, dripping down between his pectorals, pooling in the the small of his back.

Bodie wanted more than this, his body demanding satisfaction. He wanted Doyle’s hands on his arse again, wanted those long fingers to spread him and explore him and make him ready. He wanted Doyle, was famished for the feel of him inside, in him deep, fucking him all the way to heaven. He seized Doyle’s hands, shoved them onto himself, arching his back until his backside was pushing into Doyle’s hands.

Doyle drew back a little, still caressing the lush globes of Bodie’s smooth arse, but looking carefully at Bodie. “Isn’t this all a bit sudden, Bodie?” he asked, a threnody running through his own mind: I told him I was in love with him and he didn’t say a thing.

“Sudden?” Bodie gasped, flabbergasted that Doyle would actually even contemplate chatting at this stage of the game. “If I was some bloke you’d just met five minutes ago in a pub, you’d be up my arse by now. You’re my best friend, known me longer than anyone but my family, and you’re saying it’s all a bit sudden? Christ, Doyle, what d’you want—me down on bended knee, proposing?”

“An’ what if I do?”

“Then I’ll tell you to fucking wait until we’re finished and get back here and fuck me *right now*,” his voice hoarse, his cock grinding into Doyle’s belly, his own hands voracious on Doyle’s body, then falling to his knees, tugging Ray’s jeans off, tongue laving every inch exposed to him.

Not hearts and flowers, but it would do Ray just fine. Eyes smiling, he brought Bodie back up to his feet: if he was to have the unexpected bounty of Bodie wanting him, then he wasn’t going to let it be as quick as any blow job in the backroom of some club. Tongue flickering tiny caresses round Bodie’s mouth, he slid his fingers between Bodie’s buttocks, index finger teasing

the anal mouth, the puckered muscle smoothing out into relaxation. One handed, knocking over a collection of aftershave and deodorants and toothpaste, he found the bottle of oil, then up-ended it, a thin sensuous line snaking down Bodie's spine, glittering in the bathroom light, until the slickness reached Doyle's fingers. He slathered some inside Bodie, stretching him, making him ready for the possession of his body.

Bodie pushed himself backward, pushing Doyle's fingers farther inside him until he could feel Ray's two fingers separate into discrete digits, pressing his prostate, manipulating him internally so that he was poised a caress away from orgasm. He mumbled, mouth open helplessly against the sex-tensed sinews of Ray's neck. But Doyle understood him, or perhaps understood the frantic thrust of his cock against Ray's belly, and withdrew his fingers with lingering attention. Bodie filled his lungs again and again, every breath inundating him with the heady smell of aroused male, intoxicating in and of itself, but a lesser stimulus, giving him time to slow down so that he didn't waste this first time with premature enthusiasm.

"Better?" Doyle asked, nipping sharply on Bodie's earlobe.

"Be better if you were in me," he answered, leaning back against the encircling strength of Doyle's arms, lowering his gaze to his partner's mouth, one trembling finger rising to define the succulent lips. "You're going to use that mouth of yours on me next time," Bodie said, and Doyle parted his lips, sucking Bodie's finger inside, tantalising it with a taste of what was to come next time. "C'mon, Ray, you're being a pricktease. Do me..."

Doyle kneaded Bodie's arse, stretching him open. "Does this mean you don't want me to take you into the bedroom, put clean sheets on and make sweet tender love to you?"

Bodie didn't bother to answer, instead kissing Doyle hard and then turning, supporting himself against the wall, presenting himself to be fucked. And he grinned, delighted, as Doyle swallowed audibly: it was quite, quite wonderful to be so appreciated. Provocatively, he wiggled his hips, and Doyle was suddenly hot against him, hard cock pressing into him. Almost moaning with the pleasure of that presence,

Bodie bent himself almost double, bracing one hand on his knee, the other stretching back between his own legs, for he wanted to feel Ray as Ray went inside him. The thick cock filled his hand, the skin so smooth against his fingers, the glans so hard against his arse. Shivering, he guided Ray inside him, eyes closing as he fed the long cock into himself, back arching as he was filled with the thrilling weight and heat and hardness of another man. Doyle was moving inside him, fast and ferocious with desire, and Bodie met him thrust for thrust. He stumbled, knocked to his knees by the force of their passion, and felt a stab of pain until Ray moved again, curling over him, hairy chest tantalising his back, whipcord arms wrapped around him, rigid cock deep inside him.

There was sweat running down Ray's face, dripping onto Bodie's neck, there, just where the short hair curled. He pressed his face there, sucking at the delicate skin, leaving his mark, branding Bodie for his own. He pushed his cock in deeper, the moist walls of Bodie's body clinging to every inch of him, every time he moved. His right hand fastened round Bodie's cock, pumping him in unison with every inward thrust of his hips, rubbing his thumb over the tip of Bodie's cock every time he half-withdrew from the tight confines of Bodie's arse. His balls were up tight against the base of his cock, pressing into the rounded curve of buttocks. One thrust, and another, and then he was dissolving, becoming a stream of cum that was flowing, fast and faster, into Bodie, his entire body still as it soared on the intensity of climax.

Ray went rigid above him, and Bodie felt the viscid heat erupt inside him, making Doyle slick, making the shuddering last thrusts of orgasm sheer heaven. Doyle's hand convulsed on his cock, the final caress he needed, and he came, his own cum splattering his chest, Doyle's cum filling him inside. Spent, he collapsed completely, going down in a tangle of sweat-slicked arms and legs, a heap of sated flesh.

It took them quite some time and a king's ransom in kisses and softly whispered murmurs of affectionate approval, but they did finally make it to the bedroom. They didn't see the need for electric blanket or anything else: so wrapped up in each other they were warm enough, and there were, already, the languid stirrings of

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more passion curling in their bellies, so that they stretched voluptuously against the other, stroking their bodies together. Amidst the lingering kisses and possessive caresses they began to drift towards sleep, their bodies needing the time to recover that their minds did not.

Bodie, eyes closed, nestled in close against the wiry masculinity of his partner, cuddled in a bit closer, smiling as a kiss was dropped on the top of his head. Not what he'd expected from a five quid bet, but he wasn't complaining. In fact, now that he stopped to think about it, it was incredibly bloody stupid of them to have been so afraid of discovery that they'd even hidden this wonderfully salacious secret of their sexuality from each other. A pert nipple beside his mouth attracted his attention for a moment, and he sucked on it, playing his tongue against its pucker, excessively pleased with himself as Ray reacted even to that. He let himself drift a little more, thinking lecherous thoughts about how much fun they were going to have making up for all that lost time and all the truly delectable things they were going to do to each other. Almost asleep, he grumbled into Doyle's chest as he was dunted into near waking.

"Bodie."

No need to answer, was there? They were going to have weeks and weeks and months and months and years and years to talk to each other, so...

"Oi, Bodie! You asleep down there?"

Perhaps there was a need to answer after all. "Not for want of trying," he mumbled, barely open eyes watching the delightful way his breath riffled faintly through lush brown chest hair.

Doyle was, probably for the first time in his life, utterly disinterested in analysing a single thing. He was happy, and Bodie had even whispered words of love to him. He even knew now what it was like to be bedrock secure, completely and contentedly serene in the certainty that there was someone he loved and who loved him back. And not some stranger who would turn out to be totally different once he got to know them. This was Bodie, and they had

friendship to go with the passion. Doyle was even willing, again for the first time, to entertain the idea that he might just have found the one person he needed in life. There was nothing that could make his life more complete. Apart, perhaps, for one minor detail. "You haven't given me my dare, yet," Doyle said, one hand absently tracing down Bodie's spine.

Oh, shit, so not only was he going to have to talk, but he was expected to think as well? "Christ, Doyle," he said, sounding far more aggrieved than he actually felt, "don't you have any sense of timing at all?"

Doyle smacked him one on his bum, soothing into a flat-palmed caress. "That's not what you were saying a bit ago, is it?"

"Yeh, but I was distracted then. You serious about wanting your dare?"

"Course I am. I mean, look where my dare to you got us, so I think it's only fair that you contribute to this relationship."

"Did you know," Bodie murmured sleepily, "that you're so pleased with yourself, even your voice is smiling?" His jaw cracked as he yawned, and he rubbed his face contentedly against Ray's skin. "Quite entitled, when you think about it. But you want a dare, do you?" He couldn't help it: he yawned again, his eyes closing even as he said the first thing that popped into his head, something utterly impossible and therefore quite, quite safe. "Give me a bouquet of a dozen red roses bang smack in the middle of the restroom." He was giggling softly to himself, pleased as Punch, because not even Ray would do a thing like that. He'd done it: he'd finally topped Ray in a dare. Delighted, he repeated his brilliant idea. "Dozen red roses, in front of everyone."

And as Bodie finally slid into sleep, Ray Doyle was lying wide awake beside him, smiling as he worked out a way to present Bodie with his dozen red roses. In front of everyone. Eyes closing, he fell asleep contemplating whether or not his partner would blush redder than the roses.

