



*Colin and Martin's
First Christmas*



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Colin closed the door with his foot and laid the large box of groceries on the counter, before bending down to stroke Toby, Martin's dog. "Hello fella, you been a good boy then?"

The large black and tan German Shepherd dog gave a single deep woof in answer.

"Toby, you'll get me shot if the Guide Dog Association knows that you're barking at visitors," Martin said, making his way into the kitchen. "Hi, Colin, running a bit late?"

"Yeah, mate, it's all the extra stuff people have been ordering for Christmas."

Colin looked at the five feet nine inch, slightly overweight man who had just entered. Martin's auburn hair caught the light from the above fluorescent tube as he made his sightless way towards his visitor. The harsh lighting did nothing to conceal Martin's severely pock-marked face. Martin had told him the disfigurement had been caused by complications arising from a childhood illness.

"Ah yes, of course," Martin said.

"I'll give you a hand unpacking if you like," Colin said, opening the top of the cardboard box.

Colin worked as a delivery driver for a supermarket chain. Many people complained to him that they hadn't received the exact things they'd ordered. The store would substitute items if they didn't have in stock the precise article the customer had ordered. It wasn't Colin's fault if the order didn't meet the customer's expectations; he just picked up the filled boxes and delivered them. Martin had never complained when he'd been given an alternate item, regarding it more as something to laugh about. Once when he'd ordered fresh peas, for some reason best known to the person who had picked the goods from the shelves, he'd received Sharon Fruit instead.

"Oh, I've never had the nerve to try it, but it'll be fun to 1

give it a go," Martin had said. "Are you sure you've got the time to help, what with your

extra workload?"

"Sure I can, mate." Colin had deliberately left Martin's

delivery till last; he also enjoyed the times he spent helping the kind and softly spoken man. Despite his all too evident disability, Colin marvelled at how together Martin always seemed.

He also knew Martin received few visitors, and judging by how little he'd ordered, he'd be alone for Christmas, as well. Colin was also rather lonely for companionship. He'd

known Simon for a number of years; they'd gone to school together. Simon was devastatingly good looking, and, boy, did he know it. Colin had been besotted with Simon throughout their time together. Colin had foolishly believed in loving someone despite their faults, hoping that if he showed Simon total love and devotion, it would somehow change his friend's self-centred, egotistical, vain and selfish behaviour.

Simon would spend over an hour in the bathroom getting ready to go out, then once they'd arrived at the disco, nightclub or wherever, Simon's eyes would invariably begin to wander, as he checked out all the other cute guys. Chances were that Simon would spend much of the evening dancing with other men, leaving Colin standing patiently on the sidelines.

The final straw came one day when Colin had come home early to find Simon in bed with a twink he'd picked up from goodness knows where. Although Colin knew that Simon cheated on him, actually catching him in the act was just too much for Colin to cope with. Colin had quickly gathered his clothes together, cramming them into

a couple of suitcases, as Simon and his latest penis-touting airhead watched from the bed.

Colin removed the door key from his key-chain, flung it at Simon, and stormed out of the flat, never to return.

Colin had moved in with a buddy from work, his friend being surprised, but not unaccepting, of his homosexuality.

"Hey, man, how the hell can you be gay? You're six foot three and built like a brick shithouse," Max had told the brown-haired brown-eyed Colin.

Although Colin appreciated Max putting him up, he had grown increasingly uncomfortable, not to say horny, when Max brought back his dates and screwed them rather loudly for half the night, the thin wall that separated his and Max's bedrooms doing little to dull the noise of squeaking bedsprings.

"Thanks, it makes life a lot less stressful, but maybe not quite as interesting, if I know what I'm about to open up for dinner," Martin said.

"Huh?" Colin said, then realised he'd been wool gathering. "Sure, no problem."

Martin moved towards the little box he kept on the worktop, which held his stock of Braille labels. Each label consisted of a rectangle of plastic with two holes at the top; through which a loop of elastic chord was threaded. When Martin had used the tin, packet or whatever, he would remove the label and put it in the box. He'd told Colin that the box acted as his shopping list.

The two men began to go through the groceries, Colin telling Martin what each item was as he pulled it out. Martin would attach the correct label to the jar, can, or whatever, and set it to one side.

"These are the cooked meats you asked for," Colin said coming across three packets of sliced meat. "Want me to put them in alphabetical

order?"

"Please."

There were four ounces each of ham, pork and beef. "Okay, the beef is on the top, ham in the middle, and pork at the bottom," Colin said, handing them to Martin.

Their hands touched momentarily. Colin noticed the contact was held a fraction of a second longer than was usual. His arms ached to hold the smaller man, protect him, tell him everything would be all right, but he knew he couldn't go round hugging his customers; many of them would take offence.

Martin took the packets of cooked meat and turned away, but not before Colin saw the stray tear run down his cheek. Colin's desire to hold Martin became almost irresistible.

"Oh," he remembered, "there's the frozen turkey leg you ordered, it's still in the van's freezer," he said, leaving Martin's house to retrieve it.

Once outside, Colin used the few seconds in the cold to get a hold of himself. Retrieving the frozen food, he returned to Martin's kitchen.

"Here we are."

"Thanks," Martin said, putting the poultry in the bottom drawer of his freezer.

"And finally," Colin said, trying to lighten the mood, "Your Christmas pudding." It looked so pathetic in the palm of his hand. Yet more evidence that Martin would be eating alone this Christmas. He tried, probably unsuccessfully, to keep the happy tone in his voice.

"Oh yeah, not that much of a fan of Christmas pud, but you've got to make the effort, I suppose," Martin said, obviously trying to remain upbeat himself.

"Yeah, know what you mean. My housemate's girlfriend is coming

round to cook us lunch on Christmas Day, but it'll be a case of two's company, and three's, well..."

"You're very welcome to come and eat here with me and Toby," Martin said quickly.

Oh, "I wouldn't want to put you out." Colin thought politeness dictated he should make the token protest.

"You'd be very welcome. Toby is great company, but he isn't all that good at pulling crackers."

Yet again came the desire to protect. "Well, if you're sure."

He'd thought about going down to his folks in London, but his mother would have a houseful, his brother and two sisters would be there with their partners; Colin didn't fancy turning up alone. He'd taken Simon the previous year, but the visit hadn't gone well.

"If you want to try out my culinary skills first, the soup should be about ready, I think," Martin said, lifting the lid of his wristwatch and feeling the hands to determine the time.

Colin hadn't failed to notice the large pan that had been simmering away, filling the kitchen with wonderful smells.

"Thank you. I was probably just going to grab a take away or something, but..."

"It's nothing special, just a chicken carcass and a few vegetables that I threw together. If you have other deliveries to make, it can easily wait."

"You were my last customer. If you'll let me use your phone, I can book off work, they won't mind me holding on to the van for a bit."

"It's through here," Martin said, his face lighting up.

"Well, you've passed with flying colours," Colin said after downing a second bowl of soup. "That was smashing, thanks." Martin was glad. There was just something so satisfying

about being able to feed someone. It was as if...Martin stopped himself from going down that road.

The two were relaxing in Martin's front room, a room he mainly reserved for Sundays, and special visitors, not that he received many of those.

"Glad you liked it." Mentally crossing his fingers, he asked, "So, you'll come and be our guest on Christmas Day, then?"

"Love to."

"Great." Martin smiled. Hugging himself Martin began thinking about what he

would make for the two of them. Turkey of course, but... "So, you like to go to the theatre, then?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, sorry, there's an envelope from the West Yorkshire

Playhouse on your mantelpiece."

"Oh, it'll be a brochure for next season's performances, I

expect. I haven't scanned it through the computer yet." Martin's PC had a programme which converted printed text into synthetic speech. "Now I know what it is, I won't need to bother with it."

"You don't like going?"

Martin wasn't sure how to answer the question. He loved live theatre. The theatre management provided a special audio described commentary via infrared headsets on certain nights for visually impaired patrons. But the last time Martin had gone, he'd found himself unable

to relax and enjoy the play, because he had been overly concerned with the logistics of getting to the theatre, finding his seat, obtaining a drink during the interval and getting out in time for his bus home. Martin was forced to conclude that it just wasn't worth the hassle. It wasn't all that much fun going to such places alone, either.

"Erm, not really," Martin said, knowing his answer wasn't true, but what else could he say?

"I wouldn't mind reading the programme to you if you like. Might be fun to see what's on."

"No, don't worry about it. But thanks for the offer, it's appreciated." Martin would rather not know what plays he wouldn't be going to see.

"If you're sure. Gosh, is that the time? Listen, mate, I'll have to be making a move. I've got to do my gift buying for the folks back in London." Colin pronouncing it Larndon. "Though with me being off tomorrow, I suppose I could do it then."

"Might not be as crowded during the day," Martin observed.

"Yeah."

Martin heard Colin moving his TV dinner table, the spoon rattling in the now empty soup bowl. He stood up to say goodbye to his visitor. To Martin's surprise and sheer delight, Colin wrapped his arms around him, treating him to a hug.

"I've really enjoyed myself."

"Me too," Martin said, breathlessly returning the hug. Colin's body was wonderfully firm and muscular. Colin released his hold from Martin; the latter hoping his dining companion hadn't seen the bulge in his trousers. Martin drew in a breath to steady himself. Realising what he'd done, he attempted to cover. "CK1, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're right. I suppose you're pretty good at picking up on smells and things."

"Just a case of my other senses being more aware, I guess." Martin walked out of the room and down the hallway toward the front door. "No doubt I'll see you next week?" he said once he'd opened the door, again only family and special visitors used this entrance, everyone else used the kitchen door. But Colin was now guest of honour.

"Yeah, mate. Do you want me to bring anything, for the meal, I mean?"

Martin shook his head. "Just yourself. I've got it all covered."

As soon as Martin heard Colin's van drive away, he ran upstairs to his bathroom and fisted his meat until he came to a roaring climax. It didn't take long.

After he'd recovered, he realised he'd forgotten to wank into a sock, which was his usual practice, doing so helped contain the mess. Martin spent the next five minutes on his hands and knees feeling round the tiles and carpet for wet spots, mopping them up with a wad of toilet paper.

Martin spent the evening putting *Operation Christmas Cheer* into effect. He went onto the net and ordered a huge amount of food, including a 14 lb turkey, three types of stuffing, cocktail sausages with bacon wrapped around them, a bag of peeled prawns and a couple of salmon steaks. He thought the latter two items would make a decent starter. Mulling over what to do as a sweet, Martin decided to dust off his grandmother's sherry trifle recipe. It could be made the day before, and if he and Colin couldn't face it straight after dinner, then it wouldn't come to any harm. He was glad Colin wouldn't be delivering the stuff; because he didn't want him to know how much trouble he was going to.

The next day Martin and Toby battled with the Christmas shoppers on the high street; Martin was in search of Christmas decorations. He'd never bothered with them before, *After all, there's only me to appreciate them, and I can't see 'em anyway*, had been his motto, but enthused with a new energy, Martin decided to change all that.

Buying decorations wasn't exactly easy for him, because he was unable to appreciate the overall visual effect. He threw himself onto the mercy of a kindly spoken saleswoman in Woolworth's; although she was busy with other customers, Martin knew Toby had treated her to one of his most earnest pleading expressions, because she was immediately won over. Martin needed to hire a taxi to get himself, Toby and his many purchases back from the shops, but he knew that it would all be worth it. The knowledge that he'd be sharing Christmas with the kind deliveryman made it worth it.

The next week sped by for Colin. He was worked hard, people seemed to be taking to on-line shopping in a big way, many of his customers telling him that it was much easier than battling with the crowds. Colin marvelled at the huge quantities of food that was being purchased, most of which he believed wouldn't be eaten until well into the New Year.

If Colin were to use just one word to describe himself, then he'd have to say that he was a cuddler. He loved being able to wrap his arms around someone and comfort them. This wasn't necessarily a sexual thing. Simon hadn't really enjoyed it when Colin wanted to cuddle. Simon was always too uptight, competitive, and go-getting to want to just sit down of an evening and snuggle in front of something romantic on the TV. Simon would submit to being hugged after Colin had made love to him, though even then, Simon never seemed to reciprocate all that freely.

Colin had to admit to being a little dominant; he was most reluctant to take the passive role in lovemaking, though this he thought was partially due to a lack of trust that he felt towards his previous sex partners. Colin was a take-charge, look-after-and-protect kind of a guy; the smaller, weaker or more vulnerable his partner, the more Colin felt the need to take over. It always amazed him that he and Simon had stayed together for as long as they had. They were fundamentally incompatible. Colin was beginning to realise that Martin was starting to dominate his thoughts. Martin seemed to press all of his buttons, though he didn't know if Martin was gay. Although Colin's gaydar was fairly reliable, he didn't get the usual eye contact with Martin that he was used to, but given Martin's blindness this was to be expected. He'd had no difficulty in detecting the bulge pressing into him when he'd hugged Martin that once; this gave him a clue, but was Martin just lonely for companionship? Did he want someone in his life? Martin could be too set in his ways to want to share with anyone.

Was Colin after starting a relationship with Martin? He didn't know. Colin tried to analyse his feelings, were they just born of a need to protect someone whom he perceived as being weaker than himself? Or did he like Martin in a sexual way? If the bulge in his uniform trousers whenever he thought of Martin lying under him or sucking on his dick was any indication, then yes, he fancied Martin something rotten. But then Colin's guilt would set in; he knew that he would destroy the rather fragile Martin if he came on too strong.

Friday, Martin's grocery delivery day, soon rolled around again. Martin wondered if Colin would want to stop for something to eat, dare he suggest it? He hated to think that he was monopolising Colin's time. The man was busy, even more so at this time of year, Martin surmised that Colin would have far better things to do than spend time with him. However, this didn't prevent him from preparing a larger than usual beef casserole.

I can always freeze the extra, he told himself.

He'd just dropped in a few dumplings when Colin came through the door.

"Bloody hell, the nation's gone shopping mad," Colin announced as he greeted Toby.

"Well, people are stocking up in case the Millennium bug hits."

"Yeah, load of hype if you ask me. I've been round and round the town so many times today, it wouldn't have surprised me if I hadn't met myself coming in the opposite direction. Still, mustn't grumble, it keeps me in work."

The two then got down to the business of unpacking. Martin didn't really need much; the extra food he'd bought the previous Saturday had seen to that, but he wanted to see Colin again, so he'd decided to order some things for his store cupboard.

"Have to go, mate. I've still got half a van full of stuff to drop off before I knock off tonight," Colin said once he'd squared away all of Martin's purchases.

Martin concealed his disappointment at Colin not being able to stay, comforting himself with the knowledge that he'd have the pleasure of his company for the majority of Christmas Day.

"Okay, I hope to have the dinner ready for about 1 o'clock a week on Saturday."

"Great. You sure it's still okay for me to come over?"

"Of course it is," Martin said. *You'd be more welcome than you'll ever know.*

"Better get off then, mate." Colin patted Toby on the head and left the kitchen.

Martin had secretly hoped for another hug, the previous one had provided him with fuel for a week's worth of night time fantasies of being lovingly restrained by the powerful, but gentle, stud. Although Martin couldn't picture Colin in his mind, he imagined him to be fair-haired, blue eyed and devastatingly handsome. *With a queue of women after him*, no doubt, Martin told himself.

It was typical of Martin to fall in love with an idea, a dream, an unattainable goal. He knew that because Colin was out of his reach, it was safe to love him. Colin couldn't hurt or reject him, because he would never know of Martin's love for him. Martin could and frequently did construct ever more elaborate scenarios wherein Colin the caped crusader would rescue the weak and vulnerable Martin from a series of increasingly ridiculous mishaps.

Oh for fuck's sake, Martin, snap out of it! he told himself, slapping the side of his head. He returned to his meal preparations.

It was late on Christmas Eve and Martin couldn't sleep. He had checklists running round in his head. He'd spent the whole day in pre-preparation. It took him much longer to prepare food than a sighted person. He realised he should have bought frozen vegetables, but he'd decided that fresh was better. The first thing on his agenda for the next morning would be to prepare the Brussels sprouts. Martin hated sprouts, *little green packets of wind*, but they were a traditional part of Christmas dinner, and Martin thought Colin would want the meal to be as traditional as possible.

Martin had taken advice from the retailer at the off-license on which bottle of wine would best go with roast turkey. He wasn't much of a wine drinker, and Colin wouldn't be able to have much as he was driving. Though should he offer to put Colin up in the spare room overnight, so he could enjoy a drink? These and other thoughts kept running round in Martin's head, eventually quietening sufficiently to

allow him to doze off.

The alarm woke Martin at 7 am. He needed to make an early start. After taking Toby for a quick walk round the block, Martin began his kitchen duties whilst listening to carols on the radio. Normally Martin would have put in a CD of non-Christmas music, but he really wanted to get into the spirit of the season, something he hadn't felt like doing since his childhood. Martin tried hard not to build up too many expectations for the day; it would be impossible for the event to live up to them all as it was. But Martin was happy, happier than he'd been in years.

The Brussels sprouts had been rather tricky to prepare, Martin had ended up cutting himself a couple of times.

Fortunately he'd had less trouble with the carrots and turnips. The turkey was cooking nicely, Martin had just basted it, and the ten o'clock news had just come on when his phone rang. *Who on earth could that be?* Martin rarely received any phone calls. A cold shiver ran down his spine. *Oh, God, I hope it isn't Colin ringing up to cancel. I don't think I could cope with that.* He wiped his hands, and walked into the front room, reaching the phone on its fifth ring. "Hello?" Martin said nervously.

"Hi Martin, it's me, Colin." Oh no. Martin could feel his legs beginning to give way. "You there, Martin?"

"Erm, yeah." Martin began to steel himself for the bad news.

"Listen, I'm sorry..." The blood pumping in his ears prevented Martin from hearing much more.

Why, why, it's not fair. It's just too cruel.

"Martin? You sure you're all right?" Colin's concerned voice came over the phone. "Look I'm on my way now, love."

"Huh?" Martin was confused. "Martin, I'm on my way." The line went dead.

Colin got into his car and sped across town. Something was wrong, Martin sounded so distant somehow. He'd only rung up to confirm the time of the meal. He wanted to leave the house; Max and his girlfriend, were getting on his nerves with their endless billing and cooing. Colin needed to escape.

"Martin!" Colin shot through the back door, almost falling over Toby. "Out of the way, boy!" The first thing Colin saw on entering the kitchen was numerous red fingerprints all over the work surfaces. "God, no, he's bleeding."

Colin's voice brought Martin out of his funk; he'd been dazedly sitting on the sofa. He rose to his feet. "What's wrong?" they both asked at the same time. Colin hugged Martin to him. "You sounded ill on the phone, and the blood, God, Martin, you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just thought you were ringing up to cancel today." Martin fought hard to keep hold of his emotions.

"Cancel, why would I want to cancel?"

"I don't know, I wasn't expecting anyone to ring, no one ever does, and when," Martin sniffed, "and when I heard your voice and you were saying that you were sorry, well, I, I..." Martin lost the battle, the dam broke.

"Hush, love. Please Martin, please it's okay. I got your number out of the phonebook, I'd forgotten what time you wanted me to come over. There, there, it's okay, love, I'm here. I'm here." Colin wiped Martin's eyes.

"Shit, shit, I've made a total prat of myself, haven't I?"

"No, love. I'm sorry for frightening you. But you've been hurt, there are loads of bloody finger marks in the kitchen." Colin lifted up Martin's hands. "They look okay, just a few small nicks."

"Sorry, I cut myself when I was doing the sprouts, I'm not used to handling them, cause I don't like them myself."

"No, me neither," Colin said.

Martin started to giggle. "I ought to make you eat them all up for causing me all that trouble."

"Sorry, but you never told me you were going to do sprouts. And what about me? When I saw the blood, I didn't know what had happened to you, I thought you'd been hurt."

"A right pair of twits, aren't we?" Martin said, relaxing. *It was okay. Everything was fine.*

"Let me give you a hand in the kitchen."

"It's okay, I know where everything is. And there isn't much to do at the minute."

"Well, I'll wipe up the blood then."

"There isn't much, surely?"

"No, not really, I think with blood, a little seems to go a long way. I ought to put Band Aids on your cuts though."

"I'd rather you didn't, it'd be like wearing gloves, and I won't be able to feel things properly."

"Oh yeah, I hadn't thought about that. Well, let's run your hands under the tap, I don't want the cuts to get infected."

"It's nice to be looked after," Martin smiled. Once he'd attended to

Martin's cuts, Colin moved to the side and did his best to stay out of Martin's way. Martin appreciated the company.

"Wow, it's great how well you manage, considering...uh, that..."

Martin laughed. "That I'm not able to see what I'm doing?"

"Uh, yeah. Sorry."

"It's okay. "Look, this is how I chop stuff," Martin said, reaching for a stick of celery. He held the knife in his right hand, but used his left one over the top of the blade, with fingers spread."

"The right hand does the cutting as usual, but the left hand does the seeing."

"That's really neat."

Thinking he ought to lead the discussion away from blind culinary techniques, Martin said, "I thought we'd have poached salmon with a few prawns on a bed of salad as a starter."

"Sounds lovely."

"Would you like a sauce with it?"

"Whatever you think is best, I don't want you to go to any more trouble."

"Don't worry, it's an easy sauce to make up." Martin demonstrated his point by putting a few tablespoonfuls of mayonnaise into a bowl, adding a little tomato puree, a pinch of cayenne pepper and a couple of squeezes of lemon juice. Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out a teaspoon. "Here, have a taste, do you want a bit more bite to it?"

Colin sampled the mixture. "No, it's fine as it is."

"Okay, you can help with the next bit if you like." Martin reached up into a wall cupboard and brought down two wide glass goblets. "There's some pre-washed lettuce and cherry tomatoes in the fridge,

can you get them out along with the salmon and prawns, and kind of arrange them in these bowls?"

Martin pointed to the celery and other salad greens he'd prepared, asking Colin to incorporate them also.

"Food presentation isn't really my strong suit," Martin admitted.

"You've done great, Martin, you honestly have. I know even without tasting any of this that it'll be much nicer than the meal I would have had with Max and Tracy. And the company is much better here, too."

"Thanks, Colin," Martin said, getting a lump in his throat.

Martin had pulled out his rarely used dining table, setting it in the middle of the front room. He and Colin laid the table with a starched white tablecloth and Martin's best china.

"Erm, Martin, I'm not normally one for saying grace at mealtimes, but well, erm, I'd like to say a few words if you don't mind."

"Sure, whatever you want."

The pair held hands over the table. "Lord," Colin began. "We thank you for these the gifts of your bounty, we also give thanks for bringing together two friends to share this wonderful meal, so lovingly prepared. May you watch over and guide us in our efforts to serve you in our daily lives. Amen."

"Amen," Martin repeated softly. The two began to eat. "Martin, this is fantastic."

"Thanks, it was fairly simple to put together really."

"Well, I don't think I could have done it," Colin said. "I don't remember you ordering any of this stuff from the supermarket."

"I had it all delivered on your day off."

"Why?"

"Oh, well it just kind of worked out that way," Martin said, lowering his head and putting in another mouthful of food. His appetite wasn't the best; he was still too keyed up about the rest of the meal coming off okay, to be able to enjoy himself.

"I'm stuffed," Colin said, pulling his chair back from the table. "Martin, that was a fantastic meal. All those little accompaniments made it so much better."

"Thanks. Turkey is such a boring meat on its own, you need the stuffing, cranberry jelly and things to liven it up."

"You did a fantastic job. I don't think I could eat another thing."

Martin smiled. "There's a trifle in the fridge for afters." Colin groaned. "Don't worry, we can have it for tea if you like?" Martin didn't know if Colin would want to stop that long, but he'd made the offer now, and it couldn't be unmade.

"I don't want to think about tea yet."

"You can watch TV or something if you like."

"Yeah, I like." Martin got up and switched on his portable TV. "Sorry it's only a black and white set, with just me, it wasn't worth buying a colour set." Martin could have kicked himself for saying that. He was sure the tiny TV emphasised his boring existence to the man who would be used to huge widescreen TVs with surround sound.

Martin's melancholy was pushed back when he felt Colin sit next to him on the sofa and put an arm around him.

"Thanks for a really great time, mate."

Martin's heart was beginning to swell. "Thanks for sharing the day with me, it made all the difference." *You'll never know how much of a difference*, he thought.

The two quieted as they watched the afternoon family movie. For the first time in a very long while, Martin had really enjoyed a TV programme. This was because Colin had patiently explained all the bits that he was unable to follow.

When the credits began to roll, Martin stood up. It was wonderful having Colin so near him, he could smell the manly scents of his guest, a combination of Old Spice, a little fabric conditioner from his clothes, as well as that indefinable smell of man. It was all a bit much for Martin to cope with.

"I might as well make a start on the clearing up."

"No, let me do it, you've been on the go all day, and yesterday as well, I bet."

"Thanks, but I know where everything goes."

"Well I'll wash, and you can dry and put away then."

"Okay, it's a deal." The two went into the kitchen and began the rather lengthy task of cleaning up. Martin thought how wonderful it was to have someone in the house to talk to, laugh with, snuggle and watch TV next to. *A picture of domestic bliss*, he thought.

Oh, stop it with the stupid romantic dreaming, another voice in Martin's head said.

"Toby's at the door, will he want to go out?"

Martin *looked* at his watch. "Yeah, he likes to go for a walk about this time of day."

"Can I come, too?" Colin asked. Martin smiled. "Course you can." Toby grew excited when he spied his lead. Martin explained to Colin that he'd just take Toby on the

lead, leaving his harness at home. "I like to give him the odd day off from work. I can get about okay with the stick."

The two put on warm coats to guard against the cold, and set out. Martin knew he wasn't as able with his long cane, a fact that was brought home when his cane connected with a concrete bollard.

"Would it be easier if you took my arm?" Colin asked.

Martin was glad of the help. He folded up his cane, put it in his pocket, and took hold of Colin's elbow. They walked the rest of the way to the playing fields, where Toby was let off the leash and went bounding away in search of adventure.

"He looks to be enjoying himself," Colin observed.

"Yeah, he likes a free run. He's often quite a serious dog, I think it does him good to lark about now and again."

Colin picked up a stick and threw it for Toby, who dutifully brought it back.

Martin realised how deeply satisfying it was to share such simple pleasures with someone. His earlier thoughts about domestic harmony tried to crowd in again, but Martin pushed them away.

As they walked, they talked about football. Martin, who possessed an excellent memory for detail, showed off shamelessly. Colin seemed impressed, so he didn't feel too guilty.

Colin marvelled that Martin was interested in a game that he'd never seen.

Martin smiled. "I see your point. But actually I get a lot out of going to a football match, the smell and roar of the crowd, you know." Martin didn't add that it'd been years since he'd last been to a game. As with the theatre, the logistics of getting there and back, finding his seat, made it impractical.

Martin's mood was dropping again, he tried to think of something upbeat to say, when...

"Well...if it isn't my dear old brother, the poof. Oh and look, he's got a little friend with him. How nice."

"Bob!" Martin said, a cold chill running down his spine. Despite the fact that Bob was standing a few feet from them, Martin's keen sense of smell was easily able to detect the Whisky fumes. "You're drunk."

"Yeah, I'm drunk." Bob then gave a sinister laugh. "And, Martin, you're queer, but I'll be sober in the morning."

Toby bounded up to them and began growling. "Get that bloody mangy mutt away from me," Bob snarled. "Toby, here, boy," Martin said. Toby immediately obeyed, but Martin could tell he kept a wary eye on Bob. "Come on, we're going home now."

Martin's world was beginning to crash around him. Fortunately he was standing on the footpath that cut across the field. He knew if he remained on the path, it would take him back to the pavement. As he walked briskly back home, his cane swinging ahead of him, the wonderful feelings of sharing the holiday celebrations with a kind friend were now totally ruined. Someone who he'd hoped would have been a good friend to him now knew his deepest, darkest secret. As he walked, Martin battled to remain in control of his emotions. He didn't want to break down in the middle of the street.

Unlocking the back door, Martin stepped inside and faced Colin, who had remained silent on the walk home.

"Colin, I'm sorry, so sorry. I just wanted to spend the holiday with someone; I didn't want to be alone. I'm sorry that you had to find out about me that way, I'm sorry if you think that I've deceived you or used you. I just didn't want to be alone again at Christmas." Martin was openly weeping as he took off his coat. "God knows why I came out to Bob all those years ago. It's not as if someone with a face like mine could ever have the chance of finding a man." Martin hung up his coat. "Look, you might as well go home now. I'm sorry for ruining your Christmas."

Colin was horrified and very angry. *How could, how dare anyone, least of all someone Martin was related to, come out with such hatred!* Martin was the sweetest, kindest, most honest, gentle and loving person Colin had ever had the good fortune to encounter.

Colin had been torn as to whether he should pursue Bob to remonstrate with him, or make sure Martin got home safely. Out of his concern for Martin's wellbeing, Colin had chosen the latter course. His silence had also been due to the fact that he was making a decision, one which, given the failure of his previous relationship, wasn't an easy one to make.

Standing in the hallway of Martin's house, seeing his friend so emotionally shattered, a total change from the happy and smiling man he'd been only a few minutes earlier, Colin knew what he had to do. He wrapped his arms around the now visibly shaking man. Colin brought his lips to meet Martin's. Treating him to a gentle kiss, he said, "Hush, love, hush."

Martin jumped in surprise, but at least he stopped crying.

"Martin, let's go into your front room. There's something I need to tell you."

"Yoo-hoo, Martin, I'm home!"

"Did you get everything?" Martin managed to ask before Colin engulfed him in his arms and plunged his tongue into his willing mouth. The two were about to celebrate their third anniversary.

After Colin had told a totally disbelieving Martin that he, *a pock-marked freak*, was very much loved, it took him quite some time to believe that all his dreams had finally come true. Martin had persuaded Colin to take things easy in the beginning, believing that once

the dust had settled, Colin would wake up to the realisation that he would prefer to have someone in his life who was more able-bodied and less of a burden to him. Martin's love for Colin was so great, he couldn't face the prospect of having his lover feel as though he were trapped. Although Colin had vehemently disagreed with Martin's assertions, he had reluctantly agreed to take things steady. The pair had decided to go out on a series of dates to test their relationship. The two had taken long walks in the moonlight, visited the theatre, eaten out in restaurants, made trips out into the countryside, gone dancing at a gay-friendly club, as well as spending many evenings at home snuggled up together on the sofa.

After a month of courtship, Colin had finally had enough. He told Martin that he, Colin Rodgers, was totally and completely in love with Martin Kellam, and he was moving in that night and there wasn't a bloody thing Martin could do to stop him."

Colin slowly removed his lips from those of his lover. "Jesus, you wouldn't believe how many groceries I've delivered today, I've heard of stocking up for Christmas, but some people just go too far."

"You didn't get us any sprouts did you?" Colin chuckled. "No, babe, I didn't get us any sprouts."

THE END

ABOUT DREW HUNT

Having read all the decent free fiction on the net Drew could find, he set out to try his hand at writing something himself. Fed up reading about characters who were super-wealthy, impossibly handsome, and incredibly well-endowed, Drew determined to make his characters real and believable.

Drew lives a quiet life in the north of England with his cat. Someday he hopes to meet the kind of man he writes about.



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