

Red Christmas

by Cassie Ingaben

London was giving a rare display of postcard picture Christmas prettiness: bright lights glittered everywhere, red and gold decorations adorned shop windows and trees, and cheerful crowds bustled about, juggling parcels and children. The crowning touch was of course provided by the snow, which began to fall; large fat flakes, as twilight closed in on the shortest day of the year.

Behind the wheel of his Capri, Doyle started to swear viciously and indiscriminately: at the bloody freezing slush making the roads as slippery as a skating rink; at the boneheaded morons clogging the roads and constituting a major traffic hazard through their utter lack of driving abilities; at the sodding consumerist feeding frenzy of the above-mentioned morons, all busy spending money on useless junk for their idiotic children; and above all at bloody Cowley cancelling their holiday and recalling them on duty for the whole of the Christmas season.

Bodie sighed, and tried again, unsuccessfully, to make the car heating work. Maybe his fingers were too numb to manoeuvre the controls properly, he thought without much hope.

Doyle went on: "D' you know that bloody Father Christmas was invented by Coca-Cola to advertise their gut-rotting glop? That's why he's dressed in red and white, Coca-bloody-Cola colours—and the size of him! Only makes sense, of course: did you know that a can of Coke has the equivalent of thirty-three spoonfuls of sugar? Course you didn't, you swallow the stuff by the gallon. Just like you to like it—I swear, in a few years you'll look just like Father Christmas. Though I suppose you're marginally more

intelligent: at least you don't go flying around and ho-ho-ho-ing like a cretin! Father Christmas my arse!"

Bodie tuned his mate out, an essential survival ability, and consulted his watch again. Traffic was snarled up, thanks to the snow and the 'boneheaded morons'. (Bodie privately agreed with Doyle's view of the Christmas season traffic rush, even if he made very sure Doyle never found out, of course). They were going to be late for Cowley's urgent summons. God, so on top of Doyle's bitching he was going to have to cope with Cowley's now. Sometimes he wondered why on Earth he had ever thought of leaving Africa. He glanced morosely at the still-not-working heater. *At least it was hot in Angola ...*

At HQ, an unusually distraught-looking Betty ushered them in into Cowley's office. Bodie was going to whisper a joking comment to Doyle on her extraordinary lack of cool, but he felt his words die in his throat as he stepped through the door, and got a look at the person sitting in front of Cowley's desk. Through glazed eyes, Bodie could dimly see that Doyle was reacting pretty much as he was. Frozen.

"Och laddies, close the door, there's an awful draught." Automatically, Bodie slammed the door shut, then turned again towards the mesmerising sight. It was impossible. The old man was having them on. He glanced towards Doyle, who had gone pale, green eyes glittering dangerously, body poised and shaking slightly with tension. Bodie braced himself for the explosion, and stared back at the frozen tableau in front of him. Was the Cow trying to be funny? If so, it was an unfortunate attempt. Sitting opposite Cowley—in the seat usually taken by Doyle, Bodie noted with an inward groan, was an old, fat man, very big, very red in the face, almost apoplectic. Rather incongruous sunglasses perched on a round shiny nose, and a luxuriant white beard adorned the lower half of the old man's face. He was wearing a sort of red velvet tunic and trousers, trimmed with

white fur, a matching floppy hat, and shiny black boots. He bore a marked resemblance to Brian Blessed, and not only in looks. He stood up, arms spread out, and uttered a joyful, and *very* loud, "HO HO HO!"

Doyle emitted a strangled sound, almost a sob.

Bodie closed his eyes and waited for the blood of the benignly and sickeningly smiling creature to start splattering the walls. When he couldn't stand the silence anymore, he cautiously opened one eye. Doyle had advanced a step or two, and was now staring stupidly at the Cow and his guest.

The painful silence was broken by a barking Cowley: "Take that expression off yer faces, laddies, and come here—you're supposed to be my best agents, don't just stand there looking like stranded fish. Especially you, Bodie!"

Then Cowley turned towards his guest, suddenly respectful and, were he not Cowley, one could even have said flustered. "Excuse them, Your Excellency ... ? Santa ... ? Your Honour ... ? Mr Christmas ... ?"

"Call me Father," the old man in red boomed.

"Yes Father," Cowley bleated.

Bodie stared. *I'm going to wake up any minute now*, he thought. *This is more bizarre than that weird dream about a magic stone and me and Ray being Celtic warriors.*

Then the red-clad figure turned towards the CI5 agents and bellowed again: "Come here, boys, don't look so stunned—George is right, you have to do something about that fish face, Bodie."

Bodie and Doyle moved automatically at the imperious order and arrived in front of Cowley's desk, taking the seats Father indicated.

Cowley harrumphed menacingly: "I need not remind you of the Official Secrets Act, of course ..."

Bodie and Doyle blinked in unison. This was worse, much worse, than the Celtic dream, thought Bodie. Either the man really *was* Father Christmas, which didn't

bear thinking, or it really was Brian Blessed impersonating Father Christmas. But why would Brian Blessed be doing Father Christmas impressions at CI5 HQ? And in either case Cowley must have gone insane, since he was going along with the charade.

The old man in red removed his sunglasses with a flourish, revealing a pair of light reading glasses, gold wire-rimmed frames surrounding watery blue eyes. "I am travelling incognito of course, but I trust you can recognise me now?"

Cowley intervened. "I am sending you on a secret mission to the North Pole. Something appalling is happening there. But maybe our guest can fill us in on the details."

The bearded giant cleared his voice and started, very loudly: "Bad things have been happening, just before Christmas—lousy timing of course, as this is the busiest period of the year! I have absolutely no time to inquire adequately and thoroughly into the matter. That's why I came here. I knew George would give me a hand; me and him, we go way, way back." Father beamed a benevolent smile at them.

Now it was Cowley's turn to look embarrassed. "Ehr, Father ..."

"Don't mention it, George, don't mention it. As if I didn't already owe you for that toy train that got lost, was it in 193 ..."

Cowley went red, and so did Bodie and Doyle, although for different reasons. Doyle made a suffocated sound that might have been a tiny, stifled giggle. *Good*, thought Bodie, *if he's starting to see the funny side, he might forgo ripping the Man in Red's kneecaps off with a blunt knife ...*

"Ach! Never mind! Bodie, Doyle, you are to follow Father and investigate this crime," ordered Cowley, his most forbidding grimace firmly in place to cover up for the embarrassing revelation.

"Crime?" chorused Bodie and Doyle.

Father frowned gloomily: "There has been a killing ..."

"Killing?" Unison again. *Snap*, thought Bodie. *The Cow's right, we are starting to sound like a double act. Well, if this isn't a farce I don't know what is. Oh, please God, let Doyle see the funny side; he's been in such a lousy mood the whole week, I'm starting to miss my conjugals ...*

"Yes, " explained Father. "Archibald was savagely butchered."

"Archibald?" *Snap Two, The Revenge*, thought Bodie. *And you can tell Cowley's getting pissed off at us doing the Echo Effect. Good thing he's still trying to live down the toy train thing, or he'd have yelled at us to pack it in already.*

"One of my dear, dear, dear," Father bellowed, heartbroken, "reindeer! And we don't know who killed him."

Bodie straightened in his chair, a question forming in his mind. If he had to go along with a bloody hallucination, at least he'd like it to be coherent: "But I thought Father Christmas saw everything! You know—" He hazarded a few bars of the tune: *"he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good ..."*

The cold, twin stares both Cowley and Father turned on him finally made Bodie falter and fall silent, his colour rising quite fetchingly. Doyle gave what could have been a sigh of relief, and took his hands off his ears.

"Let's not talk about this!" concluded Father, looking around suspiciously.

"You never know! And well, I told you, Christmas is the busiest period of the year; do you have any idea how many people there are in the world? Six billion! You people breed like rabbits—well, not *all* of you ..." He eyed Bodie and Doyle meaningly, making them blush. Did he, or didn't he see everything? If he did ... Bodie cringed. If he saw them when they were sleeping, that might still be OK; but if he saw them when they were *not* ...

Father went on, making a sour face: "I don't have time to keep my eyes on the reindeer exercise ground of all places—it's bad enough as it is down there! Their

practical jokes and horse— I mean, deerplaying are disgusting enough!"

Cowley nodded with the long-suffering air of someone who really knew what a headache a bunch of unruly, horseplaying employees and their rough practical jokes could be.

Father paused, and looked down, contemplating his shiny, very large boots. *Strange*, thought Bodie, his sense of sartorial elegance disturbed, *how when he goes red it doesn't quite match the shade of his clothes—it clashes quite badly. Maybe he should wear purple instead.* The Man in Red finally mumbled between clenched teeth: "And then ... The Device for watching isn't working! Those bloody elves must have broken it. They're always playing with it when they think I don't take any notice ... And they have the cheek to accuse me of sitting on it by mistake!" The last sentence was supposed to be a murmured admission, or at least as much of a murmur as Father could produce, which was still loud enough to make their eardrums ache.

In the embarrassed silence that followed the final rattling vibrations of all unsecured objects in the room, Doyle started to fidget again. Bodie kicked him surreptitiously, hoping Doyle wasn't back on his high horse, and planning to rip out Father's heart with his bare hands—or even worse, in true Doyle style, have him, Bodie, do it instead.

Finally Cowley broke the awkward pause and handed Bodie and Doyle two manilla folders. "Here are all the details you need—you can read them while you travel. Go to Supply now, collect thermal underwear, spare ammunition, and sugar cubes for the reindeer, in case you have to pay for information. And of course, the costumes for Plan B ..."

"Oh, yes—something important," added Father. "You understand that it might be counterproductive to have two strangers traipsing around during high season. Not to mention the damage to my image: being seen in need of assistance by external staff would be very bad for

morale, you know—and morale is low enough as it is. So, you will be undercover, playing a part. I have a main cover story, and also a Plan B cover story in case something goes wrong with the other one."

"Under cover of what?" asked Doyle, worry in his voice.

"Well, at first I thought of passing you off as elves ..."

Bodie and Doyle exchanged terrified looks. Doyle opened his mouth again, but whatever he had started to say was drowned by the rest of Father's loud explanation.

"... But then I realised the impracticalities. You're too big, for one thing. And your ears are too small—at least yours are, Bodie. Not to mention your attitude! So, the elves' disguise will only be used as Plan B."

Bodie made a face. Maybe he should indeed rip the old bugger's heart out before they ended up wearing jingle bells on their ears. He looked at his hands consideringly.

"For the main cover story," Father continued, "I thought of something that happened a few years ago. You see, when the high season approaches, I have to work very hard, and so does my staff; and of course we are all one big family and we're not supposed to mind about putting in more than regular nine to five duty—all to make the children happy of course! We have to think about the children! But, well, it seems not everybody thinks like that ... So, one day we received a rather angry letter from this unholy gang of social workers or trade unionists or some such agitators, who had *somehow* got to think that I was working my people into the ground!"

Cowley grabbed a madly-vibrating paperweight before it fell to the ground, and nodded sympathetically: "Aye, some people understand nothing about duty." Doyle looked as if he wanted to use the paperweight, or, more likely, an unabridged, leather-bound copy of Marx's *Kapital*, on Father's head.

Father bellowed on: "A couple of those inspectors even came to talk to me, and of course they found nothing amiss. But they threat—ehr, promised that they would come again from time to time. Purely to make sure, you know ..."

Bodie elbowed Doyle hard in his ribs, to shut up the biting comment he could see his partner was dying to make. *Thank God for small mercies*, thought Bodie. If Doyle was getting seriously worked up about Father's approach to human resources management, it meant he was indeed starting to accept the situation. *Go with the hallucinatory flow and make our lives easier, Ray, that's a good boy ...*

Father went on: "So I thought you might impersonate a couple of workplace inspectors—you see, my workers would naturally be inclined to confide in you then about everything they don't feel like telling me. Not that they'll really need to, of course! But since I've had no useful leads from anyone on the staff, maybe that could help ... Anyway, it would give you a good excuse to nose around and ask questions, checking on work conditions and so on ..."

Bodie closed his eyes. Enough was enough! This couldn't be happening. He knew he shouldn't have had that extra curried rice last night. He was still dreaming; having a spicy-food-induced nightmare. He couldn't possibly be talking with Father Christmas in Cowley's office. He couldn't have just been assigned to work on the case of a butchered reindeer—and all because of a lost toy train Cowley had been waiting for since nineteen thirty something ... He pinched Doyle, just to check if he was asleep. Doyle yelped, and thumped him one, which hurt. He was not asleep. Neither of them were.

They were walking in silence, side by side down the corridor, carrying two knapsacks chock-full of woollen undies,

sugar cubes and elf costumes. Silence, that is, if one excepts the faint chiming sound that could be heard coming from their knapsacks with every step. Bloody costumes had bells everywhere, sighed Bodie. Eventually, he resolved to discuss events with Doyle. Just because Ray hadn't uttered a word since their parting exchanges with Cowley, it didn't mean he wasn't hell-bent on homicidal rage. Or did it? Oh, well, might as well get the violence out and over with ...

Bodie cleared his throat: "Uh, ehm ... Ah, Doyle, uh, I mean—"

"Stop pussyfooting, Bodie, and just ask me, will you?" growled Doyle without breaking stride.

Seems pretty normal so far, thought Bodie hopefully. He went on. "Funny that you were talking about Father Christmas and then we met him, huh? I mean, him existing and everything ..."

Doyle snorted, eyebrows rising. "Don't worry, Bodie. Much as I'd like to rip His Coca-Cola-ness's kneecaps out, we are on a job. I am a professional, and I will carry out this mission—a particularly unappealing undercover mission, of course, but still a mission. And then, *after* it's all over, I'll be able to tell Old Fart Christmas what I really think of him and his methods ..." He grinned ferally.

Bodie insisted: "So, you think he really exists? That he is real?"

Doyle pursed his lips: "I do have a few theories ..."

"Like what?"

"Well, at first I thought Cowley had gone insane. Then, that he was doing some particularly convoluted triple-thinking; maybe some sort of scheme to fool the KGB, or MI5, or both. Or that the Old Man in Red was actually the head of a very hush-hush Government agency, whose brief is even more secret than ours, and he is impersonating Father Christmas for some classified reason. Then I thought, we can't rule out that Cowley is telling us the truth—after all, if you can believe in the existence of the NHS, why not Father Christmas?"

Bodie closed his eyes, mind boggling in confusion. What was Doyle trying to do now, confuse him terminally? Everyone knew that the NHS did *not* actually exist, it was just a legend invented to keep the public quiet and panic-free when they became sick. They went to hospital or the emergency room and the secret agency operating under the cover of the NHS proceeded to quietly and efficiently exterminate the weak before they became too expensive.

"But anyway, no matter what's the right theory, our best bet is to go along with this and see what happens next."

"So you're suspending disbelief?"

"More lifting it a little bit. Let's say that we treat the Man in Red like a very important and powerful person who's friends with the Cow. And, *after* ..." He made an unpleasant sound, that could only loosely be described as laughter. "But for the moment, I will be a well-behaved agent and take this very seriously." He smiled a smile that made Bodie shiver, and started to walk again, leisurely strolling towards their appointed meeting place with Father.

The flight was uneventful, except for having to wait for over three hours on the runway at Heathrow—apparently reindeer-driven vehicles were not allowed precedence over intercontinental flights. Bodie and Doyle employed their time usefully by huddling miserably in the sleigh, staring at the reindeer in nervous awe, and trying to come to terms with the fact that all clues pointed out to the unbelievable: Father Christmas existed, and was sitting next to them, larger than life and bellowing "HO HO HO" in the onboard headset.

When they finally took off, Bodie tried to enjoy the ride, and not to dwell too much on why they weren't dying from cold or lack of oxygen. Father Christmas was again yelling "HO HO HO" to his

reindeer—the *surviving ones*, Bodie thought. The animals looked just as they should have: three pairs, and Rudolph at the front. *You could recognise that bloody red nose anywhere.*

Bodie looked next to him at Doyle, who was definitely greenish. He was trying hard to keep his eyes closed, knuckles wrapped whitely around the sleigh's safety bar. *Poor sod, he's scared of heights. Can't really understand the feeling. Still, I wish I had my parachute with me,* thought Bodie. *I wonder what happens when the reindeer run low on fuel? That reminds me, I should have brought some food ... Oh well, we'll see what we can eat when we get there...* He wiggled; his thermal underwear was itching like hell!

Father Christmas needn't have worried about the Official Secrets Act. They had no idea where they were going. It was all white, the wind was howling, the snow driving in their faces—when they were lucky—otherwise it was sleet or ice. The only things that made an impression in the whiteness were Rudolph's glowing red nose, and the noise of Doyle's chattering teeth.

They landed delicately somewhere snowy, white and stormy. Father Christmas helped them out of the sleigh and they trudged through the snow for a few minutes, until they came up in front of a massive oak door. The large, red-clad man opened it using a huge golden key, and ushered them inside, where a most welcome light and warmth enveloped them.

It looked exactly like Father Christmas's house from a childhood book Bodie thought he had forgotten. Only posher. Warm, rich woods covered floors and walls; precious, multicoloured carpets adorned the rooms; solid, oaken furniture was tastefully decorated with fine china plates and vases; and polished, gleaming brass candelabra, where red candles shone, brightened up the cosy succession of rooms they were walking through. Large branches of holly and mistletoe hung from the roof beams, and

blooming Christmas roses cheered up corners and corridors.

They finally reached a large room, sparsely furnished, whose most outstanding feature was a huge fireplace at the far end of the room, a roaring fire giving out abundant light and heat. On the mantelpiece, there sat a big golden handbell. Father Christmas grabbed it by the elaborately carved handle and rang it enthusiastically, producing a clear, penetrating sound.

Immediately, a multitude of little red-and-green-clad figures swarmed into the room, bouncing up and down, all their little bells jingling merrily. The floor was teeming with them. Doyle's eyes zeroed in on the floor, and grew round. "Bloody hell! Elves!" Bodie wondered what would happen if they trod on one by mistake. *Uhm, probably dangerous.* The combination of slick blood and round bells would be the equivalent of slipping on greasy ball-bearings. *Better be careful.*

"Welcome back, Father Christmas!" chimed and warbled the little elves.

"Hello little elves," boomed back Father Christmas. "General assembly time, my wee ones. Summon everyone in the big room."

"Yes sir. Jingling all the way sir!" the elves chorused, and ran.

Father Christmas motioned Bodie and Doyle through the large door at the opposite end from the fireplace. In the huge room, a motley crew was waiting for them. Elves, reindeer and ... Well, toys, tons of them, all moving and speaking and chattering among themselves. The end result was a deafening cacophony, like too many electrical household appliances in too small a space. *How the hell did they gather in such a short time,* thought Bodie for a second, before telling himself not to bother. It was such a minor detail in the weirdorama. Might as well make a list of the unbelievable stuff that had happened so far, just as a souvenir. Not, mind you, that he was sure he wanted to remember any of this if and when he woke up!

Father Christmas introduced them as workplace inspectors from the Labour Commission. A murmur, low and awed, went through the crowd. Father Christmas was keeping quite faithfully to his part. He looked extremely jovial and sounded even more so as he bawled, underlining his words heavily: "Make sure you treat these gentlemen well. They are here to verify that indeed we *ARE* a *happy* family ..."

Doyle sent a belligerent glare in Father Christmas's direction.

Father Christmas bellowed on: "... And to better assist these two gentlemen in their duties, I will assign them two of my most prized serv- ehm, co-workers ... Chalk, Cheese!"

A jingling noise from the crowd, some commotion, and two minuscule, glinting and vibrant figures stilled in front of the audience. In unison, they chimed: "Yes sir!"

Father Christmas picked them up in his hand, and passed them over to Bodie and Doyle. "Well, these are Chalk and Cheese, two of my better elves. Chalk, Cheese, stick with our guests and assist them."

The two elves nodded, and Father Christmas dismissed the assembly. Bodie and Doyle were left standing in the middle of the big hall, now empty, each of them holding a little elf in the palm of his hand, and trying not to feel overly stupid.

"Hello," said Chalk.

"Hello," said Cheese.

"Hello," said Bodie and Doyle.

"Have we met before?" asked Cheese, his dark blue eyes smiling with mischief. Chalk gave him a piercing stare with fiery green eyes, and addressed him none too gently. "Cheese, don't be silly! How can we possibly have met two CI5 agents before?" Then he winced, as Cheese tried not to laugh.

Bodie and Doyle made a face, and said very quickly, voices distinctly squeaky:

"We're labour inspectors!" For a terrified second, discovery—and therefore Plan B—loomed large in their minds.

Cheese shrugged: "Come off it, mates! We saw you before, with the Device—before it broke—and we know all about Cowley and Father Christmas too. So Chalk here, who fancies himself a detective, thought you might be here for Archibald. Father Christmas is *really* upset over this one!"

Chalk gave his diminutive companion a dirty look: "Not everyone is a stupid hulking lout whose main worry is food, you know! Some of us have a brain!"

Cheese sniffed with hauteur. "Well, some of us took some action to verify the hypothesis, here, rather than just speculating—so I bugged Father Christmas, and we heard when Cowley and him assigned you to the case."

He looks impossibly smug for a creature that size, Bodie thought. *Wonder how he does it? All the same, one has to admire the cheek: bugging Father Christmas!* He smiled at the elf, and nodded at him in tribute.

Chalk must have noticed some of their earlier distress—well, if they had listened in they must know about Plan B—and tried to reassure them. "Hey, don't worry! We aren't going to blow your cover. Actually, we'd like to help you with the case -- don't really fancy the idea of a killer on the loose. And we know you're good, we saw you at work."

Bodie frowned. Just how much they had seen? This Device thing was really unsettling. He needed his privacy, for God's sake!

Cheese rubbed his little hands together happily: "So, we're set. Well, let's go! We'll show you your room. That way."

They had barely started to move when a piercing whistle stopped them in their tracks. Simultaneously, the four of them swore and fished in their pockets for their R/Ts. Cheese's tiny communicator repeated its call, and he thumbed it open, speaking quickly into it. His face clouded, and Chalk sighed resignedly. Cheese put his R/T back into a tiny

pocket, and growled, or as much of a growl as his size allowed him: "Trouble at the Lego assembly line. This time it's blocks with psychedelic patterns coming out. They think someone slipped LSD into the machine *again*. Bloody reindeer!" Chalk groaned: "As if there wasn't enough work to do! Filthy animals! Can you excuse us just for a wee while, please? We'll try and be quick ... You can wait for us at the buffet; it's on our way, so we can drop you off there and then collect you later." He pointed a tiny finger to his left. Bodie put his elf down, turned that way very quickly and said: "we'd better hurry, don't want those Lego bricks getting too stoned," then he started briskly down the corridor.

"Mhmf ... mneededmmn atnm ..."

"Don't speak with your mouth full, Bodie," said Doyle, between noisy slurps of his tea.

"I said, I needed that. This Christmas cake is excellent, want some?" Bodie waved a half-eaten slice in front of Doyle's nose. Doyle made a disgusted face.

"Uhm, the way things work here, that cake has been baked by underage slaves ... That frigging capitalist pig! We really should call an inspection here!"

Bodie sighed, swallowing the last piece of his cake. Doyle's socially conscious instincts were predictably and infallibly coming to the fore. He prepared himself to tune out the fast-approaching indignant speech, but Doyle went quiet and thoughtful instead. Bodie barely had time to mentally say, 'uh-oh,' before Doyle started again.

"Did you notice, Bodie?"

"Notice what?" said Bodie warily.

"Those two elves. One of them reminds me of somebody ..."

"Who?"

Doyle moved his hands vaguely, narrowly missing the teapot. "Well, I

dunno, took me a while. At first I thought it was Murphy, but then I got it. That elf with the black hair and the blue eyes really looks like you, Bodie."

Bodie spluttered cake crumbs and indignation. "What! You must be kidding, mate! He doesn't look like me at all. First of all, I am not five inches tall and I do *not* have pointed ears. Nor do I jingle when I move. The only thing I have in common with that creature is the red woollen underwear—except I wear mine *under* my clothes. This is just because I told you about that long, bizarre dream I had, the one where we're elves. First you laughed at me about it, and now you are starting to get influenced by it!" Bodie shook his head at the outlandishness of Doyle's idea, mentally recalling the elves' appearances. Then he did a double-take, realising that indeed there *was* a resemblance to one of the elves.

"Actually, Doyle, you are almost right. It's that other elf, the one with curly hair and green eyes. He does have a familiar air; looks like a certain golly I know ..."

Now it was Doyle's turn to stand on offended dignity: "You are crazy, Bodie. You must be really, really crazy. Your stupid dreams are going to your head ... That thing and me? What do my ears and his have in common?"

Bodie opened his mouth gleefully, ready to jump on the really perfect opening—then he gave it up as too easy. "Oh yeh. I am crazy. This situation is perfectly normal, and so are you. Sure. Umph."

Doyle was going to reply, when they were interrupted by an insistent jingling that seemed to come out of thin air. After a few disconcerted seconds, Bodie looked down to the floor; then he bent down, mumbling something that sounded like "ball-bearings," and picked up a rather frazzled Chalk and Cheese.

As he lifted them up one by one, Bodie couldn't help noticing the weight difference; despite their being about the same height, Cheese was noticeably heavier than his friend. Bodie opened his mouth to comment on this, but then he

snapped it shut again. Not only was it not really a nice thing to say, but it would also give Doyle too much ammunition—the berk already thought the blue-eyed elf looked like Bodie, misguided as the notion might be—all he, Bodie, needed was more snide comments from Doyle about their relative mass ...

The two elves settled on Bodie's hand with a tired sigh, and Cheese mumbled: "We solved the problem, the immediate one at least. Now we'll take you to your rooms. That way," he pointed, "it's not very far."

So off they went, after the two elves had safely ensconced themselves on Bodie's shoulder.

On their way, an overwrought Chalk started a shrill, trilled explanation. From what Bodie could gather, it seemed that the LSD had been safely flushed out of the machine, and the Lego production was now back on track. But of course the incident had caused a delay in their schedule, so now they would have to work triple shifts until Christmas Eve. The surveillance elf, added Cheese, was tired from having worked double shifts for the past three weeks, so he had fallen asleep and seen nothing. However, tufts of reindeer pelt had been found, confirming everybody's guess as to the authors of the practical joke.

Cheese sighed again, looking positively forlorn: "And we still have to write our report, in triplicate, and hand it to Father Christmas. And of course it's all useless, he'll never go up against his beloved reindeer!"

At this, Chalk made a sour face, and snorted loudly. Doyle's eyes narrowed and he took on his 'I Can't Stand Injustice' air, but mercifully said nothing, and walked on. *Thank God the golly is too tired to rant*, thought Bodie.

"... And here's your room," said Cheese, making a sweeping gesture with his arm

that set all his little bells a-tingle. Bodie sighed with relief. Despite their quarters not being 'very far', they had been meandering down endless panelled corridors and huge plush rooms for what seemed like hours, with the elves pointing them out the main areas of the house, trying at least to make Bodie and Doyle aware of its layout. The bloody place was *huge*, which was incredible given that all you could see from the outside was a tiny, cosy little cottage.

"We're sorry we haven't shown you the scene of the crime, the reindeer exercise ground that is, but of course we'd better wait until morning. You can't see anything outside at night," finished Chalk.

Doyle raised an eyebrow: "Morning? I thought we were way beyond the Arctic Circle here, and tonight is the winter solstice! It should be night for the whole winter ..."

"Yes, well, technically we are, but ..." Chalk raked a tiny hand into curls whose diminutive size didn't help them look less disordered, and launched into a lengthy, obscure explanation on Derogations to the Laws of Physics Under Special Conditions.

Bodie just shrugged, and tuned the elf out. He was willing to catalogue The Impossibility of Winter Mornings at the North Pole as just another aberration, like the tesseract spatial properties of Father Christmas's cottage. Bodie did a mental double-take: how did he know that word, now? He looked resigned at his better half, who was trying stubbornly (and mostly unsuccessfully) to make sense of it all, and sighed.

At exactly the same moment, Cheese did the same, rolling his tiny blue eyes heavenwards. They mouthed 'snap' at each other, smirking amusedly. On closer examination, Bodie realised that the long-suffering, affectionate air with which Cheese was looking at his tiny companion was eerily familiar, only he couldn't place it exactly ... Bodie puzzled over the question for a while, but was soon

ambushed by a huge yawn. It was very late, and he was really tired. Time to put a foot down. He grabbed a still-discussing Doyle by the nearest arm and dragged him inside their room, then he took the two elves off his own shoulder and deposited them delicately on the floor, waving them good-bye. Waving back, Cheese bounced off and away, dragging a muttering and complaining Chalk by the arm, a delicate jingle echoing in their wake as they disappeared down the corridor.

"Hey, what did you do that for? It was interesting ..." complained Doyle, even as he started to explore the room, followed by his mate.

Even more so than the rest of the house, their room was hospitable in a warm, cosy way. The omnipresent wood covering floors and walls alternated dark oak and rich red mahogany; carpets, curtains and quilt displayed a harmony of rust and burgundy reds, on which the fire from the large stone fireplace played a resplendent tattoo of light and shadow. The huge four-poster bed occupied pride of place to the left of the fireplace, in front of which stood two plush armchairs and a round, carved table. To the right was a large window, its gauzy curtains now covered with heavy velvet ones of deep scarlet.

"Uh," said Bodie, "looks like one of those high-class brothels I found you in and rescued you from in that bizarre medieval dream I told you about ..." He ignored the exasperated, rude noise Doyle made, and cast a look at the dimensions of the bed, for which 'double' would be an inadequate description. Bodie felt a blush stain his face. Yes, Father Christmas had seen them all right, but this was rubbing it in! On second thoughts, maybe the huge bed wasn't such a bad idea -- if this Device thing really was out of order ... Admittedly, the medieval dream was a bit shallow, but it was also an undeniably jolly good romp. The bit where they writhed madly and passionately on the four-poster bed, for example ... Bodie

smiled and tried out the bed, carefully bouncing on it. It was perfect: not too soft, not too hard, just the way he liked it. He looked at his mate, who was searching the place minutely. *Bless his tenacious little heart*, thought Bodie, since Doyle was on all fours trying to check under the armchairs, which presented Bodie with an interesting and inspirational rear view. *Now, if only Doyle would go along with the dream for once ...* "Can't you stop being on duty, Doyle? Just accept that we're in the Twilight Bloody Zone, will you -- it's easier."

Doyle shrugged, getting up and standing in front of the merrily lit fireplace: "I'm just trying to make sense of this, that's all -- hey, there's a bottle here that looks promising! Want a drink?"

Bodie scooted off the bed and made a beeline for his partner, grabbing the proffered tumbler, and sipping the clear amber liquid. Pure malt whisky, definitely excellent stuff -- Bodie had a sudden vision of Cowley offering the bottle to Father Christmas as part of their give and take of 'wee favours', and almost choked. Another thing that was better just to accept without thinking too much ...

A short time later, tired and mellowed by the whisky, Bodie and Doyle undressed and went to bed, crawling under the thick, soft duvet with a satisfied sigh. The fire was now a softly-glowing heap of embers, suffusing the room with an intimacy-inducing reddish hue.

Somehow deeply content despite all the bizarre events of the day, Bodie sighed and scooted affectionately closer to his mate -- only to receive a hard thump in the ribs.

"Bodie! Not in Father Christmas's house! The bloody sod can see everything! Sees you when you're sleeping and, most importantly, when you aren't!"

"Nah, not now -- otherwise why ask for our help? He looked damned embarrassed about that Device thing he uses. Probably did break it himself by sitting on it by mistake. Or maybe he blew its lenses peering too closely into

women's underwear. The old maniac probably spends all his time like that while the elves work triple shifts ..."

"Bodie!" Doyle was sputtering with laughter. As he calmed down a bit, however, he went on: "Who do you think it is anyway? I mean the killer," asked Doyle, no longer resisting Bodie's pull into an embrace.

"Uh, dunno, really—we barely spoke to anyone after all, if you don't count the elves."

"Tomorrow we should interview some other elves, then the reindeer -- and don't forget the toys. I'd like to start with those Action Men, they look creepy ..."

Bodie snorted in exasperation: "You never let it go, do you? And can you please stop wriggling, I'm spraining my wrist here."

"You have cold hands, of course I'm wriggling! Oh God, I do hope he can't see us—uhmf—"

"You talk too much," said Bodie after a somewhat lengthy silence. For once, Doyle was too breathless to reply.

The following morning Bodie was awoken by a cheerful, if tuneless, whistling. Doyle was pottering in front of the fireplace, stirring up the fire, and warming up some water in a venerable-looking kettle. He had also drawn the heavy curtains aside.

Bodie yawned, and glanced owlishly around. Bright, cold (and geographically impossible) morning light was now filtering through the flimsy curtains. The creamy gauze of the fabric only slightly blurred the view of pristine snow-covered slopes, pine-covered mountains in the background, and frolicking reindeer. *Reindeer*, thought Bodie, and groaned as he remembered what they were there for. Doyle came back to bed, carrying two steaming mugs on a tray laden with biscuits and cakes. Bodie brightened considerably, and proceeded,

methodically and thoroughly, to dispose of the contents of the tray. Even Doyle seemed more inclined to slurp his hot and satisfyingly strong tea than to speculate about the origins of the breakfast goodies.

"What do you say to starting with the reindeer?" said Bodie through a slice of Christmas log, and pointed to the window. Doyle looked out at the frolicking animals, and shuddered.

"God, they make me think of Lucas and McCabe when they're feeling frisky ... Do we have to?"

Bodie sighed gloomily: "Father Christmas may have a few problems seeing everything at the moment, but I'm sure Cowley doesn't—I can see him materialising in the room now and telling us to get on our bikes ..."

Doyle jumped out of bed and poured himself into his trousers before realising Bodie was merely speculating. Doyle cast a withering glance at his mate; a glance that went totally wasted, as Bodie stared at Doyle's jeans in disbelief, mentally adding the speed at which Doyle had poured himself into them to the list of supernatural phenomena they were experiencing. Bodie then shrugged and started in turn to get dressed, fleetingly regretting that the peaceful morning mood had been broken before they could stage a repeat of the nice, cosy (and, hopefully, un-Father-Christmas-watched) performance of the night before.

As Bodie and Doyle were stepping out of the room they heard a chiming sound. Looking down, they could see the two elves bouncing up and down on the sill, trying hard to attract the men's attention before they were squashed underfoot.

Bodie eyed them suspiciously—*how did they know we were ready just now?*—and then bent down to pick them up. He offered his hand, and the elves stepped onto it. In the morning light, and not being so tired, Bodie realised that while Cheese seemed eager to take these rides on his hand, Chalk was moving very gingerly. He actually clung convulsively to Bodie's thumb and squeezed his eyes

shut as Bodie lifted them to his shoulder, depositing them as delicately as possible. "So, where are we off to?" asked Doyle, poking the curly-haired elf just to see him go green and clutch desperately at the fibres of Bodie's jumper. He had noted Chalk's discomfort, too. Cheese gave Doyle a stern look and said: "The reindeer pen and exercise ground, we thought. Unless you have a better idea?"

And off they went down the long, winding corridors, Bodie swatting away Doyle's poking finger, muttering: "Give the poor sod a break, Doyle, he's scared of heights."

After a short stop to don their overcoats, Bodie, Doyle and the elves were trudging in the pristine -- and clinging -- snow, little white puffs of vapour escaping from their mouths with every breath. The snowy field was wide and open, dotted with pretty pine trees and holly bushes. A lumpy snowman, with a half-chewed carrot for a nose and a dark sleeveless coat on, was smiling lopsidedly at them, with a watermelon-rind for a mouth. Bodie had just added 'Watermelon in December at the North Pole' to his List, when Doyle yelped and jumped, scowling menacingly at him.

"Bodie! This is no time to be funny!" yelled Doyle, furiously. "How many times I have told you not to pinch my bum when we're working?"

Bodie looked in confusion at his mate. "I haven't done anything, Doyle, honest! And how could I have? I was walking *in front* of you."

Cheese harrumphed to attract their attention. "Ehm, I think I know who it was ...". He pointed a tiny finger at the snowman.

Bodie and Doyle stared at the lumpy -- and utterly armless -- snowman, blinking. "How?" they chorused.

Chalk intervened, mildly impatient. "Oh, never mind him. He's just a practical joker. Leave him alone, he just likes to get everyone's attention. We should get going, we still have lots to do ...". And he tugged at Bodie's hair as if he was jolting

a bridle, apparently having overcome his fear of heights as he stamped his little jingling foot down imperiously. *The resemblance goes deeper and deeper*, thought Bodie resignedly and, after a final malevolent glance at the jeering snowman, they trudged onward.

The pen and exercise ground were a large fenced space, flanked by what were probably stables: large squat constructions resembling army barracks, hidden from view of the house by a little hillock. "Hum, I take it nobody from the house saw anything, as the exercise ground is a bit out of the way?" Doyle asked the elves. Cheese nodded. "Yep. Mind you, not that anyone especially wants to look at them, they're such an unpleasant lot."

They were rounding the corner of the main building, when they almost bumped into two hulking, huddled horselike forms. A commotion ensued. Bodie could guess more than he could actually see, but if pressed to describe the events he would say that one reindeer poked another one's haunches with its antlers, whinnying something in a hurry. The other one jumped, dropped what looked like a large ... cigarette? ... on the snow, and hastened to bury it with its stomping hooves, while the first reindeer madly waved all available limbs about, vainly trying to dispense a thick, aromatic pall of smoke.

Doyle's eyebrows went up: "When I was with the Drug Squad, we --" Bodie glared at him. Surely the sod didn't want to investigate anything else apart from the murder? The faster they solved the case, the earlier they could get back and finally enjoy the time off Cowley had deprived them of to send them to this madhouse. This definitely, wasn't the time to pick up small-time weed-puffers!

The two reindeer turned towards the newcomers, smiling a little too widely to be convincing. " 'Ello, guvs!"

The elves, who had so far simply glanced in distaste at the smelly creatures, started to explain that they were showing the two inspectors around, and introduced Bodie and Doyle.

The reindeers' smiles disappeared. The first one said, with disdain: "Labour inspectors, uh? We saw you yesterday. You know that close up you look like these elves 'ere?"

Bodie and Doyle looked at each other, each of them wearing a 'told you so' expression, then they glanced at the elves, who were looking alternately at them and at each other, faces wavering between the flabbergasted and the disbelieving, little bodies all a-quiver and chiming with surprise. The elves started a rapid chimed repartee that set all of Bodie's *déjà vu* signals off. He smiled, and regretfully turned to the work at hand, giving his attention back to the reindeer.

If the first reindeer had been unfriendly, the second one was positively hostile, muttering: "Some frigging bleeding 'eart social workers, uh? Well, we ain't got nothing to hide 'ere, guvs, all regular as clockwork. We do our jobs, and that's it. At least, most of us ..."

The reindeer exchanged a meaningful, utterly jaundiced look—a look silently but duly noted by Bodie and Doyle.

Cheese pinned on his most charming smile, vibrated his bells with all his might, and started to wheedle the reindeer. At the same time Chalk assumed a threatening posture and a very convincing mean smirk. Bodie, who recognised a classic 'good cop, bad cop' drill when he saw one, readied himself to go along the same track—sparing a moment to admire the way such a tiny being as Chalk could look and act so threatening and mean. Well, whoever said that only big creatures could be mean? Look at Chihuahuas, for example ... Bodie turned towards Doyle, to check who was going to play bad cop this time,

but Doyle had apparently decided that more direct action was needed, because he thrust his right fist forward towards the reindeer. Bodie's hand went to his gun, and waited there, clutching the big Magnum. Doyle's fist opened, revealing a handful of sugar cubes. Doyle smiled coldly and said: "Maybe we can find a way to do each other a favour, eh?"

The reindeer smiled back, and the small group found themselves on their way to the pens, to the loud sound of munching and crunching.

"... And this is the main exercise ground," said the first reindeer, spluttering through a mouthful of sugar. In a fit of loquacity (either weed- or glucose-induced) he had revealed that his name was Alastair. He gestured dangerously and expansively towards a rather large, and decidedly smelly, track.

Albeit busy ducking Alastair's flailing hooves, Bodie managed to add an item to his List of Weird Things: 'Reindeer Walking Upright on Hind Legs'. Meanwhile, Doyle was trying to decide whether the smell was simply reindeer sweat or if someone had forgotten a corpse in some corner.

There was indeed a pack of reindeer exercising rather briskly, all intent on what looked like a Monty-Python-choreographed version of leap-frog—or maybe they were... Bodie blushed. Surely they wouldn't ...

As if on cue, the curly-haired elf piped: "Oh, this reminds me: could we have a look at the doe-harem?"

The second reindeer immediately prickled up: "What for? I mean, why would the does have a reason to talk to labour inspectors? They're treated very well, all the best straw and food—and a doctor to check them regularly ..." Bodie looked at Doyle's suddenly sour expression and groaned inwardly. *Here comes another of his 'whores are people too' lectures*, he thought ruefully.

Doyle opened his mouth, then snapped it shut, as if realising the futility of haranguing the hoofed lout who stared at

him insolently. The deadlock was broken by Alastair who harrumphed, thumped the other reindeer in the face with a hoof (*ouch*, thought Bodie) and tried to be conciliatory: "Come on, Tristram, be a mate! They just want to have a look at all that nice doe meat. And who can blame them, eh?" He winked and leered, then popped another sugar cube into his mouth.

Doyle went livid, and opened his mouth again, just as Chalk went into a flurry of furious, and mostly unintelligible, jingling. Bodie looked at Chalk, then at Doyle, an affectionately amused smile stretching his mouth. The chiming tirade was once again interrupted by loud whinnying and brawling—a fight had erupted in the middle of the exercise ground.

"Hey, what's that?" asked Bodie, rather impressed with the way hooves and antlers could be used in a dirty fight.

Alastair shrugged, while Tristram snickered: "Just some difference of opinion over the shifts, probably."

"Shifts?" asked Doyle, interested. There was no mistaking the *schadenfreude* glinting in Tristram's little beady eyes, nor the undertones in his snorting bout of laughter. Alastair appeared flustered, and looked around as if searching for inspiration. With a faint echo of Tristram's malignant joy suffusing his features, the curly haired elf chimed in: "How many reindeer are there at the moment, Alastair?"

Alastair grimaced, then tried to count on his hooves. Doyle murmured to Bodie, "Wonder if their maths is base four?" Bodie gave him an uncomprehending look, and Doyle looked up heavenwards. Finally, after a lengthy hesitation, Alastair blurted out: "Forty-two!" Bodie mentally added 'The Question to the Answer' to his List.

Sweetly and innocently smiling, Chalk pressed on: "And how many reindeer can pull Father Christmas's sleigh?"

Tristram snorted: "Six, plus His Bloody Highness the Lightbulb."

The same sweet, innocent smile was now on Doyle's lips. "I see ... And who decides whose turn it is to pull the sleigh?"

Alastair and Tristram both launched in a resentful explanation. It sounded like the system was complicated enough to fuel lots of feelings of injustice and to ensure plenty of festering resentments. Doyle's smile was now shark-like, and he said nothing, as the two reindeer became more and more animated.

"... So, quite apart from my supplemental gizmoid points, I will have been on pulling duty three times more than Tristram here has!" concluded Alastair smugly. Tristram looked at him hard, then swung his hoof. The impact with Alastair's nose produced a loud whacking noise, a shriek of pain and a return blow from Alastair. Bodie and Doyle ducked to avoid the swinging antlers, but Tristram was not so fast. *Ouch*, though Bodie again, as he scrambled out of the melee, checking that Doyle had had the sense to do the same, and that both elves were still attached to his shoulder.

The scuffle was attracting the attention of a few other reindeer, who started to cheer noisily and bet on the outcome of the fight.

"Come on, Tristram, show him who's toughest!"

"A bale of hay on Alastair!"

"Hit him harder, lower! Pretend he's bloody Rudolph!"

Bodie and Doyle regrouped to one side, and started questioning the elves. "So, how deep is this resentment over sleigh duty among the reindeer?"

Cheese shrugged. "As deep as their tiny minds will allow. They'll all be banding together against Rudolph in five minutes."

Seeing Bodie and Doyle's puzzlement, Chalk explained. "See, Rudolph is guaranteed a place regardless, because of his red nose—so all the other reindeer are rather angry with him."

Bodie and Doyle looked at each other hopefully. Maybe they'd found the

culprit, or culprits, and they could go on holiday?

"What if one or more reindeer had decided to make the odds more even, and got rid of poor Archibald?" asked Doyle. The elves looked at each other, considering the hypothesis. "Well, Archibald *was* on duty rather a lot, lately ..."

"... I heard a rumour about why, too!" exclaimed the blue-eyed elf smugly.

All three others looked at him, and he went on: "Well, a doe from the harem told me that Archibald had influence with Rudolph, who in turn had had a word with Father Christmas."

"What type of influence?" asked Doyle.

"What were you doing, talking to does?" asked Chalk.

Cheese shrugged. "Just being friendly with the poor cow—it's not illegal is it? She was feeling a bit low, so I made her a cup of tea, and we talked a bit. Felt sorry for her ..." His lips jutted out in an aggressive pout. "It was when you were all busy with the labour dispute ... I was feeling low, too ..."

Chalk went red, but before he could reply Doyle cut in, impatiently: "What type of influence, I said? We're not here to discuss your domestic problems."

Both elves glared at him, then Cheese replied sullenly: "How do I know? She didn't say. And anyway, most of their gossip is just inventions and lies."

Bodie and Doyle looked at each other and said: "Let's go and talk to Rudolph."

So, off they went, to Rudolph's private paddock and stable. *It figures*, thought Bodie. *Spoilt red-nosed brat. How odd, my ears haven't stopped ringing since we started walking.* Bodie opened his mouth to tell Doyle about it, but as he turned to his side, his eye caught a glimpse of movement on his left shoulder. He closed his mouth, smiling. *Looks like they have a temper too*, he thought. The two elves on his shoulder were furiously chiming and jingling at each other. If he tried hard, Bodie could make out hissed phrases.

"You're just jealous, sunshine."

"Don't 'sunshine' me, you great oaf, or I'll hit you!"

"Ha! You and whose army?"

Bodie tuned out the angry noises, leaving the elves their privacy. Once again he glanced affectionately, and a bit ruefully, at his better half. Doyle looked back in puzzlement, shrugged and briefly returned the smile—then happily pointed at a sizeable stable, from which a faint red glow could be glimpsed despite the rather bright morning light. Looked like Rudolph was in.

They were approaching the glowing stable, when suddenly Bodie gave a scream and disappeared. A moment of stunned silence was followed by Doyle's frantic lunge forward and by a string of curses seemingly coming from a large hole in the snowy ground.

Bodie's tousled dark head peeked out of the hole, still swearing profusely "Bloody fucking booby trap in the frigging snow ..." He looked at his left shoulder: "Hell, I lost the elves! Oi, Doyle, give us a hand, before I step on them!" Bodie's head ducked down again, still muttering and cursing.

Doyle lay down in the snow, yelping involuntarily as his nether regions made contact with the ground, and peered down the hole. Yes, it was a booby trap. Someone must have dug a hole in the ground and then covered it with what looked like branches. The snow had done the rest.

Down the hole, Bodie was on all fours, pawing the broken twigs and calling: "Chalk! Cheese!"

After a few tense seconds, a feeble jingling call directed Bodie, and he soon extracted a dazed Chalk from among the pine twigs and needles. After a few sonorously chimed swearwords, the elf seemed to realise he was hanging by the scruff of his neck, held by a giant thumb and forefinger, and that a huge pair of

blue eyes were looking concernedly at him. He yelled, and wriggled frantically: "Put me down, put me down, for God's sake! Oh, shit, what's happened?"

Once safely on the ground, the elf groaned and clutched his head. "What happened? Oh, hell, I lost my hat again! Cheese says I should have it sewn to my—CHEESE! Where is he?! CHEESE!" The elf scrambled about, eyes wide with anxiety, a flurry of pine needles flying in all directions. As a tousled dark elven head emerged, swearing profusely, Chalk jumped on him, half hugging, half checking for injuries, and jingling with relief as he found none. Cheese was clutching his mate's tiny hat, and clumsily and very carefully he tried to put it on Chalk's head, patting the disordered curls with shaking hands. Realising that they had an audience, Cheese blushed, and tried (not very successfully) to nudge away his affectionate mate. He chimed faintly: "What happened? Oh shit ... My head hurts."

Doyle intervened: "Someone dug a booby trap, and the three of you fell into it. Bodie, hand me the elves, I'm freezing my assets here in the snow—and get out yourself, it's not too deep."

After some more scrambling, they were all together again, and could cautiously proceed, the elves now ensconced on Doyle's shoulders. "I just hope no-one *ever* hears of this," he muttered darkly to Bodie, casting uneasy looks at his shoulder as they went on. The two elves were making cow's eyes at each other in a decidedly sickly fashion. "As if those bloody idiotic dreams of yours weren't enough! Fancying me with pointed ears, for God's sake—what have I done to deserve it?"

After a while, they stopped in front of the stable, and Bodie mused: "I wonder why Rudolph hasn't come out yet, we made enough noise to raise the dead."

Doyle shrugged, and knocked. No answer. Four pairs of eyes looked at each other in puzzlement, then Doyle knocked again, louder. Bodie took out his gun,

and nodded at Doyle, who did the same. They put themselves into position, told the elves to brace themselves, and Bodie kicked the door in. They swiftly commandoed their way into a cosily furnished stable. The furniture looked pretty enough, all natural pine and floral chintz curtains, but the place was an absolute mess: dirty plates, cups and glasses littered the table, clothes strewn everywhere. A loud snore came from a quilt-covered heap on the bed: the quilt was all aglow with a soft red light seeping from under it. The place reeked of stale sweat, tobacco smoke and cheap alcohol. Bodie and Doyle advanced gingerly towards the bed, guns trained on it. Doyle's foot impacted with a bottle, and he picked it up. Vodka. Empty. He threw it at Bodie, and holstered his gun. "I think Rudolph here won't be much of a danger—he's sleeping off a drunken binge."

Bodie caught the bottle, whistled, and reholstered his gun too. He put the bottle down on the table, after fastidiously removing a dirty sock from the table-top. (Item on List: 'Reindeer Wear No Clothes but Have Dirty Socks and Underwear Lying Around'). Doyle pulled the quilt away, exclaiming loudly: "Wakey wakey, Rudy! You've got guests!" The glowing heap shifted, groaned, and started to swear hoarsely and filthily, only to be interrupted by a phlegmy cough. A hung-over, red-eyed and red-nosed muzzle appeared. Rudolph stared owlishly, belched, then rasped: "Got a cigarette? God, I think I need a drink ..."

He got off the bed and started to rummage among the debris, muttering to himself. Bodie retreated; Rudolph was reeking to high heaven, and he badly needed a shave (another Item for the List, 'Reindeer with Beard Stubble', went up in Bodie's head). With an exclamation of triumph, Rudolph unearthed a semi-full bottle, uncapped it and took a long pull from its contents. He seemed to revive at once, and to finally take in Bodie and Doyle's presence. "And who the hell are

you?" he growled, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he had met them repeatedly only the day before.

The elves jingled for attention, and introduced once again the 'labour inspectors'. Rudolph harrumphed, spat on the floor, and gestured vaguely for them to sit down. He then flopped onto another chair, carefully putting the bottle down in front of him.

Doyle started conversationally: "Do you know there's a booby trap outside your place?"

Rudolph gave a disgusted snort, and nodded: "Must be those antlered cretins! They're all green with envy, the bumbling idiots—probably hope I'll break a leg so they can shoot me!"

Bodie and Doyle eyed each other, mutely exchanging messages on how to proceed. Doyle went on: "Am I to understand that you and the other reindeer are not on the best of terms?"

Rudolph stared at them for a second, then started to laugh, an unpleasant, raucous noise. He took another swig at his bottle, then stared dumbly into the middle distance, which to him must be suffused with a soft, glowing red light. In fact, his eyes squinted a little and must therefore hold his bright nose in their sights.

Bodie thought that Rudolph was probably seeing faintly red-glowing insects climbing up the walls -- then he remembered that this was the reindeer that had guided them on the long sleigh flight to the Pole, and felt suddenly very sick.

Cheese broke the silence, cutting straight to the question: "Yet Frances the Doe said that you were all chummy with poor Archibald just before he died?"

Rudolph made a venomous face: "That little turd! Trying to blackmail me, telling Father Christmas I drink too much! ME! Rudolph, the Guiding Light! Look at my nose! Who is it that guides the bloody sleigh in the snowstorms, eh? Certainly not those dumb, testosterone-riddled antler-brains! Look at my hoof here—steady as a rock!" Rudolph held out a

foreleg, which was indeed quite steady. Then Bodie noticed that the rest of Rudolph's body was shaking really badly. *Note to self*, he thought, *we are going back on foot.*

Doyle pushed on: "So you really hated Archibald, eh? Just how much did you want to silence him then?"

Rudolph stared at Doyle, blinked, took another swig at his bottle, and suddenly fell backwards, crashing chair and all onto the floor. He started to snore loudly. "Bloody hell, Doyle! He's out cold!" said Bodie, awed. "Do you think it was him?" he added hopefully.

Doyle shrugged. "Most likely. Let's tell Father Christmas so he can decide what to do with him."

"Might find him a job as an Aeroflot pilot, maybe?" quipped Bodie. Doyle and the elves groaned. Bodie went on, seriously this time: "Doyle, shouldn't we tie him up, in case he runs?"

Doyle shook his head: "Don't think he'll wake up for a while. And anyway, he won't think he's under suspicion, his brain's too pickled."

Just at that very moment, a huge commotion could be heard, and a couple of reindeer galloped in, shouting: "Another one! The killer got another one!"

Barely able to make sense of what was going on, but definitely unwilling to accept a reindeer-back ride (as Doyle put it bitchingly, "I draw the line at this, Bodie—this is NOT a bloody Walt Disney film, and I am *not* riding a reindeer!"), Bodie, Doyle and the elves ran towards the main exercise grounds.

A frantic Alastair ushered them towards a large, hot room, luxuriously carpeted and furnished in an ornate, heavy oriental style. A huge pool, mosaicked with coloured marbles, lay in the middle of the room, its water glinting with reflections from the golden dome canopying it. To

the right was a marbled and enamelled archway over which a vaguely arabic-looking inscription read 'Steam Room'. To the left, a corresponding archway hid a shower. A largish group of sexily-clad, heavily-made-up does was huddling in the farthest corner of the room, bleating loudly.

"Bloody hell, the harem!" Exclaimed Doyle. Bodie opened his mouth to tell Doyle about his Arabian Nights dream, then decided this was not the time or the place, and started instead to elbow his way towards the does, past the growing crowd of curious animals. In doing so, he almost stumbled on the bloodied carcass of a dead reindeer. The body was halfway in and halfway out of the shower; a stiffened hoof was still clinging to the torn shower curtain. The body had been hacked apart savagely, and blood was splattered all over the place; a small river of it was flowing sluggishly in a narrowing spiral towards the shower drain. Doyle peered over Bodie's shoulder, and made a sound of disgust, his stomach turning at the strong smell of venison.

In the hushed silence (the does had gone quiet as they saw the men), Bodie's comment was very loud: "That reminds me of Ulla, that Swedish air-stewardess I used to date—she *loved* reindeer steak! Not bad, tastes a bit like horse ..."

Doyle winced, and thumped Bodie hard. Countless large, velvety eyes were now staring *very* hostilely at them. Bodie had the good grace to look sheepish, but that didn't help much to dissipate the frozen atmosphere of the room.

In the uncomfortable silence, Chalk's imperious chiming could be heard very clearly: "OK, you lot, what's happened? And can someone help me find Father Christmas, please?" Tristram nodded and galloped off.

A pretty young doe came forward, trembling slightly. "Uh, ah ... Dudley here was taking a shower, you know, after we, uh—" she blushed, "And I'd stepped out to make him some tea—"

Doyle snorted. "And then I heard horrible noises: screaming, very shrill, and a fight—" She started to cry, covering her large doe eyes with dainty, bright-red-painted hooves. "And then, a terrible silence! And I was so very scared, I called for help, and we went in, and, and—" She sobbed loudly, pointing at the bloody carcass on the floor.

The other does came forward, surrounding her, offering comfort and handkerchiefs to stem the flow of black mascara freely expanding all over her face. Everyone started to talk loudly and at once, expressing indignation, advancing theories, giving blame, and starting up a fair number of fights.

Bodie sighed. Of course, no-one had seen anything, despite all the blasted blabbing deafening them. They had spent the last hour going around the crowd and talking to everyone, discreetly asking questions, flashing sugar cubes for information, but to no avail. And now, frustratingly, they were back to square one. Rudolph could hardly have done it, cleaned himself and preceded them into his stable, all without falling into the booby trap!

Resisting the urge to kick Dudley's mortal and weighty remains, Bodie took Doyle to one side and explained his theory to him. Doyle hummed doubtfully: "Yes of course, that's what I thought too. But we can't rule Rudolph out completely. He might still have killed Archibald, and someone else did Dudley in."

"And for what reason, Doyle? Not to mention the improbability of having two Jack the Rippers loose in the same area? Come off it, Sherlock—this isn't some Victorian crime story!"

"Of course it's bloody unlikely; I was just trying to cover all the possibilities. Actually, how about Rudolph managed to do Dudley in as well? The doe said she took her time before calling for help—and that booby trap! Maybe it was Rudolph

who dug it so that any visitor would be slowed down and he could get home through the back door just before we arrived."

Bodie gave the hypothesis some thought. "Maybe, even if he was totally drunk. We should time it, re-enact the scenario—but let's talk to Father Christmas first, eh?" Doyle nodded in agreement and they turned back towards the scene of the crime.

Father Christmas had just arrived, looking all puffed up and apoplectic, and trying his best to calm down his panicked crew. Chalk and Cheese, who had done their share of interrogations, rushed towards their boss to fill him in on the details. After a while the elves reappeared and signalled for Bodie to let them climb back up onto his shoulder. Chalk piped up at him: "Father Christmas wants to talk to you, of course, but at the moment he's very busy. He'd like you to get back to the house with us and talk to some more people, while he takes care of the situation here. We brought the team who developed 'The Little Detective Kit' to carry out the Forensics."

Looking down, Bodie and Doyle could see a bevy of pink-tailed little white mice scurrying about, carrying a variety of rather weird-looking, metallic-shining implements. Every mouse was wearing thick glasses and a white coat. Mildly alarmed, the two men retreated quickly back towards the house.

A while later, the long walk back from the reindeer exercise ground over, Bodie and Doyle opted for a cup of tea and lunch in their room before proceeding with the interrogations. Chalk and Cheese excused themselves, as they had to go and check on the Lego machine again, so Bodie and Doyle found themselves alone in front of a plentiful table and a roaring fire.

Bodie sighed, drinking scalding hot tea: "I needed this! All that traipsing in the snow, me feet were frozen solid!"

Doyle slurped back contentedly, a cosy silence settling in for a while. Predictably, Doyle could not allow it to last. "This whole thing is totally crazy, Bodie. It could have been any of those reindeer, they're a bunch of crazed thugs, all madly jealous of each other. And we can't rule Rudolph out yet, either. Not to mention the rest of the bloody natives! Elves everywhere, not to mention toys. We'll never see the end of this!"

Bodie frowned: "The reindeer have a good motive—and don't forget the does! A few of them had nasty bruises—I somehow don't think they have an easy life ..."

Doyle sighed, and slurped his tea again: "I noticed. You know, this is disgusting! Father Christmas keeps those thuggish reindeer under those bloody meaningless sleigh shift rules so they're always at each other's throats—then he blandishes them with a harem. And I do wonder how those poor does ended up there! I think there's a sore need for a real labour inspection, and the Vice squad to boot. And I can't believe Father Christmas never noticed the state Rudolph's in, or the dope the others smoke."

Bodie looked into the fire, glumly. "The inspectors were here, remember? And found nothing."

"They were bribed, more likely!" exclaimed Doyle. The incipient tirade was interrupted by a knock at the door. Chalk and Cheese bounced in wearily. The elves settled on the table, Cheese gazing longingly at the crumbs of Swiss roll scattered on Bodie's plate. Bodie pushed one in his direction. The elf beamed and attacked it with relish, undaunted by the disapproving remarks his tiny mate uttered, concerning a certain expanding midriff. Bodie looked pointedly at Doyle, and pushed more crumbs towards Cheese. Doyle sighed.

"Chalk, Cheese—about those does ... I mean, how come they ended up in the

harem? How does Father Christmas justify it?" asked Doyle.

Chalk sighed, shaking his head in disgust. "Look, this is embarrassing, you know? I mean, Father Christmas is our boss, but it's not like we agree with all he does."

Cheese looked very unhappy, despite the food. "We try hard to be loyal, it's important to us, but—" he muttered.

Bodie asked: "So you don't like his methods, fair enough: the man is crooked. And we can see you're severely overworked. Why don't you leave then?"

"And do what? I mean, I thought about packing it in, but then, this is all we're good at ..." mumbled Cheese sadly.

Chalk snorted: "Cheese forgets to mention the little matter of our indenture ... We can't leave until the contract's over."

Doyle looked horrified. "You're *slaves*?!"

The elves looked glum: "More or less. He owns us: he says he could sell our bodies to science if he wanted to—" Bodie and Doyle looked at each other sharply and a bit uneasily—"He even threatened us to weld us inside those animated metal robots, you know those toys that go clunk, clunk, bang, bang ..." Bodie and Doyle stared in utter horror at the unheard-of cruelty. Chalk went on: "But of course he has a better deal in keeping us at work round the clock, putting together his bloody toys and cleaning up after the damned reindeer! God, I hate it when it's our turn to shovel their shitty paddocks!"

Doyle opened his mouth to express solidarity with the elves' lot, then he focused on Chalk's last sentence instead. He said: "You elves hate the reindeer, too. You said yesterday that Father grants them virtual impunity, and you have to deal with the consequences."

Cheese said forcefully: "Everybody hates the guts of those filthy parasites! All they do is forage, fuck, fight—and *very* occasionally get the plum job of zooming about with the sleigh! Oh, and let's not forget their wee bouts of humour, like putting LSD into Lego machines, or

reversing the gears of the manure-gathering engine ..."

Bodie clapped his hands to his forehead: "Bloody hell! We'll never find out who it is! We'll be stuck here forever!"

Chalk and Cheese looked at the humans, aghast: "You aren't thinking it could be one of *us*?"

"Well, you said you all hate the reindeer!"

Doyle said tartly. "And someone in your jolly loyal bunch has already grassed on Father Christmas to the Labour Commission. I mean, not that I disapprove, but that certainly isn't such a shining example of loyalty, despite all your lofty concerns!"

Chalk went very red, and hung his head, without replying. Cheese stared at him, mouth hanging open. Bodie thought the blue-eyed elf looked like a particularly moronic fish. After a short silence, and a quick, snappy chiming between the two elves, Cheese asked slowly: "Are the two of us under suspicion as well?"

Doyle regarded them briefly, then shook his head. "No, you were with us when Dudley died. Besides, Chalk here tried to do the right thing by calling the inspectors -- don't worry, we won't tell the old fart, I mean Father. And believe me, when we're back I am going to find out why the inspectors didn't find anything amiss!"

Bodie commented gloomily: "Everyone's got a price, Doyle."

Doyle looked back at him, and said kindly, smiling: "*Almost* everyone, Sunshine. Almost everyone."

Cheese said: "So, what are we supposed to do next?"

"I suppose we should go and talk to Father Christmas—and then start interviewing everybody. Oh God, we'll spend years here!"

This time, it was Doyle in front, elves on his shoulder, while Bodie walked a couple of paces behind, idly looking

around into the many corridors filled with pale, fatigued elves at work, and the many rooms stacked up with toys. A small, almost empty room to his left attracted his attention. He had at first thought it empty, but then his peripheral vision had caught some movement. He stepped inside. And gaped. He could scarcely believe his eyes—not to mention his ears!

Moans, lush and deep, came from a miniature four-poster bed.

"Oh, BoBo, you're fantastic! So tight and hot ..."

"Do it to me, DeeDee, do it harder! Ahhh!"

Doyle, realising they had left Bodie behind, retraced his steps, until he came up to the bulky shape of his partner, and looked curiously over his shoulder, to see what was keeping Bodie so distractedly intent. And he gaped and blushed, eyes bulging like a frog's.

On the tiny four-poster bed, two teddy bears were writhing together, locked in sweaty passion. The green-eyed teddy bear with the brown boucle-ed fur was lying on top of the black-furred, blue-eyed one, and they were ...

Stumbling, and clumsy with embarrassment, Bodie and Doyle rushed back into the corridor, hoping that the two bears had not noticed them—which was likely, given the enthusiasm with which they were going at it.

Bodie felt as red as Doyle looked, and as embarrassed.

"I can't believe I saw two teddy bears—" said Doyle, shaking his head. "Maybe we hallucinated it! I can't believe it! And the brown bear looked just like my old Ratty, too!"

Bodie felt himself go even redder, if possible, and mumbled: "The black bear was just like the one I used to have ..." He trailed off.

In the shocked silence, a chimed throat-clearing could be heard: "Uh, well, ehm -- if you could avoid mentioning what you saw to Father Christmas—he doesn't approve of involvement between the

personnel, especially the toys, since they'll have to be separated ..."

"Yes," added Chalk, "DeeDee and BoBo are desperate to avoid being found out -- and even more so not to be separated! They're trying so hard to be sent to the same child, but the old bastard won't have it!"

Despite his shock at the unexpected view, Doyle swore, a savage glint in his eyes: "If I were the killer, I'd stop prating about with the cattle, and go for Father Christmas himself! Much more satisfying!"

Bodie felt deeply sorry for the two poor bears. He sighed, a sad wistful expression on his face as he turned to look in the bears' direction one last time. They walked on.

In front of Father Christmas's door, they consulted their watches. "We're very early. Father Christmas said he couldn't see us until three. Should we try and have a look at those Action Men first? They have the weapons, if nothing else ..." Bodie groaned: "My feet are killing me, Doyle, and the action figures are miles away ... Let's see if Father Christmas can see us now."

Doyle, never able to resist that puppy look of Bodie's, gave in and knocked at the door. A series of strange, muffled sounds, followed by scrambling and shrill yelling, could be heard through the thick oak door.

Bodie and Doyle looked at each other. Had the killer heeded Doyle's advice and gone for Father Christmas? In a flash, they sprang into action, guns drawn and ready. The door fell open at the second powerful kick, they burst in—and froze.

A horrible, huge old hag, wearing a red velvet, fur-trimmed gown and a multi-coloured head-kerchief, was standing in the room, shrieking. Before either Bodie or Doyle could notice such details as the white beard covering her face, or the huge film poster of *Psycho* hanging over the mantelpiece, she took out an enormous knife and jumped at them, her voice shriller and louder by the minute,

screaming: "You saw Mother Christmas! You have to die! HO HO HO! DIE DIE DIE! HO HO HO!"

Both guns fired in unison. The horrible apparition staggered for a few paces, her grimacing face contorted with madness, then her knife fell to the ground with a clatter, followed by a massive, big-bosomed, lifeless body.

"Bloody hell, Doyle," breathed Bodie, "I think we killed Father Christmas!"

Epilogue. Cowley's office, 7th January

"... So you see, Sir. He was totally schizophrenic, a complete personality split. Father Christmas is supposed to be completely good, and the stress of having to live up to such a standard"—Doyle snorted ironically—"Well, some sort of stress anyway, it precipitated the crisis. His evil counterpart, Mother Christmas, took over periodically, and the other half most likely had no idea!"

Bodie went on: "We found her fingerprints corresponded to those left on Dudley's body, so the forensic mice said, and her knife is the one used to kill Archibald. No special motive, of course. Just crazy, random, mindless violence ..."

"As opposed to the wilful, scamming, unprincipled, exploitation the other half specialised in ..." muttered Doyle.

"What are you saying, 4.5?"

"Nothing, Sir. What's going to happen now, Sir?"

Cowley harrumphed, and swallowed some whisky, before explaining. His face looked a bit puffy and he was, uncharacteristically, unshaven. *The old bastard must be tired*, thought Doyle. *Wonder if there was pressure from above over this mess.* Cowley went on: "For the time being the elves have started a co-operative, to keep things running through Twelfth Night. The Device has been repaired, too—makes their task easier. We know now that it wasn't Chalk and

Cheese who broke it. Mother Christmas must have sabotaged it to be safe from accidental discovery, and then let the two elves be blamed. They're heading the co-op at the moment, by the way. Very busy, but they send regards. If all goes well, they hope they might be appointed permanently to the job, especially since they've managed so well during the investigation and after, when everyone else was panicking. While you took your good time returning! I can't understand why you chose to ski back, taking over a week, when there was a perfectly good reindeer-driven sleigh available! Bodie, you have a valid flying licence, you could easily have driven the sleigh—after all, it's mostly a question of letting that reindeer Rudolph drive ..."

Bodie shivered, and Doyle turned very pale. Cowley shrugged, and went on with his explanation: "However, the elves' appointment is not likely. They don't have the right background, and no connections, either. It's very much a question of image, you know. The Queen was thinking of naming a new Father Christmas, someone with the right background and connections; someone who looks the part, too. It seems there is already a favourite ..." He said no more, but looked around in circumspection, and gathered up a few folders on his desk, stacking them together. It was clearly the end of the interview, and Bodie and Doyle got up to leave.

On passing in front of Cowley's desk, Doyle took a casual glance behind it, where a half-open cardboard box sat next to the filing cabinet. The label on it read, 'Fatten Fast.' He raised his eyebrows, and looked back at Cowley, who was surreptitiously eating some sort of snack, whose wrapping matched the colours of the cardboard label. Doyle quickly turned again towards the door, trying to catch up with Bodie, and narrowly missed a harassed-looking Betty. She apologised, steadied the folded piece of red velvet cloth she was carrying, and made as if to enter Cowley's office. Doyle called her

back and handed her the tape measure she'd dropped on the floor. She grabbed it with a smile and left, closing the door behind her.

Blinking, Doyle walked up to Bodie, who was standing beside Betty's desk, his back to Doyle. Bodie turned, smiled and took a long pull from the can of Coca-Cola he was holding in his hand. "Look, Doyle, there's a box full of Cokes here on Betty's desk! Which is bizarre; she doesn't like the stuff ... Anyway, fancy a pound of sugar or two?" He handed Doyle a red and white can.

Doyle looked back towards Cowley's office, blinked again, then emitted a bizarre, strangled sound. He covered his face with his hands, and groaned, "You are never going to believe *this*, Bodie ..."

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