

S C R E W G E D
OR
NANNY'S
CHRISTMAS
CAROL



And finally, to bring our Dickensian Christmas to a fitting close, here is a very, very special reworking of that oft retold tale, A Christmas Carol..

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring...

Apart from Doyle, who was staring out his window with moody bad-temper, glowering at an innocent Christmas tree in the flat opposite.

Doyle hated Christmas. Hated its hypocrisy, hated its commerciality, hated it for the excuse it gave to so many bigots. Hated it even more for its spurious good cheer and fake games of happy families.

It was depressing, an absolute bugger of a day, and all he wanted was for it to be over. Typical, wasn't it? He'd rather Christmas didn't exist, but here he was, three days off, duty roster and sick-leave dovetailing to abandon him right there with time off for Christmas, the so-called festive season rammed down his throat like cod liver oil. Time-off? Seemed more like a prison sentence to him. Still, he consoled himself as he

twitched the curtain shut over the offensive view of seasonal festoonings, he was all set for the best time a man could have, given the circumstances and the mass hysteria of hypocrisy that gripped the nation for a few days self-indulgent slop. He had all the food he could ever eat, a bottle of gin and a generous supply of tonic, a nice bottle of brandy, not a Christmas tree or decoration in sight—not so much as a trace of tinsel to be seen, not in *his* flat—three new non-Christmas records so that he'd not have to put the radio on and be besieged by carols on the serious stations and whining Christmas hits on the pop one. His lone concession to the season: a present for himself, a brand new video, and several tapes to be watched thereon, protection against *Mary Poppins*, *Morecambe and Wise*, *Bruce Forsyth* and the entire Vienna Boys' Choir. Oh, yes, he was going to have a lovely time, in spite of the Yuletide greetings trickling syruply from

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

every mouth.

He yawned widely, stretching his spine, then crawled into his well-warmed bed. Half-asleep already, he kicked a cooling hot water bottle out and pulled the duvet up round his ears. Oh, yes, he was going to have a nice few days off. Only thing that could make it better, he thought to himself, ambushed by a jaw-cracking yawn, would be if Bodie were with him. But Bodie had friends, was going to a big fancy 'do'—something regimental, Bodie's hearty, hand-rubbing good cheer still ringing in his ears—tomorrow, and it would be all Father Christmas, 'Jingle Bells', champagne and pâté and goose...

He cooied in deeper under the cover, rubbing his nose sleepily on the edge of his pillow and began to drift slowly, cosily, into sleep. Still, his thoughts wandered as the pillow was lethargically plumped into the right position, he was going to miss Bodie. Pity they couldn't have spent the time together...

Tick, tock, tick, tock, to-ock, as the small hand and the big hand met under the number two. Doyle stirred, vaguely aware of a breath of chilled air sneaking under the duvet to shiver him, someone walking over his grave. But it was far more real than that: feet brushing his calves, and he rushed awake, sitting up, putting the lamp on and aiming a blow quickly enough to make even Macklin pleased.

"Bodie!" He let his hand fall, rubbed his eyes, scratched at the rumpled hair on his chest, buried both hands in his hair and gave his scalp a good thorough scratch. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Bodie smiled up at him, more impish than his usual, and reached one clumsy hand up to stroke Doyle's exposed and cold-puckered nipples. "Come t'see you, haven't I but?" The Liverpool docks were stronger in his accent than normally, too, and Doyle was staring at him, trying to work out what was different—apart from the fact that his partner was lying here naked in bed with him, playing with his tits. "It's not half magic, coming in here with you, naked an' everything like. Getting t' kiss you..."

Bodie suited action to words, leaning up onto his elbow to get near enough to kiss.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, hang on just a tick." There was something funny going on

here. Something decidedly peculiar. Dream-like... Oh. Yeh. That was it. He'd been thinking about how much he wished Bodie was with him just before he'd put the light out. Must still be asleep then. "Where's your scar?" It seemed quite natural, as life always does, in dreams, to let Bodie caress his chest while carrying on a perfectly mundane conversation.

"What scar? Oh, you mean the eyebrow?" Bodie's hand went up self-consciously to the unmarred eyebrow, following the smooth line of it. "Oh, yeh, that. I don't get that for another year, like. Mebbe a bit longer, I'm not sure, not about how any of this works anyroad." Screened by long eyelashes, he looked up at Doyle, an unsure smile curling at the corner of his mouth. "But, you know, I'm here, like, and you're willing..."

Doyle blinked, hard, opening his eyes again, expecting Bodie to be gone and the remnants of a dream there in his place. But there was Bodie still, large as life and several years younger, an appealing hint of uncertainty in blue eyes Doyle knew only as self-confidant, self-satisfied or self-aggrandising.

"Come on, Ray, don't do this to me. Gi'e us a kiss, I won't bite, honest. Just a kiss..."

It had to be a dream. Bodie would never get into bed with him and ask him for a kiss. He might grab him under the mistletoe and give him a smacker in front of the entire squad—had done, in fact, only this morning—but he wouldn't come crawling into bed in the middle of the night begging for a little kiss... And without setting the alarms off. A dream, he reminded his befuddled brain. It was just one of those weird dreams that made no sense after but were heaven at the time. And as it was just a dream, there'd be no penalties for anything they did, would there? No Cowley, no complications, no Bodie regretting sleeping with him, no credo—don't get involved, never let yourself care—keeping Bodie and him apart.

Doyle leant down a little, his lips barely brushing dream-Bodie's, a slow, sweet caress that suited the ethereal mood, moonlit madness, romantic folly, wonderful foolishness drifting through him. Until Bodie grabbed him, hard, hauling him down, covering every microbe of his body, mauling him within an inch of his life. Startled out of his dreamy languor, Doyle lay

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

breathless, taking the full brunt of Bodie's frantic passion. Hands and mouth and teeth and tongue and knees and belly—all of Bodie seemed to be all over all of him and all at once, giving him no second to catch up to this dervishing arousal. He tried to return the caresses, but before he could do more than touch a single finger to the head of Bodie's cock, quicksilver semen burst onto his belly and Bodie groaned into his mouth.

Then a flurry of embarrassed gaucherie, Bodie scrambling to wipe his cum up, elbows digging into every sensitive part of Doyle's body. And Bodie was talking, words at full spate. "Sorry, Christ, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, Christ—"

"Christ won't even be here till tomorrow, so stop apologising." He was spread-eagled in the bed, Bodie mopping and wiping at him, the handsome faced absolutely beetroot. There were a lot of sarky comments he could make, but he remembered being like that himself, with his first bird, and after, with his first bloke. He laughed, but made it kind, using his hands to steady Bodie, trying to take the sting out of what must feel like total failure. "Bit quick on the uptake there. Desperate, were we?"

Bodie looked as if he wanted the ground to do him a favour and open up to swallow him. "It's just, well, like, you know, it just...well, it gets you like that and if you don't have it, like, right then, you know, right now, then you'll just—burst."

"Thought you just did." He recognised that tightening jaw as humiliation, not anger. Of course, nowadays, Bodie went straight from slight—imagined or real—to pure fury, but this was... A dream. Only a dream, one where he'd conjured up this young Bodie, this secret past of his partner that he'd wondered about so many times. "Here, it's all right, we've all been a bit like that some time or other. And you've got to admit, it's bloody flattering to have a fella that hot and bothered about you."

The shyness was there, although there was already a mizzling of the hard adult's mask to disguise it. "You didn't really mind, but?"

"Course not." Bodie did not look at all convinced, so Doyle followed both his own inclination and the one thing that would make Bodie believe him. He wrapped both hands round Bodie's burgeoning erection, the young man's

revenge for older men's skill. "You come up fast, don't you? And don't worry about it, the second one'll last longer, it always does. You must know that, don't you?"

Bodie's eyes were closing, his body coming to lie on top of Doyle, cock rubbing on cock, his hands stroking soft body hair, tangling in lush curls, exploring muscle.

Doyle let Bodie have the lead, taking his pleasure from the pressure of the body caressing his and from the expression of purest bliss on Bodie's face. He drew his dream down to kiss, languidly dipping into the other man's mouth, his hands strolling down to the slight plumpness of the buttocks: no battle-hardened body, this. No, the only hard thing about this Bodie was his cock, so wonderfully hard, and hot, and sliding on him deliciously. He moved smoothly, turning Bodie over without Bodie even noticing what was going on. With one well-muscled thigh, he spread Bodie's legs, Doyle himself gasping with a sudden fierceness of arousal, his skin tingling, Bodie's tender flesh warm on him. Murmuring encouragement, he slid his cock between Bodie's legs, then pressed them shut again, a tight tunnel for him to fuck. Slowly, he began to move, in and out, spitting on his hand to soothe his passage, then moving faster, giving Bodie a taste of what it could be like to be fucked.

He'd wanted to do this so often, an opportunity lost to him if only because he'd met Bodie so much later in life, virginity long gone, lost to someone that only Bodie remembered, someone never mentioned between them. Tenderly, that was how he'd fantasised he would have taken Bodie, if he'd had the chance. Slow and tender and sweet, making it something wonderful, something worth remembering fondly. And that was what he did now, rocking sweetly between Bodie's thighs, tip of his cock sliding under Bodie's balls to dip, such a sweet kiss, into the tiny mouth hidden between lush cheeks. His own precum was making him lovely and slippery now, and he couldn't help but increase the pace, gasping into the crook of Bodie's neck as he fucked him. Sweat slicked their chests, and Doyle could feel the tremor threaten Bodie. He raised his head, locking his gaze with Bodie's watching the moment approach, feeling his own arousal gather in his belly. He moved faster,

hand snaking between their close-pressed bellies to grip Bodie's weeping cock, pumping him in perfect harmony with the movements of their bodies.

When it happened, it happened together, as it always did in his dreams, and as it did every night, Bodie wrapped himself around Ray, and wept and laughed into his shoulder.

"God, that was incredible. Didn't know it could be like that..."

Heart gradually slowing, Ray stroked damp hair from sweaty forehead, kissed flushed skin lingeringly, and smiled indulgently as his fantasy spoke to him. This was the best of all his dreams, his favourite by far. And it was just coming up to one of the best bits, when Bodie confessed, blushing, that Ray had been his first, and what a wonderful lover he was...

"You're much better than the Purser was, I can tell you that, mate."

Doyle knew his mouth had just gaped. Wait a minute, it wasn't supposed to go like this...

"Course, you didn't fuck me, so I can't compare you to Frank, can I but? Mind, you were grand, abso-fucking-lutely brilliant! Oh, I liked that." Ingenuous eyes stared up at him. "Can we do that again soon? How long does it take you to get hard again like?"

"I thought you were a virgin!"

Bodie looked at him as if there were several extra heads sprouting from Ray's shoulders. "Don't be daft—I'm nineteen. And I've been at sea for three years, and in Africa. A virgin? What a daft notion."

Doyle wasn't quite so keen on this dream any more. "What kind of dream is this anyway? You're supposed to be a virgin, and—"

"Oh, it's not a dream, though, is it? It's real, lad, dead real."

"Shit, it's going to be one of those. I'll be having unicorns and elves dancing on the bottom of the bed next."

Bodie grinned at him. "Sorry, but I don't do fairies. 'S not what I'm here for anyroads. God, I was so nervous about chancing my arm with you. Was dead scared you'd tell me to sling my hook and belt me one. I can relax now, can't I?"

This was all getting rather peculiar, and Doyle wished he'd need to go to the loo or something, anything to wake his body up and let him get back to a decently obedient dream. He lay qui-

etly for a while, but nothing happened. Bodie was still grinning at him and the wind was still battering the windows outside and—

That was funny: he never usually noticed things like the weather outside, not when he'd just, to all intents and purposes, fucked his partner. And his partner never, but never, lay beside him, tickling the hair under his arm, and chatting away to him as if they fucked every night.

"D'you remember what it was like the first time?"

First time what? First time he'd had a loony dream? First time he'd fantasised about picking his partner's cherry? "What first time of what?"

"The first time you ever had sex."

"Course I remember. Sylvia, who used to sell choc-ices in the local flea-pit."

"Mine was on the ship. Dan Thurso, nice bloke. He was the Purser, and he took a shine to me for some reason and before I knew where I was, he had me well-fucked and happy." Dream Bodie laughed, sanguinely murdering all of Doyle's tormented imaginings of vicious gang-bangs on the gang-plank or multiple rapes in the jungle. "He was dead nice to me, really decent. Got me papers, introduced me to some blokes who helped me out later... But I want to know about you."

This was definitely not turning out to be one of his better nights. "I already told you, didn't I? Sylvia—"

"No, not that. What about your first fella? What was he like?"

Now that was weird. He couldn't for the life of him remember. Dave Sterling? No, he was already taking his art classes then, and he had known exactly what he was letting himself in for when he'd gone home with Dave. Before that... Steven? Wrong—Steven had been after Dave. It must've been someone at school, surely. But who the hell had it been?

"Have you honestly forgotten all about him?"

He looked at Bodie, saw a depthless age in eyes that should have been so very much younger, and it made him shiver. This was the strangest dream, coming complete with outside noise and the smell of damp jacket drying over the bedroom chair. But he couldn't shake himself free, couldn't wake himself up, simply because his body firmly believed it was already

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

awake. He wanted nothing more than to roll over and get out of this bizarre dream, away from this young Bodie with the old eyes. But he found himself speaking, a compulsion to tell the truth.

"I haven't the faintest foggiest who it was."

Dream Bodie simply looked at him, with profound sympathy and the gentleness of a doctor telling a patient of death. Only one word. But it was enough.

"Mark."

And it was there, all of it. He could actually see it, a technicolour screen playing before his eyes. Mark, gorgeous, sweet, funny Mark, who'd had the big back garden where his dad used to rig tents up for them. The same back garden that they'd built a camp in, when they were old enough to be left alone in the dark. Mark, whispering to him in the quiet, secret night, asking him to come here, come over, I've got something to show you, come on, Ray.

And himself, crawling the distance between them, slithering into the nested blankets, trembling like a leaf when, into his unknowing hand, his first cock was put, terrifyingly sinful and hot with a life of its own.

How could he have ever forgotten Mark? They'd been inseparable, doing everything together: he could even see the day his own dad had christened them "Bill and bloody Ben". Then there they were, in grey school trousers and loosened maroon ties, coughing over their first Woodbine round the back of the rhododendron bushes. Almost a year later now, Mark's brother getting *Lady Chatterly's Lover* out of the library for them, and the two of them, sitting amidst the soil and the pots and the trowels in the potting shed, giggling nervously over the dirty bits. Giving their pricks names, the first nervous touching in daylight, too shy to look at each other until they'd wrapped themselves into an aching hug and come messily all over their Sunday best. And look who was bent over him when he came to after he'd run into the goal post when they'd been playing St. Timothy's. And then again, the next week when his mum couldn't visit because she had the flu and Dad was working: there was his friend bringing him grapes and a pile of American comics pinched from the newsagent's on Dunblane Street. On and on the pictures flowed,

a lifetime unscrolling before his mesmerised eyes. How could he have ever forgotten Mark?

"D'you remember the Christmas dance, the last year of school like?"

The voice startled him: he thought that Bodie had gone, in the way of dreams, vanished somewhere into his id, to be called up later, when sleep had put paid to the ego. But Bodie was still there, so incredibly young, with a bit of a tinge of the African sun to him and, unbelievably, a pimple marring the skin he always thought of as flawless. So young, but the eyes were mature beyond even the Bodie he'd seen in real life this morning.

"Well, *do* you remember that dance?"

"No." He didn't remember, and he didn't want to remember.

But dream Bodie was pointing, long finger aimed at the blank whiteness of bedroom wall, and Doyle didn't want to look. He did not want at all to see what Bodie was pointing to. But he looked. Unwillingly, but he did look.

It was himself, wearing the green velvet jacket that had once been all the rage, the one that had cost him half a year of Saturday jobs to buy. Preening in front of the mirror, trying to tame his curls to straightness, muttering swear words under his breath because he could not get his hair to look like Paul McCartney's. Couldn't even get it to look like Peter and Gordon's. Lying in bed watching himself, Doyle smiled at his own youthful folly, the earth-shaking issues that were so small when looked on from a distance of years and a job that had trained him to kill. But he'd been so very young then—God, had he ever looked that naïf? He laughed at himself: pure jail-bait, that's what he'd been. But on the wall, the image of himself was going out the door, whistling, a small present tucked into his pocket.

Oh God, he remembered that present. Cheap and nasty he might think it now, once he had bank cards and overdraft protection, but at the time, he'd thought it was the best, most glorious thing money could buy. Nothing much, just a watch. But he'd had it inscribed, blushing when he'd told the jeweller it was his sister wanted it done, for her boyfriend. But it'd been for him, to give to Mark. He'd even got a bow for it, a red one, and ribbon as well...

Outside the school. Streams of people going

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

in, streamers of coloured paper hanging from the ceiling, the band assembled on stage, the girls tittering in a line down one side of the hall, the boys posing like tough guys or pop stars down the other. Mark, standing with some of the blokes from the football team, and the fella who had connections with the local hard cases. Himself, he could see himself, see the expression on his face change as Mark made a joke, a dismissing joke that ignored everything they'd ever been. Mark, making nasty comments about fairies and brown noses, anything to make his new friends laugh, giving this poor, wilting Ray warning glances to not betray them.

He could feel it all over again: standing there with that watch in his pocket, and Mark laughing and laughing and laughing, standing there with the very boys who'd been bullying them both for weeks, taunt after taunt after taunt. His heart had ripped into tatters, tears swimming in his eyes, humiliation burning vitriolically after. He could see it and feel it and he was there all over again as he'd run from school, out into the playground that only the lower forms used, along the street, running and running and running through the rain, his wonderful green velvet jacket ruined beyond redemption. And himself, face contorted with pain, taking the watch out of his pocket and hurling it far, far away, into the night.

Doyle knew what was coming next. He didn't want to see it, no, no, no—

Waiting. For Mark. Watching him weave his way out of the main gates, that girl Anne hanging onto both his arm and his every word, giggling up at him with flattering eyes. That was the first time he knew what it was to be alone in the adult world, unprotected, buffeted by the full brute force of pain and betrayal, and his own pathetic delusions shown up for what they were. It was also the first time he had ever wanted to kill. He had a knife—his brother's, borrowed in case there was any trouble between the Mods and Rockers—and the blade was sharp in his hand. Blood was beading from his thumb, where his flesh honed the cutting edge.

And then Mark was reeling, screaming and shouting and running away from the pain, just as he had run away from Mark earlier in the evening. Now the blood on his hands wasn't his own. And he liked that.

“Stop it,” he whispered, horrified to feel the tears on his own adult face. “I don't want to see any more...”

Silence.

He looked around, but Bodie was gone, only the lit lamp and messy bed showing that Doyle had ever been anything but alone. The clock read quarter past two: fifteen minutes for half a life to be lived again. Cautiously, still shaken deeply, Doyle switched the light out and lay down in the dark, closing his eyes and his mind against the memories of what he had just seen. Dreamed, he reminded himself in the last seconds before sleep. I only dreamed it...

There was a faint click as the hands met again, this time under the number three. Abruptly restless, Doyle rolled over on to his back, then shifted again. Something was annoying him, something that was trying to wake him up. Someone. Someone blowing in his ear.

He opened one eye, and could vaguely make out the blurred shape of his partner. “Not you again,” he muttered, not best pleased, the taste of his last trip down memory lane still bitter on his tongue. “What're you doing here this time?”

“You have to ask? Either my technique is slipping, or you're dead, mate.” The blowing was replaced by a flickering tongue, sensation shivering delightfully through Doyle, all the way to his toes. Now he was being kissed, superbly, Bodie knowing exactly what he liked, and how he liked it, his every whim catered to. He was petted and pampered, confident finesse plying him with pleasure, until he was boneless with arousal. Thanks to the earlier Bodie's visit, Doyle could actually remember the last time he'd allowed anyone to take him so firmly, so completely, in hand. But Mark belonged to the past. This Bodie making love to him might well be nothing more than a wet dream, but he also belonged to the here and now, as current as his partner fussing and bothering over the mistle-toe this morning.

Doyle murmured his surrender and caught a glimpse of the unexpectedly tender smile that Bodie gave him. Another peculiarity of dreams: he'd always thought that Bodie would be as smooth as a spiv if they ever decided to bed each other. He'd never done more than daydream that Bodie could be so loving and over-brimming

with erotic delight, deciding that such romantic imaginings were the property of dreams alone. Obviously, he thought as Bodie kissed his way from earlobe to nape to nipple, he'd been spot on. Sighing contentedly, he stretched, every inch of skin alive to pleasure and to Bodie's touch. It was lovely, he thought, sinking more deeply into sensation, absolutely lovely: wet dreams where all he had to do was lie back and enjoy were his absolute favourites, and Bodie was giving him the best. Bodie's hands were busy on him, rubbing his balls, tingling his anus, kneading his backside, and all of a sudden, in the way of dreams, Doyle knew that Bodie had never been kissed enough by his men, had never had enough affection to go with the sex, so he reached down and soothed Bodie upward, nearer and nearer, until he could see him. Debonair delight personified, that was his Bodie, and Doyle was smiling as he kissed his friend, this man he only loved in his dreams.

"Love you," he said, saying the unsayable, thinking the unthinkable. "Love you better than I've ever loved anyone before."

"I should bloodywell think so," Bodie whispered into his skin, tongue laving lines of allure from his mouth to his ear and back again. Blue eyes were smiling brightly at him, and Bodie's palms caressed the planes of his chest as Bodie said, "You'll definitely love me *better* than anyone else, because I'm the one who'll be teaching you a trick or two." But there was no kidding around in the adoration on Bodie's face as he went back to making love to Ray.

He could fly, he knew he could. In fact, if this dream weren't so incredibly perfect as it was, he'd change it so that they were making love on a magic carpet, soaring through the skies of Sinbad's desert. It would take something as fantastic to come close to dreaming how wonderful it was to see that Bodie loved him. Humming quietly to himself—not the kind of thing he would normally ever consider doing in real life, given such a set of circumstances—he surrendered completely to the masterful hands playing his body and the exquisite lips paying him such homage. His cock was mouthed into a sucking throat, his cheeks smoothed apart and a finger delved enticingly inside him. Just like his dreams, down to the last detail, the way Bodie's finger circled inside him, the way Bodie's

tongue played over his balls, the way—Bodie fumbled with a tube of gel and prosaically lubricated him? Wait a minute—that didn't belong in a dream. Dreams weren't supposed to be realistic, they were supposed to be whatever he wanted them to be, practicalities be damned. So all these tawdry details—

Then Bodie was arched over him, and Bodie's cock was smugly erect at the entrance of his body, and all thought fled in the face of purest sensation. Doyle wrapped his legs round Bodie's hips, drawing his partner in deeper, luxuriating in the feel of Bodie deep inside, heat to match his own heat. It was superb to have Bodie moving in and out of him with such consummate skill, to feel that bulk and hardness plundering him. Flawless, perfect, catapulting him along, until Bodie slowed them down, making it last longer, taking Doyle and wringing him out, nothing left behind but mindless pleasure. Now he knew how a Stradivarius felt when played by the hands of a master, every sinew and nerve played to perfection. It was the most natural thing in the world to him, allowing Bodie absolute freedom over him. He moved where Bodie wanted him to, because his lover knew how to make him alive with arousal; he gave what Bodie wanted him to give, because Bodie gave back to him all the secrets of Bodie's well-hidden tenderness and love.

He smiled when he thought of that, of Bodie loving him. It was as plain as the nose on the other man's face, and even more appealing. Doyle couldn't help it: the love inside him was a tide rising to meet Bodie, to match his competitive partner, even in this, the sweetest battle. Lust and love were there in him in equal measure, nirvanic balance of the best things in his life. Bodie thrust harder into him, lifting his hips up off the bed, and Doyle groaned with Bodie's pleasure. Again, Bodie's cock sank into him, seeking the innermost depths of his body, Bodie's love-lush eyes finding the innermost depths of his heart.

Doyle pushed downwards to meet Bodie's cock, to bring his lover more completely into him, wishing he could devour Bodie and keep him inside forever. But Bodie was moving them now, bringing the passion to the fore, speeding them on the dizzying gyre of pleasure, the inexorable drive to orgasm.

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

A pressure, inside him, just there, where Bodie knew he loved to be touched, and Doyle was dissolving into exquisite sensation, his seed pulsing from him to caress Bodie, his muscles squeezing Bodie, his body quivering as he felt Bodie erupt into him, bathing him with Bodie's essence. It was, quite simply, the best he'd ever had, and he was sleepy-eyed and languid as he came down from the high of orgasm, his hands stroking languorously on Bodie's trembling muscles. Perfect. Absolute perfection, best ever, and he was drifting again, slipping back into deeper sleep—

Until his dreaminess was sundered by the prosaic way Bodie was withdrawing from him, a handful of paper hankies being used to mop up the semen and liquified gel oozing from his arse, and that funny sensation that he sometimes had, as if he might have to make a very rapid trip to the toilet.

Not the way he liked his wet dreams to end at all.

Bodie was massaging the small of his back for him and the niggling need to run for the loo receded, but the dream was still too practical, for Bodie was surreptitiously checking him for damage, and wiping his own cock clean, and dabbing discreetly at Doyle's belly. Doyle decided that now was the moment to get this dream back in line before Bodie started asking him if he had piles.

This dream-Bodie, Doyle was quite happy to see, was willing to co-operate, ceasing his ministrations, and turning instead to soft-smiling caresses of him, stroking him here, and here, where he liked it best, just enough to keep him tingling delectably in the afterglow.

"Why'd we never do this before?" he asked, because in dreams, of course, Bodie always answered him honestly and never retreated into the waking world's deflecting humour. "Come on, Bodie, why'd you never go to bed with me before?"

"Eliot bloody Ness, that's why."

Well, dreams didn't always make sense, he supposed. "Why, you and him married or something?" And he tensed a little, half-expecting Eliot Ness and three hundred FBI men to come crashing into his sedate suburban bedroom, demanding to know why he'd slept with Eliot's beloved Bodie.

"Nah, nothing like that. It's just that's how I always thought of you."

In a fedora, raincoat and machine gun? Now that was weird...

"No," Bodie said, knowing what he'd been thinking, naturally enough, considering that none of this was real, which consoled Doyle considerably. "It's that you're like him—one of the Untouchables. You know, all conscience and devotion to duty—apart from the occasional blonde, 'course—and don't anyone dare touch. So I never did."

Doyle snuggled in a bit closer to Bodie's warmth, letting his partner cuddle him close, daring for once in his life to let someone bigger and stronger than he have the upper hand, instead of loudly declaiming how tough he was and how he didn't need anyone—

—and he could see himself through Bodie's eyes, another series of technicolour images parading on a screen. Himself, all scruffy hair and prickly temper, sharp-tongued and sharper-minded, holding the whole world at bay. He could see the way he moved—Christ, did he really wiggle his bum like a cheap tart?—and feel the way Bodie felt when he saw that, a sweet peircing in his groin and a hollow aching in his heart. So that was what it felt like to love someone and have them—

He saw himself turning a blind shoulder when Bodie had tried to tell him about that girl in Africa, the one Bodie had loved. Felt the rejection, felt the sadness of knowing that there wasn't going to be anything beyond good camaraderie on the job, and guarded friendship off it. Saw himself again, chatting some girl up—Debbie? Or was it Sue? And it was Bodie who provided the name: Debbie, dated her for two months, slept with her on the second date, came in to work the next morning sleek and well-sated, holding the secret pleasure close to his chest, not sharing any of it with Bodie, making Bodie feel as he was nothing, meaningless, compared to some girl who could give Doyle pleasure—then he could see himself in the gym showers, oblivious to the men around him, chilly glower shrivelling the one soul brave enough to smile at him, then nail in the coffin, nail in Bodie's hopes, that queer joke in the pub the night they'd gone for a pint with Murphy...

He realised that Bodie was crying. Quietly,

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

inside, never letting it show, but of course dreams always showed these things, didn't they? He reached out for Bodie, to tell him he was sorry, but Bodie was gone, that side of the bed cold, and empty, for Bodie hadn't been there, of course. It was only a dream, just his mind playing tricks on him. Stupid tricks, trying to tell him that big, bluff Bodie was pining away for the love of him...

He wasn't sure what woke him.

"Sorry," he said, meaning for being late, before his eyes were open enough for him to realise that the clock read 4.15, and his boss was sitting on the edge of his bed. Oh, Christ, no, he thought, the last two dreams *mélanging* in his mind, and the revolting thought of Cowley having sex with him surfacing like scum on a pond.

"We'll have less of that, laddie," and of course, if Bodie had been able to read his mind, then Cowley would probably be able to tell him what he was going to think before he had a chance to think it—and disapprove, just for good measure. "I'm not lusting after your body, so what little virtue you've got left is safe with me. Oh, no, I'm not here for your body."

Doyle stared up at him, as terrified as when he was five and first day of school and he'd been hauled in by the ear to explain to the Headmaster why he'd used his catapult to smash the Head's window. He shook the feeling off: he wasn't a child any more, and nightmares were reserved for when the job turned ugly and people turned uglier. "What d'you want?"

"What do you want, Mr. Cowley, sir."

He'd never noticed that Cowley looked like a gargoyle before, or that he wore a kilt, and had a *skean dhu* in his sock. "What do you want, Mr. Cowley, sir?" he repeated, and wanted to pull the covers up over his head, because he had a gut-racking certainty that Cowley was going to show him horrors worse than anything he'd ever so much as imagined before.

"I'm after Bodie."

He couldn't help it: he chuckled, out of sheer relief. Just another daft dream then, not a nightmare. "I'm afraid you've just missed him," he said, still laughing, although part of him was wondering why there was still not the faintest trace of streetlight coming in through the win-

dow and why London—London, of all places—had gone so quiet there wasn't so much as the sound of a car on a road or wind in the tree right outside his window.

"Who says you're still in London, laddie? Who's to say you're not in Limbo, forever cast out of either Heaven and Hell, because not even Auld Nick wants the likes of you? Or perhaps I've put a word in Upstairs and asked them to give you punishment to fit the crime."

The walls were rippling now, colours blending and flowing and separating, vague, sickening impressions of bodies torn apart by bullets and a bomb that wasn't defused in time, a child shot because Bodie didn't pull it in behind the protection of a wall, a woman screaming at him because her husband was dead, dead, dead—

"Who is she?" he whispered, as she wailed on and on, a banshee scraping its nails down his spine.

"Oh, her?" Cowley asked casually, not needing to turn around to see the distorted face. "Och, her, she's just some woman whose man was killed by a terrorist fire bomb. Burned to death in his furniture shop one Christmas Eve, and her at home with their four weans."

He could hardly breathe from the lump in his throat, tears threatening to strangle him, the woman's agony inundating him. "Why's she blaming me?"

"You always did have delusions of grandeur, Doyle." The voice was dry, as if they were in the office, discussing expense chits. "That's God she's blaming. Course, I don't think it's God's fault, myself, and you don't even believe in God, but she does, and she thinks it's His fault for there not being anyone available to answer the call for help."

Cowley's face loomed huge, filling Doyle's vision, fear gnawing a hole in his belly where his courage leaked out.

"But it's no-one's fault but yours, Doyle. If you'd had a partner with you on the other call not two shops away, he'd've been able to get to the furniture shop in time and defuse that bloody fire-bomb."

"But Bodie—"

"Bodie wasn't there. Left, six months before, and you were such a bad-tempered bastard I couldn't land you on anyone else. So I let you go

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

solo, and because of that—”

The woman was gone now, literally dissolved into tears, because Doyle had lost track of everything but that one thing Cowley had said: left six months before.

“Bodie wouldn't leave CI5! He'd never leave...”

But of course Cowley knew what he'd been about to say. “You? Aye, you've got a point there, laddie. How could he ever leave you when he'd never had you in the first place?” An impatient swipe of his hands, sweeping away Doyle's protests before they could be thought. “And I'm not talking about all this sex palaver, either. Dreams weren't worth a damned thing when he woke up in the morning, and he knew fine well that the most he'd ever get from you is a drunken tumble you'd never forgive him for. Oh, aye, I know all about it,” and his voice was knives, cutting Doyle, who could see that in his boss' hands there was a claymore being fondled with absent blood-lust. “He came to my house one night and broke down and tellt me the whole sorry story. He begged me to let him leave, d'you realise that, Doyle? Begged me because he said you'd never understand or forgive him for what he wanted from you.”

Doyle was struggling to fight off the dreadful weight pressing him into bed, the heavy black cloud of nightmare compressing every bone in his body until he was in agony.

“Not a nice feeling, that, is it? But that's what your Bodie went through. Not that he thought you'd care.” A swirl of his plaid, and the room was gone, London spread out beneath him, air whistling past his naked body, Doyle unconcerned with his nudity, so much a part now of this nightmare. Cowley was standing beside him immaculate as always, not a hair out of place, kilt disappeared, the more familiar, authoritarian sombre grey suit in its place. “Have you any idea at all where your partner is this Christmas morning?”

That was easy, that would make the nightmare go away. “In bed probably, and then he's going to his big Regimental do with all his old mates.” He was proud of his answer, and the way he kept steady even though the wind was buffeting him, spiralling him lower and lower until he recognised Bodie's street and Bodie's car. Somewhere, it had become daylight, and there

was a squad of children playing in the street, showing off new bikes and prams and scooters. But they were flying in through the window—we're going to crash! cover his face with his hands against flying breaking glass but there was nothing, only carpet beneath his feet and the faint smell of breakfasted-upon sausages in the air—and Bodie was sitting silently in his favourite armchair, tumbler of whisky in his hand, morning stubble on his jaw. The coffee table had been moved over under the window, a well-bedecked Christmas tree sitting there proudly glittering, paper decorations streaming across the ceiling, and leaning drunkenly against the door, an inflated Santa, complete with an inflated and severely red-nosed reindeer. Christmas permeated everything in the room, with the bleak exception of Bodie.

Of course it was a dream: that was why Bodie wasn't reacting to him, but it was chilling, to have Bodie not see him, to have Bodie sitting there so miserably unaware. Doyle walked over to stand in front of him, despite what Cowley was saying to him.

“He can't see you. As far as he's concerned, you're sitting at home all on your ownie-o, happy as a lark and not needing him.”

“But he shouldn't be here,” was all Doyle could say, kneeling in front of Bodie, waving a hand in front of his face to break that abstracted, melancholy stare. Bodie took a sip of his drink, blinked slowly, stared at the twinkle of Christmas tree. Doyle followed his gaze and found himself looking at the fairy on top of the Christmas tree, one that had obviously been hand-made many a long year ago. Treasured, saved and kept despite Bodie's endless gallivanting round the globe. And Doyle sank in the guilt of not even knowing where that hoarded, tatty family ornament came from.

He tried again to make Bodie see him, but Cowley was circling him like a hungry wolf, snarling at him with home truths. “A fancy regimental 'do', you said. Believed him, lock, stock and barrel. For goodness' sake, I thought I'd trained you better than that, Doyle. Which regiment, did you ask yourself that? His SAS regiment—when he was an inch away from being chipped out of there for his attitude? Or the paras, perhaps. Ach, and that's the bunch that he got three of them cashiered for coming

on patrol under the influence? Oh, I know, I've got it now." So sarcastic, dripping contempt. "His old pals from that wee spell he spent in the jail in the Congo." Abruptly, Cowley was looming over him, blue eyes chips of diamond, slicing him into tiny shreds. "Well, I've got news for you, laddie. There's not a soul that knows or cares where Bodie is, and he knows that fine bloody well. He knows there're plenty of folk who'd invite him along for a party after, who like him because he's a good laugh, but there's not a one of them who would ask him to join them for Christmas dinner. Not even his own partner, who hates Christmas and everything to do with it. Who laughed—" and Doyle could hear himself again, his laughter peeling down the corridor for everyone to hear and he saw the pain that Bodie had kept hidden from him and he wanted to weep, to cry how sorry he was, he never meant to hurt Bodie "—when Bodie invited him over for a wee bit lunch, just the pair of them thegither. But you were too busy being a misanthropic bastard and standing on your principles. Ach, your principles make me sick. Fine, fancy notions and not one of them worth the hot air you say them on. And you look at Bodie. You just look at him. And you know what it is that's going to happen to him and many another beside, all for the sake of you, *you*, not having to compromise your high ideals and lower yourself to having a bit of fun with a friend."

He had to make Bodie see him. Had to make Bodie hear, because he knew with utter certainty that it would be the death of his partner if Bodie were to leave CI5 and go roaming round a world that Bodie hated almost as much as it hated him. It burned him inside to know that his was the final betrayal that broke Bodie's back and made him give up on anything good ever being able to survive in his life. But Bodie wasn't listening, and Bodie wasn't looking, and Doyle started slapping at him—but his hand went right through Bodie, who only shivered, and took another drink of single malt anaesthesia. Doyle was begging now, pleading, not knowing what to do, how to make Bodie stay.

"I don't know why you're making such a spectacle of yourself, Doyle. The man cannae hear you and even if he could, what good would it do the pair of you?"

Doyle turned round, glaring at his boss, the

nightmare edge dulled to mere dislocated reality.

"And what would you be telling him if he could hear you? Are you planning on telling him that you might be persuaded to let him have sex with you?"

"An' what's wrong with that? It's what he wants, innit?"

"Is it?" Such a calm voice, as cold as a tomb, and the nightmare was crawling back on a scuttling of rat claws behind the walls, teeth gnawing to come and get him, Doyle catching sight of—things—out of the corner of his eyes.

"Och, don't be getting yourself in a fankle, Doyle, it's nothing but your own guilts and fears after your bones."

And the yaw opened, swallowing him, tumbling him into the middle of his worst fears. He could see—hear, even smell—Bodie being shot, lying to fester on the rotting floor of some far off jungle. Bodie, in a city gutter, a broken bottle of fortified wine spilling from his hand. Bodie again, walking away coldly, so horribly coldly, from the clutching hand of someone who had tried to love him. And he knew what Bodie was thinking. Knew that Bodie would love no-one and allow no-one to love him, not after what he'd gone through with Raymond Doyle.

He was fighting dark images—Bodie become Shotgun Tommy, Bodie in a half-zipped body bag, one pale arm flopping out in the indifference of death—shoving his own fears and possible truths aside, clambering over carpet pile gone six feet deep, worms and maggots feasting on a mountain of Bodies. The armchair, and Bodie, the living, breathing Bodie, and Doyle was screaming at him, shouting Bodie's name, desperate that Bodie should hear him, must listen, must not go away.

"I've told you, he cannae hear you, and unless you're going to be offering him something a wee bit better than a quick roll in the hay, it's not going to do him the blindest bit of good, is it? Well, Doyle? It's your fault he's sitting here, and it's your fault he's going to be turning up girning and greeting like a wean on my doorstep, so what are you going to do about it?"

And Cowley was bigger than Colossus, sitting regally upon a throne of judgement, red velvet and white ermine cascading from his shoulders, but then it wasn't fabric and fur, it was Bodie's blood and bones, and he wanted to make Bodie

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

stay with him, to not go away, to not die, to not become this rotting corpse lying alone and bleeding.

Cowley's voice was thundering through him, making his teeth ache and his brain hurt. A sound too enormous to be heard, it could only be felt in the hollow spaces of his bones. "Upon your head be it!"

The world turned itself inside out, pulling him backwards, away from Bodie, his yells going unheard, Bodie sipping unhappily on his tumbler of whisky, as Doyle clutched at the white painted window frame. But he went through it, sucked back out through the window, dizzyingly spinning through the sky and it was dark again and he was drowning in a whirlpool of air and he was hurtling faster than his lungs could get air and—

—he was back in his own bed, covers tangled round his legs, luminous dial reading 5.45. It was a dream, he told himself, sitting up in bed, running his fingers raggedly through tuggy hair, trying hard to wake himself up and shake the nightmare horror off.

It was easy, funnily enough probably thanks to the daily and expected horrors of his job, to discard the cinematic images of Bodie drenched in tomato sauce—about as real as Heinz' 57, he told himself again and again, about as real as Heinz' 57—but he couldn't dislodge that image—memory? For it felt like a memory of a future yet to be—of Bodie sitting all alone and miserable in a Christmas grotto of a living room. And it was his fault. He knew that, dream or not. Even if Bodie did have a regimental do to go to, he'd still laughed when Bodie had given him that so-casual off the cuff invite to spend Christmas with him.

What if Bodie had wanted to make a move? What if that's what had been behind that request for company? What if real-Bodie really did want him and love him as much as the dream-Bodie did?

And what if real-Bodie did what he'd seen dream-Bodie do? What if his own Bodie gave up on the chance to settle down away from murder and mayhem—apart from Cowley-ordered murder and mayhem, of course—and ended up that rotted corpse he'd seen? Dreamt, he tried to tell himself, but the aftertaste of the nightmare

was bile on his tongue and a fistful knot in his belly. So different from the warm-eyed man who'd made love to him, he couldn't forget the man who had sat so alone and profoundly lonely.

It was nothing more than a dream, but he couldn't ignore it. Perhaps it was all his imagination, but he had not a single doubt whether or not Bodie wanted them to be more than 'just good friends'. A lot more than that, and something to last a very long time. Tinged with the hangover of his dreaming, he believed utterly in the insight he'd had, thinking that maybe it was just his subconscious telling him what it had noticed while his conscious mind was off on its hobby horse. But most of all, it was simply the picture of Bodie, sitting in that chair, surrounded by all the lonely trappings of a Christmas unshared. A confusion of bedding was kicked off, and Doyle was out of bed, flesh goosepimpling in the early morning chill, underwear trawled from the depths of drawers, jeans clattering off hangers, shirt dragged on and buttoned, haphazard luck guiding his fingers. Thick socks, boots discarded as being too time-consuming, old white trainers jammed on, jacket nabbed in the passing, and then he was out the door.

Turning, keys in hand to double-lock the door, his eye was caught by the tissue paper 'stained glass windows' Mrs. Abernathy's six-and-eight-year-olds had cellotaped to the landing window. Bodie had a thing about Christmas, something about... What was it Bodie had said, back at their first Christmas partnered together? Yeh, that was it. Bodie said he needed Christmas, something to remind him that it wasn't always that bad, that there were good times in the past and that people could sometimes rise above themselves and bury the hatchet for a few hours.

That tore it: if he was going to mend the fences and show—without hours of talking and weeks of probation—that he was serious about getting serious with Bodie, then he couldn't arrive empty-handed on Bodie's doorstep like a forgetful milkman. Yet there wasn't a single Yuletide frippery in his house. But, and he unlocked the door, re-opening it and slipping inside, there was something he could bring as a present: the good bottle of brandy he'd bought for himself. Bodie liked brandy. And there was that nice bit of cheese he had in the fridge, and

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

those bloody expensive imported grapes he'd indulged himself with, Bodie would like those. The gin could go, too.

Five minutes, that's all it took for him to have his self-serving feast piled on his kitchen table, a cornucopia of goodies. Which left him with the problem of what to put it all in. He could hardly turn up with a couple of carrier bags from the local fruit shop, could he? After all, he had a enough fancies to fill a Christmas hamper—

"That's it!" he announced to the uncaring pile of food. "The hamper, that's what I'll use."

Quickly, into the bedroom, wicker washing basket upended, dirty clothes scattered all over the place. He took a cautious sniff, decided that all he could smell was wicker, and got that tablecloth his mum had given him for his first flat. Suitably draped in white with blue flowers and hand-embroidered at all four corners, he took the time to arrange the food and drink to look nice, the first flush of urgency past now that he was actually doing something concrete. It didn't take long, although pressing lift buttons and getting in or out before the doors closed on him proved a bit on the tricky side, the Milk Tray almost combining with the brandy to form chocolate liqueurs.

The streets were almost empty, only a few hardy or un festive souls braving the cold and the wet. The rain had stopped, at least for the time being, although there were wonderful huge puddles at the kerb which aquaplaned into reversed waterfalls. Pity there weren't any passers-by, but nothing in life was perfect. Face lit by the intermittency of street lights, Doyle drove on, trying to work out the best thing to say and the best way to say it, rehearsing opening lines and entire speeches again and again, brain spinning with the effort to find something appropriate for a man who was still romantic and naïf enough to believe in Christmas.

There might not have been room at the Inn, but there was definitely no room at the kerb. Cursing under his breath, he parked the car half-way down the street, struggling not to slip on the treacherously wet pavement, his basket heavy and unbalanced in his arms. Putting it down in the vestibule of Bodie's building, he was shutting the door quietly behind him, when he noticed something. The neighbour's house had a fair sized, fussed over garden, and right

bang smack in the middle, fishing in a fake pond, were a gaggle of gnomes. Christmas gnomes. Critically, Doyle looked down at his very full but very un festive gift basket, and imagined Bodie's face if he got him one of those preposterous garden gnomes and sat him in the middle, with maybe one of the Italian breadsticks rising from between its legs? Perfect compromise, he decided: Christmassy enough for Bodie, filthy enough for both of them. Without so much as a twinge from his conscience, he pulled the door to, basket inside, while he went outside to steal someone else's property. Well, they could always put it back tomorrow, once it got dark again. Be worth it to see Bodie grin at him.

Moving with all the considerable stealth Her Majesty's Government had trained him in, he traversed the slick pavement, transgressed the front gate, translocated himself from gravel path to grassy lawn, displayed transiliency across the pond, and then made himself transpicuous under a nicely weeping willow. There, right in front of him, was his target: a particularly fat little gnome who bore more than a passing resemblance to Jimmy Saville. A quick check to make sure no-one was nearby, and Doyle dispensed with his government training and matériel-appropriation, dropped the language, and simply nicked the plaster-cast statuette. It fitted, a trifle snugly, into his jacket, and all would have been well if he'd left well enough alone and gone upstairs to make his peace with Bodie. However, he caught a glimpse of the front door, and that gave him an idea: why not pinch some mistletoe—after a full-size gnome, that should be a walkover—and then just present himself on Bodie's doorstep? He could even hold the mistletoe over his head to make sure Bodie got the gist of what was on offer. Yes, no two ways about it: the mistletoe would do the trick. Cold water oozing in over the top of his shoe, he remembered what the gnome had been fishing in. The bloody ornamental pond. He was up to his knee in it, his shoe decidedly sodden, and Doyle was beginning to wonder if perhaps he might not be over-reacting to what was only a dream anyway. But then again, it being a dream didn't take away from the litany of what he'd done to Bodie and how Bodie must be feeling all alone for Christmas. Squaring his shoulders and shaking the last frond of pond

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

weed from his shoe, Doyle twisted a sprig of mistletoe free from the Christmas wreath, tucking it behind his ear to leave his hands free to hang onto a gnome that didn't seem to want to leave its friends. Skirting the pond, he miscalculated and stopped in the bare nick of time, one foot up and one foot down.

Stuff the bloody gnome! He was going to toss it back into the pond and Bodie could make do with mistletoe and him. And it was then that he heard the unforgettable plod-plod-plod of a policeman walking his beat. Somehow, he didn't think that Cowley would appreciate the excuse of a dream with Cowley himself turning into a gargoyle as good enough to get himself caught stealing some poor bugger's garden gnome. Very cautiously, stifling all the appropriately rude words inside as his once-dry foot joined the other in a state of coldest wetness, he stood stock still, fingers crossed that the willow would hide him from sight and that the policeman would have had one Yuletide cheer too many.

Plod, plod, plod. Crunch, crunch, crunch as the constable crossed the gravelled repair work. Squelch, squelch, squelch as Doyle flexed his toes to make sure they were still alive. Then the sonorous footsteps retreated, and he was alone again with his gnome and Bodie's flat not twenty feet away. Sneaking quietly, he was quickly inside the relative warmth of the vestibule, arranging the gnome amidst his other, legitimate bounty. But climbing the stairs, he began to feel as stupid as the gnome, wondering what he was going to do if Bodie opened the door and some girl called out, asking who was there. If that happened... Shite, what would he say then? Pardon me, but I had this dream, you see—well, dreams, really, and you were in love with me in them and you were going to go running off somewhere insane if I didn't get you and me sorted out, and then you were going to die because you were miserable and depressed people are a bit on the careless side when it comes to being careful and—

Perhaps he should just turn round right now and go home. Stick the gnome back in its bloody pond, cellotape the mistletoe back on next door's wreath. Walk away and leave everything be, say hello to Bodie when they went back to work and pretend none of this ever happened.

Handswithering over the doorbell, he paused,

considering, thinking about how he'd feel if Bodie had a girl with him. Stupid, really, he supposed, to risk the partnership on a dream. That's all it had been, right? A couple of nice wet dreams followed by a doozie of a nightmare, not enough to risk the best working partnership for, was it?

And then he heard it, quite clearly: On your head be it! He whirled round, almost dropping the basket, but there was nothing and no-one there, just an echo of his dream, a wraith of shadow fading smokelike out the window: a finger of fog, perhaps, a shadow from a cloud passing overhead and covering the window for a moment. But it brought his nightmare back full force and before he knew he was going to do it, he had rung the bell and was left standing there in the hallway, waiting for Bodie.

Who answered, sleepy-warm and rumped, rubbing narrowed blue eyes in the too-bright light of the outside world.

Doyle, sickeningly, couldn't think of a thing to say. Excuse me, mate, but are you thinking of leaving me? So instead, he asked: "Doesn't the security system work at Christmas?"

Bodie shuffled aside, yawning enormously, waking gradually. "Didn't need to buzz through on the intercom—who else'd disturb a man's rest at this hour on Christmas morning, eh?"

Cowley for one, Doyle thought, the dream sinking onto his shoulders like cement, for Bodie's living room was precisely as it had been in his dream. Not bad, considering Doyle had never been in this new flat of Bodie's, and had no idea that Bodie had bought a new sofa to match that ridiculous big armchair. Unaware that he was both clutching his gift basket in his arms like Moses' mother and that Bodie was finally surfacing enough to be watching him with genuine concern, Doyle walked slowly over to the small Christmas tree sitting in all the same glory he'd already seen it in once before that morning. Sure enough, right where he'd known it would be, was a hand-made fairy, child-sized stitches showing at the hem, one sleeve hanging loose where the sewing gaped too large to hold it tidily in place. But the face on the old-fashioned wooden spool had been drawn by adult hands, and the pig-tails of yellow wool were far finer than the clumsy stitching and haphazardly glued-on sequins.

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

“Funny little thing, isn’t it?” Bodie was saying from right behind him. Doyle hadn’t even heard him move, didn’t know how long he’d been standing there, but obviously long enough for Bodie to be fully awake now, and indulgent.

“You made that, didn’t you?”

He sensed Bodie nod, was aware of a combination of pride and sorrow in his partner. “Me and my mam made that with my sister the Christmas before she died.”

“You never told me you had a sister.”

“You never asked, did you? My little sister had leukemia before they even really knew what it was. She was getting iller and iller. She knew she was dying, but she kept on saying, not till after Christmas. Not till after—” The silence made Doyle turn round, breaking Bodie’s mood. “Here, let me take that for you,” Bodie said, then his face lit up and he began to laugh with glee. Picking up the gnome, he could hardly speak for laughing. “Oh, Ray, you shouldn’t have! A life-size statue of yourself, and in such a fetching outfit!”

It was easy again, to know what to say to Bodie, sliding back into their tried-and-true pattern. “I’m wounded, Bodie, struck to the core. That’s not me,” and he sounded suitably upset, rewarded by a glimmer of guilt starting in Bodie’s expression. “I don’t know how you could say a thing like that to me—it’s obvious it’s Cowley.”

Bodie did a manful job of keeping his face straight, plunking the basket down and cradling the absurd gnome in his arms. “I shall treasure it always,” he murmured, carefully positioning the gnome at the bottom of the tree. “Until the man next door sends the boys in blue over, anyroads.”

Doyle sank down into the plush sofa, watching Bodie. “Glad you like it. Thought you deserved a present.”

“Thought you hated Christmas.”

Doyle shrugged, grinned. “Yeh, but you’re like a kid with his nose on the sweet-shop window, how could I resist.”

Bodie smiled at him then, as sweet as the shop, but then it was gone, replaced by the more usual Bodie expression of distant affection. In fact, Doyle realised, if he hadn’t been looking for it, then he’d never even have noticed it. He had to say something. Knew he had to say something.

But he’d never been good at anything but chat-up lines that didn’t mean anything and no-one took seriously anyway. Still he was going to try to completely change their relationship with each other, and more than that. It would mean a change of lifestyle, even a change of the way they thought of themselves. Have a man as your lover, plan on staying with him through thick and thin, and certain labels would start to stick.

He wasn’t sure if he was ready for that.

Then he looked up at Bodie, who was sitting in that armchair of his, and there was an open bottle of whisky beside him, and a tumbler that might have been full the night before and definitely would be before the day’s end—were he to leave Bodie alone now. Instead of being defeated by possible labels, perhaps he should go by the adage about sticks and stones.

Bodie spoke before him, not quite looking at him. “I’ve a present for you as well.”

Doyle felt about two inches tall: Bodie must have bought him that present when he’d hoped that Doyle would come over for Christmas dinner. And got laughed at instead. “Well, hand it over, then,” he said, hiding his guilt behind their usual attitudes. “Is it inflatable, and if it is, did you get me a bicycle pump to go with it?”

“Sorry, nothing that juicy. I mean, it’s not a big present or anything, just what my Gran would call a ‘minding under the tree’, you know, something to show you were...” he stumbled then, recovered, made a face to minimise the words farther, “being thought of.”

A small parcel was put into Doyle’s hands, gaily gift-wrapped, complete with bow and Santa Claus tag. Making a great show of it, Doyle shook it, listened to it, felt it carefully all over, heaved a dramatic sigh of relief. “Least it’s not a bomb.” After all that meticulous exploration, he simply ripped the paper from the present, revealing a dulled blue cover, faded gilt printing. Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. He looked up quickly, caught the embarrassment and trepidation on Bodie’s face.

There was an awkward pause, and then Bodie shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. You know, bit of a joke, what with you hating Christmas and all that...”

“You mean, what with me being a miserable bastard and too mean to buy my best mate a present.”

SCREWGED OF NANNY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

Bodie waved an expansive arm at the heaped-high basket. "That's a pretty nice present, Doyle."

"Yeh, but I didn't buy any of that for anyone but me. Was planning on keeping it all for myself."

Bodie was looking at him strangely, obviously catching the odd undercurrent running through Doyle.

"What'd you come here for?" he asked in a softly patient voice, and Doyle looked at him, thinking about the things Bodie had been saying to him recently, recognising that Bodie had been waiting for this change between them for a very, very long time. "What made you turn up on my doorstep like that?"

"Believe me, mate, you wouldn't believe me." He hefted the book, grinning wryly at it. "And it's a very long story." Bodie was looking at him still, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't know how to say it, how to make Bodie understand, not without coming out with it

baldly, making it sound like one of their reports to Cowley. And that would be disastrous: it would change the atmosphere, and God knew how he'd end up screwing it up by phrasing things badly, and then he'd hurt Bodie's feelings and then they'd get into a fight, and then it would all go wrong anyway.

"Ray," Bodie said, leaving his armchair and coming to kneel in front of Doyle, comfortable as always when it came to emotions and his partner, an expression of such hope and love in his eyes that Doyle knew it was going to be all right if he left it to Bodie. "You trying to tell me something?" Then Bodie reached out, very gently, and took the forgotten sprig of mistletoe from behind Ray's ear.

He knew what to say to that.

"Yes."

And then Bodie leaned forward and kissed him, and it was just as sweet and just as perfect as he'd...dreamed it to be.
