

SHOPPING DAYS

OR

DOYLE

THE COPPER FELT^{UP}



We open with a humorous tale wherein our hero longs for a bit of tail or at least wishes someone would wag his for him. Undercover and in the roles of a lifetime, here are Bodie and Doyle as you never expected M. Fae to write them. Or perhaps you did. Be warned: never tell our Scottish lass that she would never pen a particular sort of piece. She will, of course!

A fairy-tale castle in the gritty kingdom that was London, the shop glowed and glistened with thousands of lights. Twinkling brightness festooned the ornate stonework, transforming Victorian stolidity to Disneyesque airiness, mile-long strands of light limning the structure, forming reins to hold the giant glory of Santa's Sleigh in place. The sleigh itself was green, the reindeer all in gold, save for Rudolf's beacon nose of red, of course, and the great piles of presents that shone with every colour under the rainbow. But the front seat was unlit and unoccupied, for as every child and empty-pocketed adult knew, Santa wouldn't take to his sleigh until Christmas Eve. Until then, he was inside Grace's, sitting amidst heaps of cotton wool snow and under screeching cascades of children.

Imagine now, in the early darkness of winter's

day, if we were to walk along the rain-drenched streets until we reached this beaconing display, we would catch sight of ourselves in the puddles of reflection, and turn to see ghosting images of ourselves in the great plate-glass shopping displays. We would, beguiled or repulsed by the over-abundance displayed, fight the hordes or join the crowds, depending upon our desire, but it wouldn't matter: contained in the press of people, eventually we would be swept to the great double doors, to be blasted by dry heat stifling after the cold dampness outside. Then we would give in, go inside willingly, to hoard the heat against the nagging ache of winter outside, to drink in light as antidote for darkness falling so miserably early.

Displays reaching to the ceiling, glitter and glister and gilt, all the colours and brightness of Christmas, clouds of streamers and clusters of

balloons, red sweaters and black stockings, blue slippers and tartan blankets, white china and multi-hued books, all of this would bedazzle us, intoxicating us to wander around with our necks stretched to see more, eyes widened like children.

Unless, that is, we had some of those children with us, tugging at our hands, pulling at our sleeves, trying not to cry or trying to scream as loudly as possible, depending on what tactic would work best on us to make us give in and spend some more money, to bring Christmas—so long awaited, so desperately needed—here today and not a week from now. Any present, but the bigger the better, children feverish with the need to possess and own, uncomprehending of why they simply must have this, or this, but infected with the acquisitive lust of the season.

And we, willing to pay anything for a minute's peace in this so-called time of Peace, would say 'yes, yes', and hushing the hiccupping whimpers, would drag them up the escalator, woollen gloves sodden from the rain and odorous from the drying heat, to the third floor where Heaven awaits the young. Toys, as far as the eye can see, and hidden away by the seductive colours and shimmering cellophane, price tags lurked, waiting to cause heart-attacks at the till. Dolls in fantasy dresses of froth, Cindy and Tressy with long blonde hair and acres of net, Action Man in khaki drab ready for combat or in dress uniform ready to be decorated for exceptional bravery. Bikes, red and pink and snow white, prams of pink and lavender, or navy blue for practical practising mothers. Motor cars in enamel paint, toy trains with daddies clustered round, brand new walking-talking dolls with mummies crowded round to watch. And there, where all the signs lead, where the great long queue winds its sinuous length of fidgeting children to the painted quaintness of an indoor North Pole, was Santa himself, red suited and white bearded, sitting on the huge white chair, a child on his lap, a sack of giveaways to one side, the endless stream of children to the other.

With a sigh, we would deposit our child at the end of the queue, signalling to Santa's Helper that here was another one to watch over. And without a backward glance, we would hasten off to do the last of our shopping, the children's toys and father's presents, something for the woman down the street who was never too busy

to help us out.

A weight off our shoulders, we'd smile with relief and leave our child behind, safe in the capable hands of one of Father Christmas' elves...

Not that the elf viewed it quite the same way. The elf was here on sufferance, extreme sufferance, in his opinion. He was supposed to be undercover, but in this costume he felt more exposed than covered. What a rotten fucking way to spend his first Christmas in CI5! the aggrieved thought soured through his mind. But the Cow had spoken, so here he was, undercover to see if the highly-placed informant was right: that this toy department had been targeted for bombing by your friendly local terrorist organisation. Keep your eyes peeled, he'd been told. More like keeping his arse peeled in this bloody outfit. But he was keeping his eyes as peeled as he could, watching the few parents who insisted on staying with the children, keeping track of every package in sight to make sure that it wasn't one of the nastier presents that they'd been warned would be in the shops this Christmas. He knew it was a job that had to be done, but he was positive that he wouldn't have been stuck doing what he was certain was based on a duff tip, not if he hadn't argued with Cowley about that last job. 'So you think you were too important for that last bit of work I sent you on, do you? Well, you'll be perfect for this one', the old bastard had said. In fact, the elf, as he twisted and turned to tug at the back seam of his green tights where they were sliding between his nether cheeks, would have much preferred to have been playing Scrooge. Now that, given his current surfeit of both children and professional holiday cheer, was a role he'd be perfect for.

Tangling round his legs, there was a wandering child, fist stuffed in its mouth, wails threatening to erupt past the stopper, eyes liquid with impending weeping to go with the wailing.

"Oh, shut up," he snapped, forgetting for a second he was an elf, until stricken big blue eyes reminded him, yet more tears welling threateningly. "All right, all right, don't start crying about it, you'll get to see Father Christmas."

His voice obviously moderated far less than

childhood's ears needed it, the tears erupted along with blood-curdling howls. Doyle winced, then tugged his elf's hat more firmly over drooping curls and dropped to his knees beside the bawling five-year-old. "What's the matter, little boy?" he asked in his best North Pole sing-song, glad that no-one he knew could see him.

"But I don't want to see Father Christmas!"

So what the fuck are you doing standing here, you stupid brat? Doyle thought to himself. Mindful however, of both Cowley's dire warnings and the newly-transferred sales manager's even more immediate direness, he said, really quite sweetly under the circumstances: "But Mummy brought you here to see Father Christmas so that Father Christmas can give you a nice present."

It wasn't doing the trick: the crying was getting louder, threatening to touch off a chain reaction of horrifying proportions. An entire after-school queue of over-tired, over-excited children the Friday before Christmas, and every single bloody one of them looked about to burst into bloody tears. Doyle heaved a great sigh and picked the screaming brat up, thinking of all the nicely vicious things he would like to do to it as a runny nose was wiped on his shoulder. Noisily, and wetly. Swallowing his lunch for the *n*th time that afternoon, he patted the brat on the back, thinking longingly of thumping it hard enough to give it something to cry about. "There, there," he said, cringing at his own mawkish tone of voice. "Why don't you tell the Nice Elf—" he winced again, a sudden, appalling image of himself in green tights, red peplum jacket and green elf's hat flooding his mind, "all about it. What's the matter...poppet?"

The words were choked out on a rising wail. "But my mummy said I was going to see Santa Claus!"

Just what he really needed. Christ, kids nowadays, not even knowing that Father Christmas was Santa Claus—and at five years old, for fuck's sake. And he knew the little monster was five: he'd become quite an expert at judging the snivelling, snotty brats' ages over the past week. "Now, don't you worry, Father Christmas is just another name for Santa Claus so you'll get to see him just like Mummy said." And if he smiled much longer, his face was going to crack. But not, perhaps, before he

cracked this ankle-biter one across *his* face.

Listening to what he was thinking, he forced himself to unclench his jaws and put the child down in one piece, unbruised and limbs all still firmly attached. "Tell you what," he said as he crouched down beside the woe-wrung face, "you come on with me, and I'll take you to see Santa right away. How does that sound?"

That, of course, was the right thing to wipe the tears from the face and have the smile come out. It was also the right thing to say to have great wailings and moanings and gnashing of teeth from the hordes of other cherubs waiting impatiently for their turn at Santa Claus, Father Christmas or whatever you wanted to call him. Doyle wanted to call him bastard, prick, swine and a few other choice words, but in deference to young ears, he'd stick to Bodie. Snatching the once-crying five-year-old up again and escaping by the skin of his teeth out from under the baleful glower of four of Santa's other elven helpers, Doyle wove and dodged his way to the head of the queue, where Bodie sat, resplendent in all his glory: snowy white beard, red suit, black boots and belt, and that enormous jovial booming laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Ho ho ho your bloody self, Doyle thought with real animosity, barely stifling a yelp as one well-worn welly came perilously close to his green-clad groin. It was all right for Bodie: all that jammy sod had to do was sit there and pretend to be interested in whatever the monsters were whispering and then fob them off with a present that wouldn't last ten minutes before it fell apart and the parents were left with screaming brats. By the time the beasts—sorry, delightful little children, he corrected himself, half convinced that the sales manager could read minds from such close proximity—got to Santa, the tears were forgotten and all the little angels could think about was getting their grubby little paws on their present.

Acutely aware of the penetrating stare of Captain Peacock the sales manager, Doyle sidled up to Father Christmas, neatly elbowing two extraordinarily buxom elves out of the way, quite spoiling Bodie's lovely scenic view. "Excuse me, Santa," he said as one child slithered off the great red lap and before the next child could be popped on with assembly-line effi-

ciency, “but could you take care of this little boy first? He’s been very good, and he was ever so frightened that he wasn’t going to get to see Santa. His mummy hadn’t explained to him that Father Christmas is just another name for you.” Like rotten fucking lucky bastard, he thought behind his falsely bright smile and tinkling elven voice.

“Ho, ho, ho!” boomed Bodie, red felt trimmed with fake white fur reaching out to take the welly-booted five year old from Doyle, an enormous grin visible behind the froth of beard as one of the boots managed to catch Doyle in a very sensitive spot with a very insensitive kick. “Well now,” Santa Bodie boomed on, while Doyle stood cross-legged and cross-eyed, muffled swear words streaming from him to the tune of ‘Deck the Halls’, “there are lots and lots and lots of little girls and boys just like you,” a very Clausian tweak of a rosy cheek and a Fatherly pat of fair hair, “and if I only had the one name, it would get all worn out, wouldn’t it?”

Doyle thought he was going to be sick, and not from the subsiding pain of the welly-boot. Shit, but Bodie was nauseating when he came over all avuncular like that, as if he had a dozen kids of his own and adored them all as well as every other brat ever born.

The little boy wasn’t looking entirely convinced that this man with the big voice and the big beard and the big hat didn’t come under the heading of Strangers and should therefore be bitten and run away from. “Mister Elf...” the small voice trembled.

“What is it, poppet?” Mr. Elf asked with a smile sweet enough to garner glacial approval from Captain Peacock, and give the rest of the world diabetes.

The little boy had abandoned his claims to being a big boy and his bottom lip was as ominously wobbly as his voice. He gave Bodie the kind of look usually reserved for dentists with drill in hand. “Is he a bad man?”

It was tempting, oh, it was so sorely tempting, but manfully, Doyle resisted, hitching his tights up and tugging his jacket down instead of shouting YES at the top of his lungs. “Of course he’s not a bad man. I wouldn’t take you to a bad man, would I? And your mummy left you with me and she wouldn’t leave you with a bad elf,

would she?” Fucking hell, it was contagious! He was beginning to sound like Father fucking Bodie and Enid Blyton rolled into one.

“Noo,” the boy said, looking from green and red elf to red and white Santa, thence to the titillating sackful of toys. Father Christmas made a funny face and a funnier noise and said, “And what do you want for Christmas, little boy?”

Avarice and greed won where decency and niceness had failed. The boy smiled like the angel on top of the tree, clambered gracelessly up onto Santa Bodie’s lap and proceeded to recite a list that was, as far as Doyle was concerned, satisfyingly long. He grinned, not nicely, and more like a banshee than an elf.

“Mr. Ray, would you come with me a moment, please?” the pseudo-upper class voice of the hastily transferred sales manager intoned, fondly-remembered days in the military barely leashed in the clipped tone.

Doyle groaned, pointedly ignored Bodie’s self-righteous tut-tut-tutting and followed on behind Captain Peacock like an obedient child, in stark contrast to the shuffling mob that was waiting in an ever more disordered line. “Yes, Captain Peacock?” he asked as soon as they were behind the stock-room partition, grabbing the opportunity to haul his stupid green hat off and soothe flattened curls, blissfully unaware of the visceral sexual lure of his lean body.

Captain Peacock cleared his throat hurriedly, straightened his tie and visibly got a grip on himself—his reactions, not his...prurient interest. The legitimate cause for bringing Mr. Ray the Nice Elf in here was dragged out to cover the very illegitimate reasons and Captain Peacock’s voice was very stern indeed. “That manner of facial expression is not the sort of thing we want our young clients exposed to, you know.”

“Yes, sir,” Doyle said, no sir, three bags full sir, he thought, paying Captain Peacock no attention whatsoever whilst indulging himself in a good two-handed scratch of a scalp that had never suffered the indignities of a hat before.

“And do stop that! It’s so...uncouth.”

Doyle stopped, just in time, before he asked what the ‘couth’ thing to do would be. “Yes, sir,” he recited again, thinking about how Bodie had this fellow ex-Army man eating out of his hand, getting extra breaks and little treats brought to keep him going while he was doing such a good

job. And what do I get? Doyle asked himself, squirming to readjust his briefs in the clinging theatrical tights. I get Captain bloody Peacock strutting around flapping his tail feathers and moaning at me. “Yes, sir,” he said again, on the general assumption that whatever Captain Peacock had just said was another injunction against uncouthness, this time regarding the rearranging one’s genitals in front of a former Army officer of the Queen.

It was at that moment Doyle rediscovered his CID and CI5 training, or at least the part about never making assumptions.

And as he was doing that, Captain Peacock was displaying the fact that he’d never forgotten his old Boy Scout motto and was proving that he was, still, always prepared. The very proper English gentleman was spreading an absolutely huge white cotton handkerchief on the floor. And kneeling on it. In utter shock, Doyle’s glance flew to the patrician face, in time to catch the Captain twirling his moustache as one would before beginning a cordon bleu meal or as the villain would before beginning the carrying-off of the reluctant virgin. There was no possibility of Doyle misunderstanding the Captain’s intentions: intentions which gave a very interesting twist to the phrase ‘an officer of the Queen’.

Doyle’s hands covered his groin, hiding his assets from view whilst enlarging on a certain not-so-small problem. “Captain Peacock, this isn’t quite what I meant...”

Incredulous brown eyes looked up at him with dismay. “You wish to fellate me? Oh, but that wouldn’t do, oh, no, that would not do at all. That’s really not my cup of tea. I’m very fond of firm young meat, you know.”

“Yeh, I can see that,” Doyle said, stepping back out of the reach of perfectly manicured hands, only to come to an abrupt halt as he and the partition met. “It’s only...”

Captain Peacock’s face lit up brighter than the twelve-foot fake Christmas tree behind Santa. “You’ve never done this before?”

Doyle almost burst out laughing at *that*.

Captain Peacock obviously thought the sudden puce of Doyle’s face was a sign of embarrassment rather than mirth. “How absolutely delightful!” he crowed, literally licking his lips in anticipation. “And you so very, very pretty as

well. Who would have thought you’d still be a virgin with your looks?”

Not bloody many, Doyle thought, and all of them would have to be complete morons.

“Well, all you have to do, Raymond,” the name was rolled trippingly off the tongue and given a decidedly Continental rill until it sounded more like Raimaunde, whilst Captain Peacock was as avuncular to Doyle as Bodie was to frightened, inexperienced children, “is lean back and enjoy, my darling young thing.”

Doyle stepped to one side, intending to escape the dim storage room and get back onto the sales floor but a particularly piercing shriek from beyond the stock-room door made him hesitate as he automatically slipped into CI5 training and assessed the situation. Unfortunately, Captain Peacock took the moment to slip into something far more intimate than Doyle’s training and was busy assessing another situation entirely. Doyle’s jacket was pushed upwards, tights pulled downwards, briefs tugged out of the way and his cock freed all with an impressive speed and economy of movement, the ostentatious product of many years’ experience with the Household Guard.

“Aah,” the sigh was long and lush, pleasure evident on Captain Peacock’s face.

“Aah,” the sigh was longer and lusher, pleasure evident on Mr. Ray the Nice Elf’s face as Captain Peacock stopped sighing and started sucking. All right, so Doyle didn’t usually indulge himself either in public or with fifty year olds, even such well-preserved and handsome fifty year olds, but he wasn’t stupid enough to take his cock out of so talented a mouth either. Tossing caution—not to mention discretion, logic and good common sense—to the winds, he indulged himself in this wonderful fantasy of fantastic sex as the extraordinarily gifted mouth worked miracles on his flesh.

“Captain Peacock!”

The sound of Bodie’s impending voice was as shocking as a wet finger in a live socket and had Doyle hauling himself free with scant regard for teeth or anything but dignity—or as much dignity as he could muster as he tried to stuff eight and a half inches of absolutely rigid cock into minuscule briefs and clinging tights. At least now he knew why they always got women to play Prince Charming in the pantomimes and

left the men to wear the voluminous dresses of the wicked stepsisters.

“Yes, Bodie? Is there something with which I can help you?” Captain Peacock asked with considerable aplomb, considering he was using his white handkerchief to wipe his mouth free of tell-tale signs of sucking.

Bodie rounded the divider, glancing sharply from Doyle to Captain Peacock, making Doyle itch to check that he’d managed to get himself tucked away properly. Hardly three months partnered, he was too sensibly cautious to risk Bodie finding out about what the bigwigs would call his lamentable tendencies, right before they decided to call him fired.

“One of the little girls just managed to get herself stuck up the display tree,” Bodie said in that annoying tone of voice Doyle imagined as fitting perfectly into the CO’s office and report-making, “and we can’t find the control switch for the...em...fairy lights.”

Doyle looked at him sharply for that, but Bodie was his usual self, apart from the fine show of military decorum he was putting on for Captain Peacock, and there was nothing at all to show that Bodie suspected anything at all.

“Well, you’re a very capable young man,” Captain Peacock smiled pleasantly, edging round towards the luscious curves of Doyle’s buttocks where they stretched the green tights, his attention bent on indulging in activities of a very bent nature. “I’m sure you can deal with the situation whilst I, er, finish with Raymond here.”

Raymond was hereby choking on a combination of embarrassment, fear and rampant lust and looking anywhere and everywhere but at Bodie.

“Normally, yeh, I could deal with anything or anyone tangling with, you know, fairy lights.”

Still nothing there but oblivious innocence, but Doyle was almost sure he had caught Bodie flickering a glance at him, but that was—stupid wishful thinking, he snapped at himself, so stop trying to make a silk purse from a sow’s ear.

“But the problem is that the little girl says the lights look just like the Snow Queen’s sweeties and she’s trying to loosen one so that she can eat it.”

“What?” Captain Peacock shrieked, abruptly losing all interest in Doyle’s well-formed rear

end as he found himself overcome by the thought of dreadful segments on the *Six O’Clock News* naming the name of the shop that had electrocuted a little girl in their Christmas tree. “Well why didn’t you say so? Quickly, quickly! Raymond, you can come with me.”

Raymond would settle for coming on his own, but despite a week of being a Nice Elf, even he hadn’t gone off children enough to let one fry herself. Plus, Cowley would have his guts for garters and being too busy having a wank was no excuse where that dried up old prune was concerned. With a grimace to heaven and a pronounced list to his walk, Doyle hurried out behind the other two, hoping that no-one would ask why the Nice Elf was holding his hat in front of himself in such a peculiar manner.

By the time he caught up with Bodie and Captain Peacock, the front seam of his tights was threatening to vasectomise him without benefit of anaesthesia, which might not be the best way to control the situation, but at least it meant that the little girl wasn’t the only thing descending rapidly. Muttering under his breath—five bloody shopping days of being such a Nice Elf to such naughty children had increased his vocabulary no end—he went back to his position, still walking slightly hen-toed as his erection faded to mere tumescence and his balls decided they were more fragile than Christmas tree ornaments of blown glass.

How he wished *he’d* been blown. Or that he’d never let Peacock start. Or that Bodie hadn’t come in. Or that Bodie *had* come in, but to tell him it was knocking off time. He groaned to himself, cock twitching as it took the other meaning, obviously remembering that knocking off didn’t just mean finishing work for the day, but also other, more passionate pursuits.

His boss for this current operation was glowering at him, pointed stare aimed at an equally pointed hat that Doyle was holding in front of his groin. “Hat, please, Mr. Ray,” Captain Peacock said in profound innocence.

With yet another grimace towards heaven, Mr. Ray the Nice Elf obeyed.

“Oh,” said Captain Peacock in the profound absence of innocence and a decided flood of desire as the reason for this display of a somewhat uncommon reason for wearing a cocked hat was exposed to his very appreciative gaze.

“Yes, well... Perhaps we should continue our...ahem, discussion now?”

Doyle stepped forward, for once in his life more than anxious to obey the orders of a boss. And trod, not lightly, on the nearby foot of a fellow elf. Who stumbled, and landed, also not lightly, amidst and under the gaudy display of fake parcels.

So much for having the time to go off for a private discussion. Fulsome with apologies—all this being nice to children might yet prove to be irreversible—Doyle helped her up, his cock paying careful attention to her luscious bust even as his mind paid attention to the fact that her ankle was beginning to swell as much as her red jacket. “I’m really sorry,” he said, managing to accidently run one hand over the curve of her tights-covered rump, “let me give you a hand to the nurse’s office, okay?”

“Oh, no, Mr. Ray, I think you’d serve us all much better if you stayed here and put all these parcels to rights,” Captain Peacock said, much to Doyle’s irritation. “Miss Fry can help Miss Brahms to the nurse, can’t you, Miss Fry?”

Miss Fry, being no fool, leapt at the chance to skive off for a good half hour and escape the weepings and wrestlings and wranglings of children. “Oh, absolutely, Captain Peacock sir,” she said in her enthusiasm to put her feet up in the nurse’s office and have a good cup of tea and a nice chin-wag. “I’d be delighted to help our poor Miss Brahms up to Nurse.”

“But...but...” Doyle stammered, staring in agonised dismay as his ticket to blessed orgasmic release departed Santa’s Grotto, ripely twitching bottoms dancing out of sight. All right, so the bodacious Miss Brahms would probably have belted him one if he’d chanced his arm with her, but at least he’d have had time to nick into the lavatory and take care of some very...pressing business.

Captain Peacock harumphed, none too gently. “The parcels, Mr. Ray, if you don’t mind.”

Doyle minded, but that obviously didn’t matter. He bent down to retrieve the first of the parcels, and nearly fell right into them as he found out why Captain Peacock had been so very keen to have him stay. A very knowing hand ran along his back seam, from waist to crotch and then forward to his balls, fondling him with perfect firmness. Naturally, Doyle

was in no hurry to straighten, until he got far enough beyond what was happening to his front to notice what was happening right in front of him. Bodie was standing not three feet away, and staring. In fact, Doyle’s partner was just beginning to crane his neck to see precisely what Captain Peacock was up to round the back of Santa’s sleigh where the children could see even fewer details than Bodie could. Hurriedly, before Captain Peacock could continue his tender ministrations, Doyle stood, and showed all the world and Bodie too just precisely what *he* was up to.

“Oh, very nice, Mr. Ray Elf,” Father Christmas said. “You’ve obviously been a good boy. Hoping for a big pressie from Santa, are we?”

For once in his life, Raymond O’Connell Doyle was utterly dumbstruck. It wasn’t so much what Bodie had said—Christ, after three months of twisted humour, he was used to the great oaf camping it up—it was the way Bodie had said it. Off balance and therefore immediately on the defensive, Doyle looked away, throwing himself into clearing up the upended parcels, inadvertently upending his own rear in the process. Captain Peacock, obviously, had yet to depart.

“As soon as the Misses Brahms and Fry return, Mr. Ray, you and I shall have to continue your dressing down.”

At this juncture, Doyle would cheerfully have dressed himself down right here in public. But then the dulcet tones of a whinging child brought him back to reality, and by the time Mr. Ray the Nice Elf had finally re-stacked the silver- and gold-foiled empty boxes into a mountain of tempting presents, his large problem had subsided to a small bulge—well, as small as Ray Doyle ever got, the Nice Elf routine be damned—and a not so small ache. One glance at Bodie’s cheerfully benign face convinced him that what he’d thought he’d seen in those blue eyes and what he’d thought he’d heard in that deep voice was nothing more than the product of his own over-active gonads. Grimly, he jammed his Robin Hood-meets-the-Gnomes hat on his head, pasted a smile on his face, and went back to work.

And by the time another crush of children had been funnelled through Santa’s Grotto and out onto the bedecked sales floor, he swore—under his breath, of course, ever mindful of

delicate and youthful ears and the neither delicate nor youthful boss of his that would cheerfully condemn him to watching Russian trawlers from some uninhabited Scottish island if he were caught corrupting the young—that if he heard Bodie say ho-ho-ho once more, he was going to scream. Unfortunately, as his poor pounding head attested, the children seemed determined to do all his screaming for him. It was with the most heartfelt and fervent hope that he saw the Misses Brahms and Fry returning to the Grotto through the staff door and then, real relief pouring through him for the end was now in sight, the talented Captain Peacock beckoning imperiously to Santa’s best elf from the storage room door. Relief, relief, relief at last! The child was dropped onto Santa’s lap so quickly the previous one hadn’t managed to get off yet—just like Doyle, in fact—and then Mr. Ray the Nice Elf was rapidly turning into Ray Doyle, randy toad, desperate for anything on offer. A quick blow job in the store room before Bodie could get off the floor, and Doyle would be a very happy little elf indeed. He’d taken the grand total of a single step when, somewhat unfortunately, it was at that precise moment Bodie’s relief—Dickinson from CID and still in his civvies—chose to turn up, thereby throwing Doyle’s own intimate relief right out the window, because that meant it was shift-changeover for Santas. So now he definitely wasn’t Santa’s Little Helper—or anyone else’s, for that matter.

This was definitely his day for grimacing to heaven, and just as definitely not his day for achieving heaven. Still, he was a resourceful CI5 agent, not to mention a stubborn bastard, so he decided that if he hurried, he could get changed before Bodie would be able to disentangle himself from the yards of red felt and fake fur, which meant that he could thereby lumber Bodie with going in to HQ to make their reports. And while Bodie was stuck coming up with a report and dodging Cowley’s idea of an evening’s entertainment, he himself would make for a very accommodating pub not too far from here. Of course, if he decided he couldn’t wait that long, he could always simply disappear off for his ‘dressing down’ from Captain Peacock, but given his druthers, he’d rather have someone younger—and someone who wouldn’t let the wrong comment slip around his partner’s too

perceptive ears the next tea-break.

Meanwhile, as Doyle bemoaned his dreadful fate of unrequited lust, Captain Peacock had come up behind him, the click of his quintessentially polished shoes well covered by the mewling, moanings and generally loud complaining of waiting children and trod-upon elves. “Mr. Ray, you shall have to take Father Christmas off for his ‘tea’,” the child-protective euphemism slipped easily from a mouth that looked as if the only protection it would enjoy employing was Durex or a full rubber suit, “but if you’d care to earn a spot of...overtime?” Captain Peacock murmured, edging Doyle round the back of Father Christmas’ throne and out of sight of childish eyes, even as his left hand wandered, quickly making Doyle’s small problem one of rather large proportions once again.

“Very kind of you, Captain Pea—” and Bodie hesitated for just a second, clearing his throat as if he were coming down with a cold and not making an extremely pointed comment, the impact of which was lost on Doyle, who was too busy being aware of the impact of a very discreet hand, “—cock, but we’ve got a lot to get done. So we’ll be off now. See you in the morning.”

Bastard, Doyle muttered spitefully to himself, what a time for Bodie to be fucking conscientious about stupid sodding reports and showing up for de-briefings. But he was a big brave CI5 agent, so he swallowed his dismay and his annoyance, pinned a sappy smile on his face and began his lilted spiel to the rapt faces of the brats clustered around him like bees waiting to sting. “Father Christmas has to go away for a few minutes for a nice hot cup of tea. After that, he has to see to the factory where all my other elf friends are making brand new toys for us to put on the shelves for you.” He was on the point of turning away when a harrumph from the good—the very good—Captain Peacock informed him that love may be blind, but lust keeps its eyes wide open. With yet another grimace to heaven, the Nice Elf pasted yet another smile on his face, this one somewhat strained, and then finished the spiel prescribed by the shop. “And don’t forget to have Mummy and Daddy show you all the lovely toys my friends the elves have been working so hard to make for you. Now Santa will be back in just a few minutes, so be good

little girls and boys and wait patiently and he shall give you a lovely pressie.”

He guided a waving and nauseatingly ho-ho-ing Father Christmas across the sales floor and thence to the staff door, abandoning Bodie to his fate the second that same door was shut, before Bodie might possibly utter another mutter about elves who thought they were fairies. And then Doyle was racing up the stairs to the staff room, hat off and jacket unbuttoned long before he was even in the changing room. Dickinson from CID was already there, guffawing in sheer delight as Doyle raced in.

“Look!” the man who didn’t need any padding to play Santa shouted, pointing at the tousled vision in green tights and peplum jacket, “it’s the fairy queen!”

“Belt up, Dickie boy,” Doyle snapped at him, turning his back to peel his tights off without revealing the rather major spot of bother he was in. “Just be grateful you only have to doll yourself up as Santa. In fact,” he cast a disparaging look over his shoulder in the general direction of the rotund and varicosed Dickinson, “it’s the rest of us that should be grateful you’re not wearing these bloody tights.”

Bodie arrived at that very second, saving Dickinson all unknowingly: the Detective Sergeant had been about to innuendo rather suggestively as to why Doyle was the only male elf in this operation. Struggling with clinging nylon, Doyle winced inwardly as he replayed again the root cause of his current elven predicament: he really shouldn’t have shouted the odds at Cowley over that last job. Probably shouldn’t have said that Cowley was a stupid bastard and the Queen a stupid cow either. Actually, upon reflection, perhaps he should consider himself lucky that all he had to do was dress up like a fairy.

“Fancy a drink, mate?” Bodie was asking him from a confusion of beard and jacket and padding.

“Nah,” Doyle answered, seeing a way of getting off on his own—or more accurately, being without his partner and therefore able to find someone to get off *with*—if Bodie were anxious to go for a pint or two, “you go on without me. I’ll do the reports tonight.”

Pity that Bodie was so bloody obtuse today, wasn’t it? “Oh, no, I’ll come in with you to do that first—Murph promised he’d give me back

that tenner he borrowed last week, and I’m not stupid enough to let you get your mucky little paws on it.”

Brilliant. Absolutely bloody brilliant. Why did Bodie have to pick tonight of all nights to be a skinflint? And it wasn’t like him: one of Bodie’s most endearing characteristics was his generosity, an aspect especially popular the Thursday before pay day and this really wasn’t the day for Bodie to go tight-fisted and untrusting on him. Still, all might not yet be lost. “All right, then,” Doyle snapped, his temper shortening in direct proportion to his cock lengthening under the influence of stripping naked in front of the beautiful Bodie, “why don’t *you* go to HQ, do the reports and get your tenner from Murphy, and then I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You’ve forgotten, haven’t you?” This, decidedly muffled as a white cotton stomach of daunting proportions was pulled off over Bodie’s head.

Oh, shite, now what? he thought, taking a deep breath and turning away from the temptation of staring at that expanse of smoothly muscular chest. Given his present state of affairs, the last thing his cock needed was any more inspiration. “Of course I haven’t forgotten—you’re the one with the memory like a rusty sieve.” He had time to unfangle his tights from the shoes he had neglected to take off and put a pair of clean underwear on before he had to accept that bloody Bodie wasn’t going to say another word. In the interests of speed and amity, he turned back towards his partner, gave him the grin that always seemed to put Bodie in a good mood and conceded. “Oh, all right, all right, so I’ve had more important things on my mind than whatever it is you’re rabbiting on about.”

“Going round Luigi’s for Jax’s birthday,” Bodie told him, scratching newly bared skin luxuriously, making Doyle’s mouth water. “It’s not till half eight, so we’ve got plenty of time to go for a pint first.”

Go for a pint, then go to HQ, then go to Luigi’s till God knew what time, with Bodie at the very least constantly with him—bloody hell! This just wasn’t his day, but he wasn’t going to admit defeat. Not quite yet. He hauled his street clothes on with a vicious frustration that matched his voice, all considerations of being nice to Bodie

completely discarded. There was no doubt about it, he was unnervingly fond of Bodie—but it was in spite of himself and against his better judgement. “I know when Luigi’s fucking is, Bodie. Which is why I was going to go in to HQ and do the sodding paperwork and get it over and bloody done with,” he tiraded, conveniently forgetting that he’d been trying to get Bodie to go into HQ so that he could bugger off somewhere—*anywhere*—else. “There’s sweet fuck all to report, so that’d leave me time to go home and get changed before I go to fucking Luigi’s.” And that way, I’d still have time for a good wank, he thought longingly, resisting the urge to ease his cock into a less uncomfortable position. Or to pop into a certain pub and have a lovely, long blow job, or a hand job, or maybe find someone who was in the mood to bend over for a quick hard fuck.

“What d’you want to do that for, Ray?” Bodie asked, obviously still referring to the conversation about Doyle going home to change his clothes and not to the thoughts running through Doyle’s head. “You’ve just this minute got yourself into clean stuff. I mean,” and the wicked eyes twinkled, “it’s not as if you’ve been wearing your own clothes all day, is it?”

It was the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back, the final insult considering that he’d actually been trying to be nice. “Don’t you start, Bodie, you stupid bastard. I’ve had it with you today, in fact I’ve had it with you all week, and—” Now what was wrong with the stupid great prick? Doyle shut up and took a good look at Bodie, at the way his partner was averting himself from Doyle’s gaze, at the abruptly tight set of the jaw and the droop of the lips. Shite, he’d hurt Bodie again, Christ knew what over this time—could be anything from not appreciating the bugger’s joke to hurting his feelings by making him feel that his friendship wasn’t welcome. Or it just might be that Bodie didn’t have Doyle’s life-long experience with Doyle’s explosive temper and runaway mouth. Doyle wiped a weary hand over his face, weighing up quick meaningless sex and thereby upsetting his partner against an evening of banked sexual tension and thereby keeping his partner happy and making up for his own temper. There wasn’t much choice, was there? The partnership had been oddly tense for days now, a tension that he

would have called sexual if it weren’t coming from Bodie, a fragility in the bond between them, an unnerving feeling that it might break, where from the second they’d met, it had always been rock solid and taken for granted. Well, it looked as if tonight was going to be a night for a different kind of rock solid. He took one more good look at Bodie’s tense face and troubled eyes and this time he gave in and admitted defeat: better to have blue balls than a blue Bodie. He sighed and sat himself back down on the bench, running his fingers through his hair in the substitute for combing used by curly-tops the world over. “So where d’you want to go for that drink?” Of course, just because he had given in didn’t necessarily mean that he’d gone completely soft—in the head, that is, because he certainly hadn’t gone completely soft anywhere else yet. “And as it’s your idea, you’re buying, mate.”

Doyle called himself for all kinds of fool as Bodie’s face lit up and Doyle realised that having his balls in knots was worth it just to see Bodie so pleased. Oh, well, one of these days he’d finally get used to being this stupid and soft over his partner. In the meantime, he’d make the bugger pay for the drinks and cough up for their share at Luigi’s tonight as well. The thought of an all-expenses-paid night on the town cheered him up enough to make him wait for Bodie to get back into civvies without much more than the occasional wiggle of discomfort. Although, with Bodie’s back turned to him and Bodie therefore oblivious to the way he was being looked at, Doyle indulged himself in a few minutes of Bodie-watching, the muscular curve of buttock making him wriggle a little bit more enthusiastically. All things considered, it really was just as well that he wasn’t wearing his usual jeans. Cold weather and pleated woollen gabardine trousers had something to be said for them after all.

Still, half an hour later, by the time he got out of the car at HQ, he was even more glad for the fact that his jacket was long and could hide a multitude of sins—or soon-to-be sins, if his cock had its way. He strode off ahead of Bodie, dodging the worst of the puddles, distracting himself from Bodie’s too-close presence in the car with a recitation of the report he was going to be writing as soon as he got in out of the cold.

Nothing happened, no-one showed up, no drugs, no weapons, no terrorists, no nothing, apart from this agent suffering strangulation of his scrotal region, brought on in equal parts by the stupid fucking costume and the gropings of a man old enough to be his father.

He was actually considering putting something of that nature down on paper, right up to the moment when he heard Cowley's less than dulcet tones ripping several layers of skin off Murphy for a facetious comment in one of his reports. And if Murphy, he of the subtlest, slyest digs in the history of CI5 had incurred his boss' ire, then Doyle wasn't going to chance a thing: Cowley would probably have him going undercover as the fairy on top of the fucking tree if he weren't careful.

Bodie, not surprisingly, had sloped off to the rest room to wait out of Cowley's sight until Murphy—and Bodie's £10—resurfaced from the mauling. Which gave Doyle a chance he wasn't going to skip. He made a beeline for the toilets, thinking longingly of lockable cubicles and what he could do with such privacy.

But then he discovered that the stomach virus had finally hit CI5. Wonderful. Abso-fucking-lutely wonderful, he thought to himself, thumping the door jamb, giving Lucas such a fright he almost lost control of his grumbling bowels much to the horror of everyone else in the queue. Retreating under the onslaught of Lucas' fierce glare and foul-mouthed opinion of himself, his immediate family and everyone who had ever borne the name Doyle, our Raymond got out of there as quickly as he could. Only to walk slap bang into Cowley, which not only put paid to any faint feeble hope he might have had of finding a nice unoccupied office, but also put the mockers on any thought of Luigi's, a drink with Bodie or, for that matter, time enough to go for a pee. He did, however, get the chance to wave a fond farewell—actually, he raised two fingers in that eloquent and ever-so elegant gesture of complete disgust—to a gleefully departing Bodie. Partnership, obviously, didn't stretch itself as far as getting trawled in to help Cowley do an extra job on a long-awaited night off. Doyle managed a truly innovative list of invective, all of which slid off Bodie like water off a duck's back. And all it took to get Doyle vicious enough to do his job was to think about

Bodie, at Luigi's and how the only reason Doyle had even come in to HQ was to be nice to his bastard of a partner. Frustration did nothing whatsoever for Doyle's sweet nature, as even Cowley found out as the night wore on ever longer.

By the time he crawled into his flat at a quarter past three that morning, he had done the shop report, combed the files for information on one suspected gun-runner and interrogated four yobbos who'd been caught with their hands in a very unexpected till indeed: it wasn't every day MI6 caught four teenagers running around their corridors with the petty cash crammed into their pockets. And by the time CI5 had sorted that out in the most suitably embarrassing (to MI6 and therefore to Cowley's teeth-bared satisfaction) fashion, it was half two. By the time he'd dropped Cowley off at home, it was a quarter to three. By the time he persuaded the two over-zealous coppers in the panda car that he really honestly was a member of CI5 and the green tights and silly hat draped over the passenger seat were nothing indecent or transvestite, he was dead on his feet.

He didn't even bother to turn the light on in his bedroom, collapsing into the unmade bed, fighting with the sheets and blankets and quilt only long enough to cover the worst of the cold, and then he was asleep. Not, more's the pity, for long, though. The alarm clock was insulting in both its volume and its liveliness, subsiding to chirruping tings after a leaden arm had thumped it right off the bedside table. Eyes gummy, Doyle dragged himself from his warm and cosy bed, shuffled witlessly round the flat till he ended up in the kitchen, staring in dumb agony at the empty coffee jar and equally empty bread-bin. So much for breakfast. Eyes still half shut, scratching an errant atom of sleep that was clinging to the small of his back, his brain finally noted that a shower would help. Yawning again, his fingers clawed his scalp where his hair was lying in the wrong direction. Then the meagre comfort of carpeting ended and he woke up abruptly, wishing he had the energy to hop as his poor bare feet collided with winter-chilled bathroom linoleum. It took him a while, but he was eventually, if you were of a kind and forgiving bent and didn't look too closely at the details, presentable for another day in the farcical

world of CI5 undercover. The streets were mobbed with bad-tempered workers and clouds, the morning darkness yet to lift and the frost yet to clear, and none of it did anything to ease his own mood. The mere thought of an entire day spent with all those squalling brats and Captain Peacock's ogling was enough to make him simmer and steam.

First, though, before he once more experienced the joy of being Mr. Ray the Nice Elf in tights that cut his circulation off, he had to pop in to HQ: there was a vague and fuzzy memory of Cowley muttering something about picking something up at HQ in the morning, something that just might be his jammy sod of a partner. He brightened at that, the rough velvet of Cowley's voice replaying in his mind as Doyle had stumbled, half asleep with all the adrenalin rush used up. 'An' don't you be going straight to your assignment in the morning, Doyle—you'll come in here for the usual updating. You can pick Bodie up while you're at it—I've got him coming in to help Jamieson with the mopping up on this one." Oh, that was a good one. Bodie loathed getting up early, really loathed it. Poetic justice, really, to have Bodie dragged from bed at some ungodly hour, hopefully only minutes after the lazy bugger had got to sleep. No, even better, a good half-an-hour after Bodie had started snoring: he'd've been in a good deep sleep by then, and *really* miserable at being woken up and hauled off into the cold. Served him right for going off like that the night before, when Doyle had been bending over backwards to make his partner happy.

By the time he'd gone through Security, there was enough spring in his step for him to make it up the stairs with nary a grumble, the thought of a bleary Bodie cheering him no end. There was justice in the world, after all.

That pleasant thought lasted until the precise moment he walked into the restroom, felt the sudden tension in the atmosphere and saw the alacrity with which certain support staff scrambled to leave. He might only have been active in CI5 for a few months, but that was still time enough for him to have built up a formidable reputation and understand why, exactly, CI5 had earned such a formidable reputation of its own regarding ragging and practical jokes. Eyes narrowed, he stalked his gaze round the cluttered

and tattered room, looking for whatever joke that was aimed at him and then he saw it. Right there, bang smack in the middle of the notice board for all the world—or the department at least—to see: a glossy 8 by 10 photo. And those measurements didn't refer to certain impertinent parts of his anatomy, although Doyle wouldn't have minded *that*. It was the pose that he minded, and the outfit, and the pristine clarity of the picture that left not a single doubt in the mind of the viewer that here was Raymond Doyle, street rat, former hard-nosed policeman, boxing coach to wild and woolly teenagers, CI5 *agent extraordinaire*, in his other guise, a.k.a. Mr. Ray the Nice Elf, done up as the proverbial fairy. Immortalised for eternity, in glorious colour, photographed from behind, caught in a pose of Betty Grable proportions, straightening the seam on those sodding tights.

Hanging, obviously, was too good for him—both for Doyle-the-elf on the notice board and for Bodie-the-bastard who was the only person who could have possibly managed to get the photo into CI5 HQ. There was a profound silence from the few, duty-trapped rookies who were the only populace of the restroom, apart from a poutingly preening elf on the wall and a fuming Doyle in the doorway. "Excuse me," he muttered in a parody of politeness, "but I think this is mine."

All smouldering, self-conscious machismo, Doyle stalked over and ripped the photo from the board, restraining a wince as he came face to face with himself bedecked in green, arched to see if his tights were straight. Pity he didn't exactly look straight himself, wasn't it? Christ, but he was going to hang Bodie by his balls! Photo tucked securely and invisibly inside his jacket, Doyle wolved off in search of his soon-to-be late and unlamented partner.

"Hello, Puck, met any nice Queens, have you?" was the first thing he heard. Lucas.

So much for his fond hope that only the early-bird rookies had seen the bloody photo. "Met any nice queens? Not recently, no. Why—you lost yours, have you?" he snapped, side-stepping Lucas, only to come eye-to-eye with McCabe.

"Watcha, Doyle. You're in bloody early. Been out jogging?"

Doyle looked at him askance, saying nothing, only too aware that McCabe would have some

punch-line coming—and also just as aware of what would happen to Doyle himself if he punched McCabe after the line.

“Course not,” Lucas answered, playing straight man to McCabe, which adjective immediately made Doyle cringe.

“That’s right!” McCabe went on in a voice of prodigious innocence. “You’d be out dancing round the fairy rings before they faded, wouldn’t you?”

He was going flail Bodie before he hung him by his balls.

McCabe and Lucas, showing far more wisdom than Cowley usually gave them credit for, beat a hasty retreat before the only beating going on was Doyle grinding them into the carpet. They even managed to get to the corner of the corridor before collapsing in gales of giggles and staggering off out of sight.

But not, as it were, out of mind. Doyle stomped off in the other direction down the corridor, determined to find Bodie. Unfortunately, Murphy found Doyle first. “Petal!” Murphy cried, falling to one knee upon the carpet. “Come run off with me and be my love!”

Doyle, stoically refusing to waste any of his fury on so minor a target, walked on, ignoring the laughter that wailed in his wake. But not only was he going to flail Bodie before he hung him by his balls, he was going to dip him in salt as well. With a generous dash of malt vinegar as a special treat.

Stewart didn’t actually say anything: with the pointed way he looked at Doyle, he didn’t need to; whistling the song ‘Killer Queen’ was more than sufficient. It was, needless to say, another nail in Bodie’s coffin. From an open office door came a reminder of the hat he was wearing so fetchingly in the photo. He gritted his teeth as feminine voices raised in ‘Robin Hood, Robin Hood riding through the glen...’ He most emphatically did *not* want to hang around long enough to hear what they had done to such sterling lines as ‘with his band of men’, knowing, as he did so very well, the obscene senses of humour of that particular bunch.

By the time he had run the gauntlet of HQ looking for Bodie, he was fit to be tied—and if Cowley had seen him, he would have been, and handcuffed as well, just to make sure that this dervish in denim wouldn’t do something every-

one else would regret. Simmering loudly, he threw the door to the gym wide open, slamming wood against wall, saw Bodie, opened his mouth to begin his superbly searing tirade, then shut it, quietly. The slamming of the door had jolted Bodie, supremely un-Christmassy in black, from the inward focus of his martial exercise. For a moment, Doyle stared at Bodie, unused to such an expression on a face he was sure he knew better than anyone else—as well he ought, since he’d paid far more attention to it than anyone else. There was...he wasn’t sure, just...something was different. Not different as in Bodie had suddenly gone insane and grown a moustache, just...something...in the eyes, in the expression, in that second of startled honesty.

Then Bodie grinned, and the difference was gone, wickedly amused Bodie replacing the vulnerable bareness of before. “Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” Bodie carolled, neatly side-stepping Doyle and edging down the corridor while his partner was still just staring at him in disbelief that even Bodie would be so insane as to dare sing what Doyle thought he was going to sing.

But Bodie did. “Don we now our gay apparel—”

At which point, Doyle took off like Donner and Blitzen and all the other reindeer combined, with the express—the very express, considering the speed he was running at—intent of nailing this particular Santa Claus to the top of the nearest Christmas tree. Bodie, being of a daring bent but far from stupid, used his ten-yard lead to get him safely into the briefing room and under Cowley’s gimlet gaze before Doyle could catch him up, much to Doyle’s disgust. Bodie even had the balls to shove his way up to the front row of the metal seats, tossing a wickedly superior grin over his shoulder at his fuming partner. Doyle sat six rows behind him, amusing himself with thoughts of darts in the back of Bodie’s skull. Poison darts. With barbs.

The usual run-through was run through, and somewhere in amongst it all, Doyle noted that he was still—still!—stuck undercover as a bloody elf in a bloody toy department with bloody Bodie sitting on his arse all day going ho ho bloody ho. Life, he decided, was grossly unfair, and if Murphy didn’t stop fluttering his fucking eyelashes at him, then Murphy was going to

find out what it was to be stuffed like a Christmas goose. And he didn't mean from over-eating, either.

"Bodie," Doyle said, coming up behind his cupid-smiling partner.

"Doyle!" said Cowley, neatly stepping between his two best agents and thereby preventing the fight of the century. "A word, Doyle?" Oh, Doyle could come up with a word or two for Bodie... "In my office, Doyle. Now!"

"Yes, sir," he snapped, drawing Bodie another dirty look and preceding Cowley towards the office, forcing himself to be a model of self-discipline, dignity and restraint. All of which almost went out the window with Bodie when an impromptu choir began to sing 'Dick the balls with elves and fairy...'

Hanging, definitely, was too, too good for Bodie. Revenge. That's what he needed. Nair in the underwear... The tape he'd made of Bodie sweet-talking that girlfriend, the one who was into kinky stuff... Exploding Santa beards... Super-glue on the toilet seat... Oh, yes, there were one or two things he could think of, and did think of, the entire time Cowley was supposedly running over the prior night's operation.

By the time his boss was finished, Doyle knew that Bodie was going to be securely ensconced as Santa and that revenge was going to have to be postponed. But only until he had the opportunity to get into Bodie's flat and into a certain shoe box that contained certain revealing photos of Bodie playing some very sophisticated games with a very buxom 'milk-maid'. (He'd found the photos when he'd gone snooping to find out what kind of a man he'd been partnered with.)

But before that, there was traffic, and road works and the joys of parking in central London. Then the shop, the costume, the brats. More bloody stuffed toys and stuffy noses, more sweetly phrased comments to kids he wanted to sacrifice on sharp sticks over hot fires. Rotisserie brats, yum, yum, he thought, pulling an eighteen-month-old's curious fingers from his mouth and getting them in the eye instead. Next time, oh, next time, he'd make sure he got Bodie to do the arguing with Cowley, let Bodie be the one to end up dressed like a fairy, done up like an elf, smiling sweetly in pretty tights and silly hat. Scowling, he jammed the hat on his head, tugged

his tights up high enough to make him a proper little soprano, and sailed across the sales floor to pull the six-year-old out from the infamous pile of parcels, the cacophony of colours assaulting him almost as much the racket kicked up by whining brats.

Groaning knowledge hit him with the horrible truth: it was Saturday. God help him, it was the Saturday before Christmas and he was working as an elf in the toy department of one of the country's biggest shops. And, he cursed as he had to adjust his tights to lower his voice back down to tenor, he was still wearing the stupidest outfit known to man. Even Puck wouldn't be caught dead in this, an outfit not even Oberon could love.

And the ultimate indignity, he thought sourly: it wasn't just the departmental Christmas tree that had blue balls around here. Uncomfortable, feeling as if his spine needed a good scratch from the inside out, he tried to force himself to think about something—anything—but sex. I'm not randy, he told himself. I'm fine. I'm all right, I'm okay and I don't want to throw Bodie to the floor and fuck him right through to Menswear, Ladies' Wear and Suits. It went without saying that he was scowling ferociously and walking knock-kneed by the time he had come back to the writhing, deadly serpent that some people might insist was actually a queue of excited children waiting to see Father Christmas, and had unceremoniously dumped the baying six-year-old right at the very end of it.

"Late, Mr. Ray?" Captain Peacock, pomposity personified, one eyebrow raised in disapproval at the time revealed on his gold watch.

Just what Doyle really needed at this time of the morning when he'd already had to deal with one boss: his second boss coming after him for being late because of his first boss who was after him for not producing enough results because his second boss kept him doing his second job instead of his first job. This was the kind of day that made him wish he'd listened to his mum for once in his life and run off to join the Navy. At least there, not only wouldn't he have these grubby little children clutching at him, but he'd have full access to as many men as he could handle. And that was quite a few, ambidexterity having its advantages.

Captain Peacock was looking at him again, or

more accurately, Captain Peacock was staring at Mr. Ray-cock. "Are you free, Mr. Ray?"

Not by a long chalk, he thought to himself. You couldn't afford me in a month of Sundays.

"Mr. Ray, I said, are you free?"

There was a positively predatory gleam in Captain Peacock's brown eyes. Perhaps Doyle wouldn't have to go as far as the Navy to get all the man he could handle. Perhaps ex-Army was as far as he'd need. Perhaps being desperate was worth the next-day cringing when he remembered what he'd done, and with whom.

"Yes, of course, Captain Peacock," he said, temporarily dropping the notion of being embarrassed at being done for trade by an older man and dropping, just as adroitly, the idea of sticking to someone in his own age group. There was a lot to be said for age and experience, he told himself, his balls dictating the rationalisation to his brain, and most of it deliciously rude. His cock was busy remembering the state it had been in yesterday and how very nicely Captain Peacock had managed to get it like that.

Just as he was really getting keen contemplating the combined pleasures of Peacock's age and his own soon-to-come experience, there was a voice at his knee, one of those piping voices that cut right through you like the wind and carry to every nook and cranny and dour dowager of the largest crowd.

"Is 'at a man or a lady, Mummy?" words accompanied by chubby finger pointing at the svelte Captain Peacock who merely scowled and very sensibly turned on his heel and walked away. Mr. Ray the Nice Elf had no such fine options, unfortunately, trapped beside the staircase where he was supposed to watch for a hinted-at exchange that would be very much to CI5's advantage to stop. "Is it, Mummy? Is 'at a man?"

"Yes, that's a man, darling," 'Mummy' replied and Doyle's hackles raised immediately: he'd been around enough almost-three-year-olds this past week to be suitably wary when even the mothers got *that* look on their faces when the tiny tots started asking things in *that* tone of voice.

"'At a man cos him got a m'tache?"

"That's right," the mother replied absently, looking around the displays as if distancing herself from anything the small child was planning on saying.

"'At a lady, Mummy?" This, directed at Miss Brahms, who might not be a lady, but there was no doubt that she was demonstrably—rather largely demonstrably—a woman.

The child obviously realised this, bell-like voice chiming on without waiting for an answer. "An' is 'at a man?"

Uh-oh. Doyle stiffened automatically, dividing his attention between the suspicious character in a rain coat and the even more suspicious character in red duffel coat and yellow wellies with wombles on the side. That last question was about him...

"Mmhmm." The mother, disturbingly, was contemplating the fourth wall tile on the third panel behind the register, and if she hadn't been holding the child's hand, one would have assumed that she'd never seen the little one before in her life. And that, Doyle knew only too well, usually spelled trouble. Doyle glowered intimidatingly at the small child, who was obviously used to better than he.

"Him not 'ook like a man, Mummy!" she sang out, loud and clear, making all the children stare and all the adults suddenly appear enthralled by displays of wrapping paper.

"Oh, he's a man, dear," the mummy all but whispered, still not looking at her child.

"But him not got m'tache, Mummy."

The mother smiled broadly, the threat of infantile embarrassment removed by the innocent comment. "That's because some men don't have moustaches."

The child stared at Doyle, thinking deep thoughts, giving Doyle cause for relief when Captain Peacock had to assist Father Christmas and distracted the child enough that the bright brown eyes went back to regarding the pneumatic Miss Brahms.

"'At lady got a 'gina, Mummy?"

Funny how everyone can understand the most twisted of tot babble when the word involved is in reference to private parts or bathroom function?

"Yes, dear," Mummy managed, obviously one of the new sort, the kind who rightly refuse to bring their children up with guilt and then have ample opportunity to regret their modernity every time they take the children out in public and they start asking if ladies have vaginas.

Now it was Miss Fry's turn to come under the magnifying glass of childish curiosity. "An' 'as 'at lady got a 'gina, Mummy?"

"All ladies have one, dear." Mummy was growing decidedly pink around the ears, but fortunately, Miss Brahms was used to nieces and nephews and men, and so took all this in her stride.

"You 've got 'gina, Mummy," the little angel said with pride.

"Yes, dear, Mummy's got one too," the mother said, now positively roseate with embarrassment.

Captain Peacock fell under the piercing stare, the innocent eyes of the child examining his form for the necessary tell-tales that would answer a three-year-old's deep and difficult questions of man or woman. "'At man got a pee-nees, Mummy?"

Mummy looked like she wanted to die. "Yes, dear, of course he has. Look, Sarah, there's Santa!"

The child, however, was not going to be distracted from her quest. "Santa a man, isn't him not? He got a pee-nees, Mummy?"

Doyle nearly choked, but at least he didn't laugh out loud.

"Father Christmas is a man, yes, Sa-sa dear." Doyle gave the mother points for answering yet another one of these questions without actually using any of the words her daughter was tossing around with such reckless abandon.

"Oh," said the child, obviously satisfied. But not, it seemed, for long. Doyle, about to check the stack of cuddly teddies to make sure that all they held was stuffing, was arrested by the shrilling voice directed at him once more. "Is 'at a man, Mummy?" the little girl asked again.

"Yes, Sa-sa, he is," said the mother with obvious unease, as if horrifying experience had taught her what was coming next.

"But 'at man got long hair! 'At's like a lady, Mummy!" Disapproval oozed from every pore in the distilled outrage of the very young.

"Some men have long hair, just as some women have short hair, dear," Mummy answered, grabbing her child and turning her towards the side wall where stacks of toys rose half-way to the ceiling. "And look, Sa-sa, isn't that a lovely dolly?"

The child, however, was not so easily turned

aside from her quest for her own personal grail, completely unmoved by mere hairless baby dolls. "Oh," she said, taking a minute to think about this strange tonsorial detail in the interesting world of men and women and boys and girls. "Seen ladies with short hair, haven't I not, Mummy?" Another pause for thought, but the stare on Mr. Ray the Nice Elf was unwavering.

Doyle tugged his jacket down, glad that he had both stopped thinking about fucking Bodie under the Christmas tree and that after yesterday's débâcle of wielded welly boots and unrequited passion, his over-sensitised and demanding cock was tidily tucked away out of sight, one of the many tricks he'd learned from old Marvellous Mary, the best drag queen he'd ever seen. He dreaded to think the kind of question this brat would come up with if she could actually see his important little places. But then again, perhaps it would have been better if she had.

"'At not a man, Mummy," the little girl said with certainty.

"Yes it is, dear," the mother smiled at him in apology whilst Doyle scowled at the child.

"But him not got a pee-nees, Mummy."

Doyle couldn't help it: he looked down at himself, just to check. He did too have a peenees, but it was held snugly by tight briefs, lying down quietly between his thighs, which obviously wasn't where the monster-child was used to telling the difference between men and ladies.

"Of course he has," the mother said bravely, obviously wishing she had never started all this openness and honesty rubbish and stuck to shame, subterfuge and wonderfully incomprehensible kiddy-words like her own mother so sensibly had.

But her little girl wasn't finished, not quite yet. With a sneer worthy of an adult, she looked more closely at Doyle and then announced, with all the utter certainty of the very, very young: "Then him got an itsy-bitsy 'ittle peenees, Mummy."

There was, not entirely unexpectedly, a sudden chorus of coughs from every adult in earshot.

Doyle fumed. He fizzled. He opened his mouth to deliver a stinging invective at the child, but fortunately for the sanctity of infancy Captain Peacock was back, one re-

straining hand on Doyle's arm to remind him that until 3.30, he was also Mr. Ray the Nice Elf.

"Are you free, Mr. Ray?" he asked in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Yes, sir, Captain Peacock sir, of course I'm fu—"

"That'll do, Mr. Elf. Come along now."

Come? Come along with Captain Peacock? Well, maybe it was better than infanticide. Yeh, he'd come along, and Captain Peacock could take care of it in the store room right now and if bloody Bodie stuck his nose in again the way he had yesterday, then Mr. Bloody Bodie could just get an eyeful, couldn't he?

"Actually," and there was bloody Santa at it again, butting in where he wasn't wanted. Well, he was wanted, and wanted a hell of a lot, but not in a way that Doyle thought Bodie would be keen on accepting.

"What is it now?" Doyle snapped viciously.

"Actually, Mr. Ray," Bodie said serenely, taking hold of Doyle's other arm, neatly rendering him helpless, while the small child meandered on to the interesting question of why reindeers have horns and if they had a pee-nees or 'gina, "I think that Father Christmas needs some help from his little helper because it's Santa's tea-time."

"Oh, yeh? An' what—"

"Mr. Ray, be a Nice Elf and come with Father Christmas, please?"

And there it was, an echo of that peculiar expression that Bodie had had on his face yesterday. Doyle's eyes narrowed in speculation. Then, decision made with his usual speed, he took Santa by the red-clad arm and saying, "Do let me help you, Father Christmas. At your age, your arthritis must be acting up something chronic," led Santa from the ravening hordes of greedy children and those small people who make impertinent comments about a certain elf's pertinent parts.

"What is it, Bodie?" he asked as soon as they were on the staff stairs, Bodie's red bulk heaving its way up the steps in front of him.

"It's tea-time, Ray. Even Father Christmas gets to stop for tea, doesn't he?"

They were at the staffroom now, Bodie closing the door behind them. "In other words, you just wanted to get me out of there before I did something to that kid that Cowley would make

me regret?"

"I wouldn't actually say that, no. Although," and the wicked glitter showed that this was, indeed, the kind of man who would plaster an embarrassing photo of his would-be best mate right dab in the middle of CI5 HQ, "she's right, you *do* have such an itsy-bitsy pee-nees!"

At which point, the devil in Doyle decided to show its horns. Or one of them, at least. He'd get his own back on Bodie right now, embarrass the hell out of the rotten sod. "If you call this," and he pulled the peplum of his jacket out of the way and straightened his tights once more so that his cock wasn't tucked away out of sight but straining there, long and thick and blatant, "itsy-bitsy, then you've been hanging around with too many donkeys, Bodie." And he stood there, flaunting himself and posing, waiting for Bodie—the man who hated it when his girls kissed him in public, the only man Doyle knew who felt peculiar about peeing in public toilets—to blush furiously and dissolve in embarrassment. Bodie, however, had reasons other than modesty for being so discreet in public. It had more to do with exposing himself—in more ways than one—whilst standing beside the temptation that was Doyle than with any false notions of Victorian etiquette.

With ostentatious casualness, Bodie pulled his fake beard, wig and hat off and then said, with a sophisticated little smile, "Nice, Ray, oh, very nice."

Doyle stared, goggle-eyed. This was not what was supposed to happen, this wasn't what he'd expected.

"And you," Bodie's voice was lazily amused, "you dozy bastard, were going to waste it on old dried up Captain Peacock?"

Catching Bodie's drift, Doyle smiled, never one to complain about a bit of spontaneity. He wouldn't have thought it of Bodie, but there had been doubts these past few days, odd looks and odder expressions, peculiar reactions and that strange tension that had been lying between them. He'd thought it to be sexual, but he'd let himself be put off by a few photographs and a spectacularly straight attitude. The perfect match, indeed, for the way he himself had been with Bodie, wanting to trust, too smart to take the chance of confessing too soon and thus risking public exposure if he'd mis-read his

partner.

“You interested, then?” he asked, flaunting himself a bit more.

Bodie was grinning again, obviously delighted that his own suspicions had proved true. “I’m even more...interested than you are, titch.”

Not that Doyle could check the claim, not with Bodie festooned in all that red and padding. “Care to prove that, do you?”

“Here?!” Bodie squeaked.

And Doyle knew exactly how to have his revenge on Bodie, and his pleasure at the same time. Talk about having your cake and eating it too...

“Where else? We’re not due back on the floor for another ten minutes, Peacock’s been warned that we might have to disappear off now and then on CI5 business, so no-one’s going to come looking for us, are they? And there’s no-one here but you and me, is there?”

“But the door doesn’t lock!”

Oh, that panic was a lovely sight! Especially since Doyle noticed that the baggy trousers were tenting in a most impressively delectable manner. “Not to worry, Bodie,” he said, dropping his hat to the floor, stepping forward until he was less than twelve inches away from Bodie and certainly close enough to grab his partner through red fabric. “Oh, nice, very nice,” he echoed, massaging his favourite muscle, his other hand fumbling round to find the zip. “In fact, that’s so nice, I think I’ll have to have a look at it. Just to make sure you really are as...nice...as you feel, ’course.” With a small, wicked smile, he undid Bodie’s Santa trousers, hands slipping inside until they found out that it wasn’t just stockings this particular Santa could stuff and that the North Pole could be more than just Santa’s address. “Oh, nice, very nice,” he said again, bringing Bodie out into the open, breaking into a grin both at the luscious feel of cock in his hand and the mortified nervousness written all over Bodie’s face.

“Don’t, Ray!”

Who would ever have thought that big, tough Bodie could sound like Mickey Mouse? But anyone who knew Doyle knew how quickly he could adapt to any situation, chameleon change putting him in instant control. “No? You mean,” and he dropped suddenly to his knees, engulf-

ing Bodie with one succulent swallow, bringing his partner to full, throbbing hardness, then pulling back, “you want me to stop?” He pumped Bodie’s cock, skin flowing fluidly over rigidity. “Right now?”

Then he stood, and slowly, languorously, unbuttoned his jacket to reveal a cascade of chest hair and small, brown nipples that crowned when his whetted fingers circled them. “You mean, just stop?” He hooked his thumbs in the waistbands of his tights and briefs, pushing them down, not far, just enough for the tight lycra to cradle his balls. Plump and full, his balls were pushed up by his taut clothes, and his cock was standing up straight from nothing more than sheer passion. “Stop, just like that?”

Then he licked his lips, and stepped forward, pressing himself and Bodie cock to cock, taking both cocks in one hand, holding them tight, making Bodie’s breath hiss. “Pack it in, shall I?”

And he wasn’t using that in the slang meaning, not now. Bodie’s eyes were half-closed, and Doyle leaned in another inch and kissed him, moistly, masterfully, thrilling to the sensation of Bodie helpless in his arms. “D’you want me packed in to you?” he asked, breath souging over the exquisite paleness of Bodie’s neck.

“Here?”

“No, Bodie,” Doyle answered, free hand going inside red trousers and finding the sweet cleft of arse, “here.”

“Now?”

Passion-dark, Doyle stared up at him. “D’you really want to wait?”

“But someone might come—” Bodie broke off, hearing what he had said, feeling what Doyle was doing to him, seeing the way Doyle’s face flushed faint rose with passion. “And if we do it right, it’ll be both of us,” he whispered, leaning forward to brush Doyle’s lips with his own.

Doyle let go of Bodie’s nether region and interesting appendages and slid his hands up to cradle Bodie’s face, holding the other man still while he kissed him deeply, tongue inside Bodie’s mouth, stealing the breath from him, hips beginning an insistent, insinuating thrusting, body telling Bodie exactly what was in it for him—or what was going to be in Bodie, for Doyle. He wanted to kiss every inch of Bodie’s beautiful face, and did, small lingering kisses,

getting to know the satin of forehead and the comparative roughness of cheek, the fleshy pleasure of earlobe. Bodie was murmuring inanities, murblings of desire and pleasure, and Doyle gathered them up like Scrooge with his treasure horde, pretty words to be brought out and cooed over, preferably when the entire work-force of CI5 were present.

“Christ, Ray, this is fantastic, I wish we’d done this right at the start,” Bodie said, and Doyle envisioned Bodie’s face when they were all sitting around the CI5 rest room engaging in the traditional fuck-and-tell that marked every sexual encounter, Murphy serenely murmuring the filthiest rejoinders ever heard by man. Served Bodie right, putting that photo of him up in public for everyone to see. Smiling to himself, he feasted on the side of Bodie’s neck, desire tingling through him as he unbuttoned Bodie’s tunic and started pushing the padding out of the way, teeth fastening on pretty pink nipples.

But then Bodie was holding him close, and whispering some really sweet somethings, and Doyle began to wonder if he honestly were the only one in this partnership who’d got to the stage of putting his friend first. And he began to wonder if perhaps the tension in their partnership hadn’t had something to do with the fledgeling emotion between them. One thing was certain, though: with what Bodie was saying, with how Doyle himself felt, there would be no action-replay for the lads. No, he was going to keep this for the two of them, something to be remembered. And then he stopped thinking completely as Bodie started kissing him hard, thrusting his tongue into Doyle’s mouth, and Doyle found himself wallowing in the ferociousness of Bodie’s hunger, feeling it compound his own, and then he was pressing into Bodie, thrusting his cock into the slight softness of belly, taking control of the kiss, leaning into Bodie, once more the seducer.

“Like that, do you?” he whispered, smiling into the flushed beauty of Bodie’s face, tongue tip lapping at the corner of Bodie’s mouth. “Nice, innit? This,” his hands palmed Bodie’s hard cock, thumb teasing the slitted head, “is nice as well. Gorgeous, big and hard and gorgeous. Just like you, Bodie.”

“Fancy me, do you?”

“Mmm,” Doyle murmured, dropping to his

knees and licking the slit at the crown of Bodie’s cock. “Could go for you in a big way.” Suddenly wary amidst the ease of passion, his glance flickered up to Bodie’s handsome face and brittle blue eyes, checking to see if he needed to backpedal, to make it a size joke, to turn any suspicion of genuine affection aside. But Bodie meant what he had whispered so sweetly and was smiling at him, and the luscious cock was slid back into his mouth with sweet slowness, filling him up. In the background of his mind, in rhythm with the pulse of Bodie’s cock on his tongue, understanding dawned, all the little comments of their partnership making sense, all of them signposts leading up to this sexual understanding between them.

And the emotional understanding, too, he thought, shoving Bodie’s trousers down round his knees, getting to his own feet so that they were cock to cock again. “I’m going to fuck you,” he whispered.

“No you’re not,” Bodie whispered right back.

That shocked Doyle into silence for all of two seconds, then his cock pulsed at him again with two days of unrewarded lust and if they hadn’t been where they were, he would have let rip and shouted. Instead, he hissed, voice beginning to edge upwards: “What the fuck d’you mean? Too much the big man to get fucked? Well, you just—”

Bodie kissed his mouth shut, turning the quick flare of anger into a slow simmer of building ecstasy. “All I meant,” he breathed against Doyle’s lips, “is that you’re not going to fuck me up against the door of a scabby staff room when we don’t even have anything to use.”

Doyle leant his head on Bodie’s shoulder, a brief breath of laughter running through him. “Why, you worried you’ll get pregnant, petal? And you’ll get used to me flying off the handle, won’t you,” he murmured, bringing Bodie’s hand down to hold his cock tightly, thrusting into the warm fist, eyes wildly dilated as his body got closer and closer to flying off into orgasm.

“Get used to a lot of things, won’t we?” Bodie said to him, lips brushing Doyle’s ear, letting go of Doyle’s cock.

Doyle felt Bodie’s hands settle on his rump, then he groaned as he thrust forward. Bodie

parted his thighs briefly, then clamped them shut again, letting Doyle fuck him between the legs, Bodie's cock stabbing into Doyle's belly while Bodie kneaded his arse and Doyle fucked his tongue into Bodie's mouth. Harder and harder Doyle thrust, the door rattling under his assault, Bodie shaking with the onslaught of pleasure, both of them rushing headlong into climax, Doyle swearing and gasping as orgasm flooded him, but still, unwilling for it to be over. His hand filled with Bodie's cock, pumping him hard, demanding that Bodie come for him, now, here, like this, not content until Bodie had.

Slowly, Doyle slithered down Bodie's body, lapping at the beads of cum that were dotted here and there, rubbing the white wetness on his hands in between Bodie's legs, blending Bodie with himself, licking both of them up together.

And that was when he realised that not all the rattling at the door had been caused by him and Bodie. Startled, his gaze snapped up to Bodie, to meet equally appalled blue eyes. Frantically, they started stuffing themselves back into clothes that were wrinkled and marked, tell-tale moisture that would dry and show the world what they'd been up to. Bodie grabbed the remnants of his beard and scrubbed, desperate, at the marks on himself and Doyle, while Doyle crammed the wig back onto Bodie's tumbled hair and jammed his own hat back onto curls that he didn't even remember Bodie making such a tangled mess of.

Breathless, and from more than just the sex, Doyle threw the door open, glower fixed firmly in place, confronting a fetchingly jealous Captain Peacock. "You just interrupted CI5 business, this had better be fucking good!"

"On the Queen's business, obviously," Captain Peacock said, but left it at that, his own old training very much to the fore, which was why he'd been transferred to the hell of the toy department in the first place. "One of the men whose photograph you showed me has just made an appearance in the department, beside the teddy bears."

Doyle looked at Bodie, and the costumes made it incongruous to see such professional action-readiness on the faces of Father Christmas and Mr. Ray the Nice Elf. "Which one?" Doyle asked, shoving Captain Peacock aside, starting down the stairs two at a time. "Come on, which

one?"

"I don't know. One of the first batch of—"

But that was all either Bodie or Doyle needed to know, the first batch of photographs belonging to a group known equally for its drug-trading for arms and for its bombing. And this, the Saturday before Christmas, could well prove to be the peak of the bombing season.

Once on the floor, they slowed to what looked like a stroll, but was an efficient consuming of distance. Bodie ho-ho-hoed to children as he passed, Doyle smiled and picked one of them up, setting him back down out of the way once he'd plucked the teddy bear from his arms and checked it for suspicious lumps far more worrisome than cancer. Under the chiming Christmas carols, they crossed the floor, ignoring the cries of children who could suddenly see two Father Christmases, neither of which was sitting on Santa's throne.

Dickinson came up behind Doyle, speaking quietly. "Richards just called in to your mob on the R/T. They'll be here in a couple of minutes and your boss said something about ripping your balls off and feeding them to you if you hurt so much as one hair on a single child's head."

"Yeh, well I wish he'd tell our friend over there that. Listen, you get round the back in case we need you. He won't look twice at Santa and one of his elves, but two Santas'd put the wind right up him."

The second Santa melted out of sight behind the piles of presents, while Doyle and Bodie angled in on the freckled redhead so innocently going through the shelves of teddy bears. Innocent, but for his record, and the bulging carrier bag that had started at his feet and was now snuggled down all cosily behind the fat teddies.

"Hello, mate," Bodie said, casually taking the man's arm in a grip that could dislocate an elbow with ease. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Yeh, come here often, do you?" Doyle asked, neatly retrieving the carrier bag, his free hand grabbing the would-be bomber. "What's your name this time, eh?"

He and Bodie were marching the man so calmly through the crowd that the only looks they got were amusement at two grown men dressed up for the festivities.

"Forgotten how to speak English?" Bodie

said, twisting the man's elbow painfully at the first faint sign of rebellion. "Wouldn't try that if I were you," he said in a friendly voice, waving at an open-mouthed child as they walked past the food department and into the delivery area at the back. "You see, if you do that, then I'd have to do this—" a solid punch to the stomach, "and then I'd have to do this—" an upper-cut to the jaw, "and then—"

"Leave it out, Bodie," Doyle said, straight-arming his partner back from the reeling prisoner. "He's not worth getting fired for."

"Yeh, but I owe him and his mates, Doyle, Christ, what I owe them!"

Doyle looked calmly at his partner, and shivered as he realised that Bodie was now also a man he had had sex with. A man he could have as his lover, if he wanted to work at it. If he wanted to take on the darkness inside Bodie and allow Bodie to see his own darkness. If he was willing to take the chance of loving and still being rejected.

"He's not worth me losing you as my partner, Bodie," he said, staring into Bodie's eyes, making an offer, upping the ante from sex against a wall to building a proper relationship, based on friendship and partnership and the understanding that came from sharing a dirty, necessary job with all its attendant violence and horrors.

Bodie took a deep breath, flexed his fingers out of their fist, used his hand to mockingly smooth the ruffled red hair. "He's right, you know," he smiled at his silent prisoner. "You're not worth spitting on."

Then Doyle was looking at him again, smiling, seeing Bodie's smile turn from dangerous, leashed violence into that odd vulnerability he'd surprised on Bodie's face in the gym that morning.

"If you two have quite finished gaping like landed fish, we've got a job of work to do here." Cowley, of course, showing up at the worst possible moment. But there was an echoing throb of desire in Doyle's groin, and he decided that there was a moment that could have been a hell of a lot worse. With a very discreet pinching of Bodie's bottom, he began the dry recitation of facts for his boss, walking over towards the car whilst Lucas and McCabe took a louring prisoner to Bodie's car, Santa's spare keys snaffled from

Cowley's glove compartment.

Doyle made a face at his partner, one which Bodie, by the miracle of rapport and shared interest, managed to decipher as meaning, 'go on, ask him. I'm in his bad books so I can't'.

"Em, sir," Bodie said as Doyle's brief report wound down but before Cowley could wind up into his usual sharp-fanged assessment of their performance. He was as bold as brass, showing off a little for Doyle. "As Doyle's given you his report, there's no need for us to come in with you, so we can finish off for the day now, right?"

Cowley smiled at him, very nicely, which was enough to put both Bodie and Doyle firmly on guard. "Why, no, you don't, Bodie, and how kind of you to do my job for me. In fact, as I'm so pleased that you've decided to help me deploy my men, I'm going to let you and Doyle here solve the problem of CID's needing their manpower back as soon as possible."

Doyle had a horrible feeling he knew what was coming next, and it wasn't going to be anywhere nearly as pleasant as coming up against a door had been.

"Sir?" Bodie asked, with an expression that showed that he knew his boss just as well as Doyle did.

"Aye, you can give CID a hand, Bodie. You and your partner in crime here can go upstairs and tell Dickinson and Richards that they can report back in to their Inspector, whilst the pair of you can cover until the shop can find themselves a new Santa and a new elf."

Doyle drew Bodie an absolute stinker of a look, but Bodie knew better than to turn round and catch it right between the eyes.

"Yes, sir," Bodie finally said, having learned from Doyle's dire mistake in arguing with their boss last week.

"Oh, and Doyle," Cowley said as he got into his car and Doyle started off towards the staff entrance, "you had best get changed before you go back to work—you've got a ladder in your tights."

"Thanks for telling me, sir!" Doyle shouted sarcastically at the departing car. "I'll just get into a new pair right away, sir, don't mind me, sir, I love poncing around like a fairy, sir—"

"Only thing is, Doyle," Bodie whispered as he fell into step immediately behind the grumbling Doyle, "I don't think he meant you had a

hole in your tights.”

“So what did he mean?” Doyle muttered, storming up the stairs, thinking of wonderful things like Cowley, instead of Christmas pud, on the platter covered in flaming brandy and prickly holly.

“I think he meant you had something long, and hard, and upright in your tights, petal,” Bodie murmured, a quick solid grope making Doyle jump to attention, and in more ways than one.

“You—” But Bodie was already passing him on the stairs, the first strains of ‘dick the balls with boys and jelly’ wafting down behind him.

On the floor of the toy department, Santa’s Grotto settled down into its manic rhythms of crying children pacified with toys and complaining parents handing over folded banknotes, and a Father Christmas who made the children laugh by making Mr. Ray the Nice Elf jump ever so high...

And, our shopping finished, or our money run out, or our patience completely exhausted, we could come back to the toy department, and smile at the nice elves and nod to the jolly Father Christmas. We would take our child’s hand, and listen abstractly as the words streamed forth, all of Santa’s expensive Christmas morning promises. We would smile then, for we had those childish dreams already hidden away at the bottom of the wardrobe, or frown, for nothing

on the child’s list of wishes had been bought.

We would go down the crowded escalator, dragging our child thoughtlessly through the minefield of shopping bags and umbrellas, passing under the dry blast of heat that was our last moment of comfort before emerging to the breath-stealing shock of winter outside. Walking head-down to the wind, wearily unseeing this time of the great shining sleigh or the glittering displays, we would struggle to the bus stop or the tube station, avoiding puddles, careless of children’s feet protected so completely by bright wellies, our minds far from the glitter of the shop we had left and thinking only about what had yet to be done, and the cooking that had yet to be started, leaving the bright lights of the shops ever farther behind us.

And after a time, as unaware of us as we would be of them, two men would also emerge from the monolith of the shop, not touching, but walking closely side by side, circling away from the busy street to where a car had been left that morning. As we would sit swaying on a crowded bus, they would reach their car, the one with the curly hair glancing disapprovingly at the one with straight hair as he jumped from yet another well-placed pinch. But still, he wouldn’t move away, until they had to get in the car, undercover costumes slung onto the back seat, Santa and elf garb tangled all up together, forgotten, the two men looking at each other with brief, knowing smiles, the future tingling between them.
