

teapot all together.

The living room next, newspapers shoved aside on the coffee table to leave room for the tea, a quick backtrack to the kitchen for the new bottle of milk and the sugar, cubes this time, the box torn open, some of the white lumps spilling out like childhood's memories. Poor brat hadn't even been missed at first, not with all the running around to give the kids their routine polio drops, the bitter taste disguised in sugar cubes...

He shook himself then, trying to make it all water off a duck's back. Switch the telly on, get laughing at "Some Mother's do 'ave 'em", shove it all to the back of his mind, let today bury itself under years of dust until he wouldn't even remember it. Get rid of the sting of seeing that kid, push it all aside. Ignore the pain, because pain made him angry, and he couldn't be angry. Ray would need to let it out, would need to shout and yell and rail against the unfairness of the world. And if Bodie allowed himself his own anger, then it'd be another fight, more bruises and another agony of separation, no quick spat the way they were both feeling today, no chance of that. Not worth it, not worth it all, to let the job rip them apart the way it had over that bomb cock-up at Christmas. He began, methodically and with concentration, to cram biscuits into his mouth, chewing energetically, arrowing on that simple luxury. If it weren't for Doyle needing to go through his usual catharsis, he'd crawl into a bottle tonight and stay there until morning, but Bodie knew how stropy he got when he'd been drinking like that, and he'd already decided that this would be another of those nights when he'd be there like the Berlin Wall, big, solid and dumb, something for Doyle to scream his outrage at, something for Doyle to mark with his protests for freedom and decency.

The bathroom door clicked, the faintest shuss of bare feet on carpet, then Doyle was there, and if it had been any other day, if they'd found anything but that poor kid today, Bodie would have made a cheerfully cheeky comment about copper's instincts never failing—always there the second the pot had brewed. But it wasn't one of their better days, where the worst they'd had to do

was rough someone up or shoot someone. It had been the kind of day that not even all Bodie's good intentions were letting slip from him. He was too tense, and he knew it, not turning to look at Doyle, but gesturing instead, dark head nodding, to the tea things on the table, the ritual objects of British life. No matter what, the kettle went on, Bodie thought to himself, didn't make any difference whether or not it was a christening or a funeral, the end of a day at the seaside or the end of a day where Doyle had to bring a small body out of that dark cupboard...

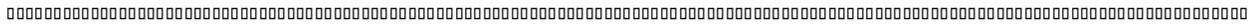
Doyle didn't speak either, not berating Bodie for his choice of television viewing, not uttering a single word that was outwardly to prick Bodie's conscience but was never meant as anything more than a way for Doyle to beat himself with his own stick. He just sat down, there on the settee beside Bodie, poured them both tea, adding milk and sugar as required, passing the mug over as if this were nothing out of the usual, as if they did this every day. And they did, which was what made the hairs on the back of Bodie's neck rise: this was what they did after a day spent going through files, or giving evidence in Court, or working on the bikes. This was not what they did on the days when Doyle's guilt would be working overtime. He wondered, looking at the closed profile with its frown of concentration, when the explosion was going to come, when the vitriol was going to start. Nothing. Not a word, nothing but the slurp of Doyle drinking tea, the crunch of biscuits being chewed, the chattering fun on the television. He could, he fancied, even hear the beating of his own heart, picking up speed, brump, barrump, getting faster, waiting for the axe to fall, for the anger to spill over.

And that was when he noticed: no anger. No caged fury, no coiled temper waiting to strike with all the venom of the cobra. Just... He stared at that profile again, at the bruise under the eye, nestling there like a pillow between the spike of lashes and the bump of cheek implant. But Doyle hadn't been hit. They hadn't come close enough to any of the bastards, the sods slipping through the net and slinking off to Spain when Customs weren't looking. It was darkling in the living









fled, crowded out by the ridiculous lump in his throat.

“Cat got your tongue,” Ray was saying to him, in something akin to the old manner between them. Bodie watched in fascination the way the curls tumbled back into place in the wake of Doyle’s hand, watched as Ray watched him, watched himself in Ray’s eyes. “Oh, sit down,” and he did as he was told, arms stretching out along the back of the sofa, making a point of displaying his ease-filled confidence, even if he felt nothing of the sort.

“Got nothing to say? Since when ’ave you done the silent sufferin’ bit?”

“Since when ’aven’t I?” There. He’d said it, or part of it, part of what was between them, holding them together, keeping them apart. “Never get a chance to do anything else, do I?” And it was easier, now that he’d started, now that he’d dared to go beyond the usual carping that was second nature and first mask to them both. “Never get a word in edgewise, do I? It’s always how you’re feeling, it’s always all about how we can get you over whatever the fuck’s gone wrong.”

And those eyes were staring at him again, Doyle’s mouth soft and half-smiling as he spoke. “An’ when ’ave you ever tried to make it any different? D’you realise this is the first time you’ve ever talked to me like this? Honest, no holds barred, lettin’ me in to how you’re feelin’? You’d make the Pope feel guilty for Easter, you would.”

A begrudging smile for that, the truth stinging not half as badly as he had thought it would. “Always thought you’d be all over me if I started complaining.”

“Started complainin’? When did you ever stop? ’Bout the stupid little things, anyroad.”

“No time like the present.” He looked away, watching something on the television that didn’t even register with him, just that there was noise and colour and movement. Hadn’t been enough of that today when Doyle’d gone into that cupboard under the stairs. “Don’t mind when you take it out on me, Ray, when the job gets to you, but I hate it when you get the fight you want an’ then go and bear a grudge on me for what I said.”

“Like Christmas, you mean? Told you I

was sorry about that.”

“When? When did you even *mention* it, tell me that?” He was shouting again, he recognised, saw it in the way Ray’s face tightened. “Told me you were sorry? Oh, and how did you do that? Roll over and let me fuck you, did you?” Too late, too, too late, he saw the wounding truth. Oh, fuck it, he thought to himself, it was after Christmas Ray’d started doing all those little things, all the small touches that made the difference between friends fucking each other and two people... He closed his eyes, groaning in dismay at his own blinkered blindness. It was after Christmas, at the beginning of January, when Doyle had started speaking to him again, that was when Ray’d started letting on to a very few, select mates what was going on between them. It was after Christmas that Ray’d relaxed again about letting Bodie touch him in public, it was after Christmas that Ray’d stopped bristling and denying everything when someone made the usual comments about ‘better halves’ and ‘share *everything*, do you?’. After Christmas...

“Penny finally drop, did it?”

“Fuck, Ray, I’m sorry, didn’t realise...”

“Yeh, well, can’t really say anything, can I?” Bodie’s look of disbelief and the incipient words were forestalled with: “Thought you’d twigged, didn’t I? Thought that was why you didn’t throw a fit when I organised the holiday and bought you that new duvet...”

They sat, looking at each other, all the years coming together at last, and Bodie started to laugh. “We’re a pair, aren’t we? Here I am, expecting it to be red roses when the time comes—”

“Red roses? Why would I—”

“It’s what you did with Ann.”

“Yeh, and Ann was a woman, an’ in case you ’aven’t looked between your legs recently, you’re not. Get off it, Bodie, you’d’ve knocked me into next week if I’d come at you with roses.”

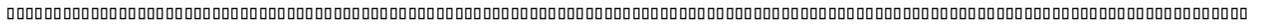
“Look who’s talkin’. You expectin’ me to settle down with someone just cos he’s bought me a new cover for my bed—specially since you were the one always complaining about the old bedspread.”

“So do you want roses instead then?”









Doyle's gaze, caught sight of the aching hurting needs that needed to be sated tonight. Oh, yes, they'd read one of Doyle's stories, as they always did, but it would take something very special to take away the chill sting of pain in those eyes. Something deep, something that would stir Doyle to the profoundest core. Something very personal, something secret that only the one man closest to Ray was ever trusted to know. And that was Bodie himself. There was a bittersweet thrill in knowing that, in knowing that he was so desperately needed, so deeply tied to this man. Then the bitterness passed, as unmourned as the freedom he no longer wanted, leaving only the sweetness behind.

"It's all right, Ray," he whispered against Doyle's parted mouth, his words taking the place of the words Doyle had almost spoken. "You don't even need to ask. Know what you want, know what you need. And you've got it, mate. Got me now, and that's everything you'll ever need in your life, isn't it?"

So Doyle didn't speak, didn't ask, which made Bodie wallow in self-satisfaction that it was all going to be so easy now that he had stopped running and caught up to Doyle at long last. He settled Ray in closer, propping him just so, until the curly hair nestled under his chin and the whisper of chest hair caressed his own smooth chest. One handed, he reached into the bedside unit, taking out the unassuming grey book, holding it whilst Doyle flipped through to the well-worn pages,

to the story that he knew Ray usually read alone, on afternoons or nights when Bodie was unwilling to be so open, when Bodie was unwilling to share so intimate a fantasy. The page found, Bodie smiled as Ray settled against him again, pressing a kiss on tumbled curls as Doyle's strong fingers found his right nipple and pressed it, flickering nail surging delight through him. He knew, at that moment, that neither all the good intentions nor all the skillful control in the world was going to be enough to make it last long enough tonight. Skipping through the tale, he found the part Doyle would love most. The hot sweetness of arousal rekindled, he turned to the much-loved lines and began to read. And as he spoke, he felt the jolting heat of Doyle's cock against his thigh, heard the sudden, fierce intake of breath, felt his own heat rise to match Ray's, his heart full of love, his body full of passion, both ready to seal them together forever. A fiery kiss, a fist tight on his balls, pulling them tight, promising, promising both himself and Doyle what they loved most and so rarely had had the open trust and love to share. He gulped in a deep breath, spread his legs all the farther for Doyle to delve and explore and take possession as he willed. Voice trembling with passion, he continued their bedtime story...

*"And he drew the whip between his legs obscenely, like a lover, a deviant caress rich with subtle eroticism..."*