



All Snug

B.G. Thomas

For Raymond, for ten years—
and for the idea for this story...
I love you!

THE more I thought about it, the more I knew I had to have the bed. My boyfriend wanted it. It was Christmas. And while it was a bit overpriced, I could afford it. Steve on the other hand, could not.

I'd thought about it for two weeks, and when Steve casually mentioned it was still at the antique store, I made up my mind. It was perhaps an excessive gift for a man I'd been dating for less than two months, but when I thought about what Steve and I would *do* in that bed, the scales were tipped.

A call to the antique store the night before told me the bed was still available. So it was quite a surprise when I arrived at Derringer's early the next morning and asked for the large, oak four-poster bed at the very same time as another customer. The look on both the proprietor's and the other man's faces (and my own, I'm sure, had I been able to see it) were quite comedic really. Like they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"Oh, my," said Mr. Derringer, the owner of the store. "I haven't had anything like this happen in a long time. And it's been sitting there two months."

The other man, youngish, slim, with dark hair and pretty, wide startled eyes, looked like he might cry. "I... I think I was here first," he said.

"I'm not sure," Mr. Derringer said, adjusting his glasses.

"I did call last night," I reminded Mr. Derringer. He knew me; I'd bought a few things from him in the past, most of them costly: a standing lamp, an oil painting, and a few other odd items (more than one with a rather naughty touch).

"So you did, so you did," he said, looking up, down, but not seeming to want to look at either of us. "But, ah, you didn't ask me to hold it."

"So?" asked the young man. "Does that mean I get it or not?" He looked like he was about to go into fight or flight mode. Which would it be? I wondered.

Mr. Derringer, nervous thing that he was, began to shake, fumbled with some papers on his desk, removed his glasses and began cleaning them. He looked back and forth between us. "You both approached me at the same time," he said in that spineless voice of his. He drove me near insane he could be so insipid. But he also found things that no one else could. He had a gift for it.

"I've got my card out!" the young man practically shouted.

"I'll pay cash," I pressed. This was ridiculous, and I didn't want to be here all day. I did need to get to the office at some point.

"Cash?" asked Mr. Derringer, his little eyes focusing on me.

I liked the sound of Derringer's voice now. Holiday season or not, cash was always good, and who knew if the young man could even afford the bed. His peacoat looked worn, his pants with tattered cuffs were just a little too long, and his shoes had certainly seen better days.

"I don't see why that makes any difference," said the young man. "What do you usually do in a situation like this?"

"I..." said Mr. Derringer, "I *could* use the cash."

"I'll give you an extra hundred," I said and pulled out a roll of bills.

"No!" yelled the young man. "You can't do that!"

"I can," I said. "Do we have a deal, Mr. Derringer?"

"I'm sorry, young man," Mr. Derringer apologized, staring at my cash like he was starving.

The young man turned to me. "Look, I really want that bed," he said, his eyes wide and pleading. "The... person I'm seeing really wants it. Anything else would just be a letdown."

Person? I smiled at the lack of pronoun and wondered if that "person" was another man.

"I went through hell to get the money," he continued. "There isn't anything else I want. It's really important to me. Please."

Oh, those eyes, I thought. Like a big puppy dog, but blue instead of brown. This young man was just too sweet.

But why did that matter? I really wanted the bed as well. Steve had a reason for wanting a four-poster bed, and the idea caused my dick to twitch right there in that little store. Steve was just crazy in the bedroom, any room for that matter. I'd never known a man with such a sexual imagination. My whole adult life had seemed to be filled with men who considered tickling to be kinky. They'd given the word "vanilla" a whole new definition. I'd resigned myself to

sexual mediocrity, and then Steve had shown up in my life. Finally, I'd met someone with an erotic imagination to put mine to shame, a man who wanted to fulfill my every fantasy.

Yet the kid looking at me, and he didn't seem to be much more than a kid, really did look like a puppy. One who'd been kicked just a few times too many and was expecting me to kick him as well.

Shit.

"I am going to let you two decide," said Mr. Derringer. "I have a few calls to make. You two work it out." He turned and practically fled the room.

"Please?" the young man asked again.

Please? Did he say "please"? I almost laughed, but knew it would hurt the man's feelings. I bet if I had shouted out "boo" at that moment, the kid might have wet himself. Shit. It would be like kicking a pup. I glanced down at my watch. *Oh, to hell with the office*, I thought. It wasn't going anywhere. This young man intrigued me. "I'll tell you what," I said. "Let's go have some coffee and talk about this. We'll both present our case and see if one of us can talk the other one out of it."

"I... I..." The young man paused and then seemed to make up his mind. "All right," he said, nodding.

I went to find Derringer. "We'll be back. Don't sell that bed, you hear me?" I said.

Mr. Derringer heard me. Most people did.

WE SAT down at a small table outside The Radiant Cup, my pick as the best coffee shop in Kansas City. I loved everything they made, especially their lattes. The young man had some hot chocolate—cheapest thing on the menu—and when he'd paid his bill, counting out his money almost to pennies, it only confirmed my suspicions that this guy had no business buying such an expensive gift.

I took a sip of my latte. Wonderful. Perfect as usual. "You've been here before?" I asked.

"Nah, I usually just make my own." The young man laughed. "I can buy a can of coffee at Aldi's for what a cup costs here."

I nodded. Yes, I was right. "Maybe," I said. "But then it is Aldi's coffee. You get what you pay for."

"And I want to pay for that bed," he said excitedly.

"I don't think you can really afford it. Am I right... what is your name?"

"Shawn," he answered.

"I'm Elliot. Shawn, I'm thinking you've got yourself in hock to your eyebrows trying to buy that bed. That 'person' you are buying it for. They know it, too, I bet."

"Maybe," Shawn said, chin out. "But it sure is going to shock the shit out of him when I get it."

I raised my brows despite myself.

"Yeah," Shawn said defensively. "He.' I'm gay! You think just because you'd be having straight sex in it that you should have the bed?"

“Whoa,” I said. “Let’s not even go there. For one thing, I’m gay too.” I surprised myself at making the admission. Not that I was ashamed, but I kept my private life private. There could be many an important deal lost because of how some bigots felt about gays.

“You are?” Shawn asked, obviously surprised. “Gosh. You don’t look it.”

I laughed. Didn’t look it? Was this guy for real? “You don’t ‘look’ particularly gay yourself, Shawn.”

Shawn blushed. It was a most delightful shade of pink. “You’re just so... big. I think your arms are bigger than my thighs.”

I laughed again. “Not quite,” I said. “I just like to keep myself in shape. It’s amazing what you can do with a personal trainer keeping on your ass. And there is nothing wrong with your thighs.” Now what the hell had made me say that?

Shawn went even more red and tried to hide his expression by taking a long sip of his hot chocolate. I don’t know if was his blush or the morning sun, but I was again noticing just how blue his eyes were. Was he wearing contacts? They were the most amazing color. And huge. Otherworldly.

He really was sweet. Like a kid, but the more I looked at Shawn the more I could see he was no kid. Surely no more than about thirty, but all man. Handsome too. His skin was pale, and it really brought out the shadow of a threatening beard along his jaw. Maybe it was that complexion that made his eyes look so blue? “How long have you been out?” I asked.

Shawn almost spit out his chocolate. "What? Why do you ask?"

"This guy you are seeing, is he your first boyfriend?"

"My second," he said, chin out again.

"You just come out recently?"

"Why do you want to know that?" Shawn asked.

I shrugged. "You seem so naïve. How old are you?"

"You sure do ask a lot of questions for a guy trying to talk me out of buying that bed."

"Just trying to get the lay of the land," I said. It was what I did. How I'd become so successful.

"I'm thirty-two. And how old are you, oh Master Yoda?"

It was my turn to nearly spit out my coffee. Master Yoda? "I'm thirty-nine," I said. "And I've been out since I was fourteen, so I guess I know a few things."

"Fourteen?" gasped Shawn, and once again did that thing with his eyes. Made them look huge.

Oh, if we weren't both already taken, I thought, I'd take you home right now.

"You knew you were gay when you were fourteen?" Shawn asked again.

I nodded. "Coach Brennermyer—"

"The coach—!"

"No!" I said. "No. He never touched me. But his thighs! One look at him in those shorts of his, and Janet, my 'girlfriend' never had a chance." As a matter-of-fact, it was

the coach that had inspired me to get myself in the shape I was in. I liked my body. It made up for what I considered a boring face—light brown eyes, big nose, lantern jaw—and it surprised me when a trick told me it was my looks and not my body that had gotten them interested.

Shawn reddened again.

“Did you have a Coach Brennermyer?” I asked.

Shawn smiled, then nodded slowly. “He was my art teacher, though. Mr. Finsecker. He was also the track coach, and I became his assistant for the chance....”

“To see him naked? Or was it the team?”

Shawn hid his face behind his hands. “I can’t believe I’m talking to you about this.”

“Sweetie, you’re thirty-two, not fourteen,” I said. The kid—no, the young man, I reminded myself—was charming, no doubt about it. His man, whoever he was, was lucky.

Shawn peeked from between his fingers. “I guess I am naïve,” he said. “The thing is, I didn’t know I was gay. I didn’t know why I wanted to see guys naked. In retrospect, it boggles my mind that I didn’t know. How could I have not known? I hung out as long as I could in locker rooms and... Oh God!” Shawn closed his fingers over his face again. “I can’t believe I just admitted that!”

“You’ve never told anybody that? What about the guys you’ve had sex with? Or your boyfriends...?”

“You’re a stranger,” Shawn said and all but giggled.

I smiled once more. I hadn't stopped smiling around this guy. He was just that charming. "You're a sweetheart. Your man is lucky to have you."

Shawn dropped his hands and revealed a shy smile. "Thanks."

I took a big swallow of my coffee, and then gave Shawn a level look. "You can't really afford that bed, can you?"

Shawn looked down at the table, and then slowly back into my eyes. "I'm *going* to, if you let me. I got some money out of my savings to start. My boss said I can have all the overtime I want. I figure if I work ten to twenty hours a week extra, I can do it."

I whistled. "That's a lot of hours."

Shawn shrugged.

"But then I've worked that many hours on many a week, and I'm salary," I admitted. Of course I also earned a percentage and got some very nice bonuses. "You must really love this guy."

Shawn smiled, and it *was* a sweet smile. He was this mix between man and boy, and that smile was all boy. Happy joyous boy. "I do. He's perfect. He's everything I ever dreamed of and more. He holds doors open for me, pulls out my seat at a restaurant!" Shawn got a faraway look on his face. "He calls me 'Baby'," he said, and then he sighed. Shawn looked up at me. "He doesn't have as much time for me as I wish he did. But that'll be easier when I'm working more. I won't notice as much."

The guy didn't have enough time for him? Shit, if Shawn were mine, I'd never let him out of my sight, despite the fact

that he was probably as vanilla as hell in bed. Häagen-Dazs vanilla bean maybe, but vanilla nevertheless.

But wasn't I *tired* of vanilla? Isn't that why Steve appealed so much?

"And if he likes the bed as much as I think he does," Shawn continued, "it's all he talks about—then maybe I'll be sleeping in it on a more permanent basis. If he asks me to move in with him, I'll be able to see him as much as I want."

Whoa, I thought. Shawn had it bad. I remembered feeling that way. How much I'd longed for love. Someone to call my own, to come home to each night, to wake up with each morning. But years of disastrous relationships had made me stop believing it was even possible. I'd exchanged dreams of love for a lustful reality of hot sex.

Shit. I'd come here to lay out to this kid that I was going to buy the bed. Period. But now? It was confusing. I looked into his face, shining with an innocence I'd lost years ago, and heard Shawn's passion, and I was tempted to just let him have it. Yet for some reason, I was also feeling like I should be responsible and talk the kid—man—out of it. Not so that I could get it for Steve, but because I knew that trying to pay for that ancient thing was going to put a ridiculous financial strain on Shawn. He was a big boy; he was a grown man and could make his own decisions. However, I found a strange protectiveness rising in my chest. What to do?

Maybe find out just how much Shawn really did want the damned thing?

And that led me to an idea.

"I've got a thought," I said. "Let's you and me go back to Derringer's and buy the bed together, fifty-fifty. Then we'll have a little contest."

"What do you mean?" Shawn asked. "Fifty-fifty? What kind of contest?"

"Well, we buy the bed, and that way it isn't going anywhere. We don't have to worry about someone else going in there for a Christmas present."

Shawn nodded warily. "Ah, okay.... And the contest?"

"We figure out a series of little challenges and see which of us wins them. In the end, whoever has the most wins, gets the bed."

"Like some kind of reality show or something?" Shawn asked, eyebrows raised.

I laughed. "Yeah. Except we won't be on TV."

Shawn gave a half-shrug. "Weeeeellll...."

"You can even figure out the first challenge," I said.

"This is really weird," Shawn said.

"Yeah, maybe. But it's better than me telling you that I am going to get that bed."

"Why do you want it so damned bad?" Shawn asked, exasperated.

"Because I do," I told him. Like he was going to understand I was doing it for the sex. He'd get all romantic and tell me I could get sex anywhere. And I could. But Steve was special. It might not be love; I'd given up on that before I'd given up on the idea of finding a wild sex partner. And

Steve was all that and more, plus he didn't charge. Why should Shawn's romantic reasons outweigh my sexual needs?

"And you usually get what you want?"

I nodded. "I do," I confessed. "If you win our little contest, I let you pay for the rest of the bed, and you take it home. If I win, I pay you back what you put into it, and I get the bed."

Shawn didn't say anything for a minute, just stared at me. Finally, "Fine," he said.

"What's your sweetie's name?" I asked.

Shawn shook his head. "You know, let's leave their names out of it. It makes it too personal. I don't want to start feeling guilty when I whip your ass at this."

He was joking, but I could also see the sincerity in those pretty eyes of his.

"Fair enough," I replied. "So, what is the first challenge?"

"The Male Box. Tonight. They're having this charity thing. You sell tickets for people to get their pictures taken with Santa. Except he's some leatherman. I volunteered to go through the crowd and get people to buy tickets. So you be there too. Whichever one of us sells the most, wins the first round."

Charity, I thought. *Fair enough*. I only hoped Shawn was as good as he seemed to think he was, because this was right up my alley. I'd raised enough money through the

years. Shawn may have bitten off more than he could chew. "You got it," I said.

THE MALE BOX was packed, music boomed from hidden speakers, and there were men everywhere. I had met Shawn at the main bar and insisted on buying him a drink. I knew he was going to buy himself the cheapest thing he could, and if he was going to do that, I figured he might as well start the evening with something good. Get a little buzz on, and he wouldn't care that the cheaper alcohol didn't taste as good.

So I told the bartender to put Appleton Estate in his coke, and I asked for Lagavulin. It surprised me that they had it and impressed me as well. The Male Box was more upscale than I would have imagined. Kansas City had come a long way in the last decade, but it would never be New York. It was nice to see a gay bar with good taste. Most queens don't know a ten-year-old, single malt from Black Cat. I was usually lucky to get Laphroaig, which was another favorite of mine.

Then Shawn took me to this bear of a man who was in town from Maine and who was in charge of the event. We were each given ten tickets and told that we could come back and get more if we needed them. I planned on needing them.

"And there is no buying the tickets yourself, Mr. Moneybags," Shawn said.

"What makes you think I would do such a thing?" I asked, giving Shawn my best innocent look and wondering how he'd known exactly what I'd been thinking of doing.

Shawn just laughed and vanished in the crowd.

I finished my whisky and went back to the bartender for another. Looking around the room, I enjoyed my drink leisurely, taking my time. A Lagavulin ten was not to be rushed.

Neither was making money.

I watched the crowd, watched what people were buying, and then made my move.

The gentleman I approached looked to be at least sixty-five. There was a look to him that said old money, and there was no ring on his finger. Two young men sat on either side of him and were giggling up a storm. The gentleman had a short glass with a small amount of a dark liquid. Scotch? Whisky? I wondered. I walked up and introduced myself and asked what he was drinking.

The gentleman looked up and smiled. "Whisky," he said. "You?"

"Lagavulin," I replied, and the older man smiled even wider.

"Excellent."

"May I get you one?" I asked.

"Indeed you may!"

A few moments later, I had sold my tickets and the boys were off getting their picture taken. Not only that, but the gentleman and I had exchanged business cards as well. The evening was bearing all kinds of possible results already.

Just as I went to look for Shawn, he appeared at my side. “I hope you’re selling tickets ’cause I’ve sold mine and am going for more.”

“How fortuitous,” I said. “I’m ready as well.” And why was it that the look that passed over Shawn’s face brought me no pleasure? I’m not an asshole, like some people—especially at the office—liked to think I am, but I did take pleasure in beating the other man in business. Yet the almost stricken look that had passed over Shawn’s face didn’t give me the little charge I usually got in such a situation.

That’s because this isn’t big business, some damned inner voice told me, and I just gave it an inner shrug. *Yes, it is*, I told myself, and I followed Shawn back for more tickets.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk again until this Santa thing is over?” I asked. If I got to feeling guilty, it might hinder my ability to go in for the kill. The idea of Steve, tied to that antique bed, was calling after all.

“Yeah,” Shawn nodded. “Sure.”

There was a brief moment of excitement when this bearish-looking guy who was about to get his picture taken got all pissed off when he didn’t get to sit in the leatherman’s lap but instead had to pose with some big heavy guy who actually looked like Santa. Besides that, the evening went pretty uneventfully.

As it turned out, I won the first round by only six tickets.

Again, for some reason it didn’t feel so good.

THE RADIANT CUP; the next day. It was Sunday and neither of us had to work, not even with Shawn needing the overtime.

"The place I work isn't open on Sundays," Shawn explained over his coffee. "Whoa!" he said.

"What?" I asked.

"This coffee! It's really good."

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Aldi's indeed. "It's Peruvian," I explained. "They roast it here themselves, probably within the last couple of days. It was ground today, right before they brewed it."

"Shit," he said. "Who would have thought there was such a difference?"

"Vive la différence?" I asked.

Shawn smiled that smile of his and nodded. "Touché," he said. I wondered how it would be for Mr. Shawn's Boyfriend to wake up and have coffee with Shawn in the mornings. To look at that handsome face, those blue eyes, that boyish smile over the kitchen table. Nice.

"There are all kinds of wonderful things out there just waiting for you to try," I told him.

"But sometimes," he commented, pointing to his cup, "it really is about the price of a can of coffee from Aldi's. I just can't afford Peruvian every day." He took what was obviously an appreciative sip.

"Not it and that bed," I said.

“Don’t start!” he said. “Now what is the next challenge?”

“Well, usually in things like this there is a physical challenge....”

“Physical?” he asked.

“We could arm wrestle,” I suggested.

“Arm wrestle? Like I’d stand a chance with you!” he cried. “Just look at your arms!”

What the hell was I supposed to do about that? “Handball?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have any idea how to play that,” he said.

“You know, I don’t have to make it something you can do. That was never part of the bargain. You seemed pretty sure you’d beat me last night.”

Shawn looked crestfallen. *Damn him.*

“I usually make a killing on things like that,” he said. “People are always trying to get me involved in their charity drives.”

“And you usually help?”

Shawn nodded. “It’s just that if I am going to be out, going to be gay, then I have to take responsibility. I can’t just do the fun stuff. I feel like I owe something to all the gay men and women who paved the way, who gave us a world I could come out in, even if it took me forever to do so.”

Damn, I thought. The little son of a bitch had a conscience too? Cute and moral? This whole thing was going in a direction I’d never intended. “Fine,” I said. “Then here is the challenge. I have a friend who owns horses. Eight in fact.

So taking a cue from the Labors of Heracles, we are each going to take half the stables and clean them out. The one who is finished first, and does a better job of course, wins.”

“I’ve never been in a horse stable in my life. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I don’t think I have that much of an advantage, and do you really think I’ve ever cleaned a stable? We’ll ask my buddy what to do, and he can be the judge.”

“Your friend will be the judge?” Shawn asked.

“Trust me,” I said. “Carter would love nothing more than to see me get horseshit on my hands. I’ll have no advantage there. He thinks I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Says I’m a snob.”

“A guy with eight horses thinks you’re a snob?”

I laughed. I was doing that a lot when I was around Shawn. “Maybe I was born with a few advantages, but I’ve worked for everything I have. Dear old Daddy wouldn’t give me a cent until I’d proven myself. Said no son of his was going to be lazy. He told me he would give his money to a cat shelter first.”

“Whoa,” said Shawn. “Maybe I misjudged you as well.”

Somehow his praise made me feel nice.

“Okay,” he said. “Horse stables it is.”

“I’ll even drive,” I offered. Then I called Carter and made the arrangements for later that afternoon.

I PICKED Shawn up a few hours later in front of his apartment building, and the look on his face when he saw my car made me almost feel ashamed. Damn it, I'd worked hard to have my Lexus. Why should I be embarrassed?

Because, my inner voice said, your car costs more than he'll make in three years. It might cost more than his parents' house. I hated my inner voice. It had almost ruined several deals. On the other hand, it had kept me out of some pretty suspicious ones as well.

Shawn didn't say anything, though, and I wasn't going to either. For some reason I'd gotten uncomfortable. Did he think I was trying to show off? Why did that even matter to me?

"Music?" I asked trying to fill the silence.

"Sure," he said.

"There's a case in the glove compartment," I said. "Pick out a CD."

A few minutes later we were both rocking to Lady Gaga. "I figured you were more of an *Aida* kind of guy," he said.

"Giuseppe Verdi or Tim Rice and Elton John?" I asked.

"I didn't know the guy's name," Shawn said. "But the first one is the one I was thinking."

"I have both," I admitted. "But I bet you'll find Sir Elton's in that case."

Shawn was smiling that smile of his, and suddenly the mood was light again. "You are a constant surprise, Elliot."

"You too, Shawn," I said. "Call me El," I added and surprised myself again.

"May I ask you something personal?" I asked.

"You haven't gotten permission before," he replied.

"How come it took you so long to come out? I mean, I'm getting the idea it hasn't been more than, what...?"

"A year," he said with a sigh.

"A year?" I tried to keep the shock out of my voice. "You came out at... thirty one? What were you doing all that time? I mean before you came out? Were you a priest or something?"

Shawn shook his head and there was a sad look on his face. Shit. And things were going so well.

"I was married," he said.

"Married?" And then I wondered why I was so surprised. Lots of gay men got married.

"To my high school sweetheart."

"To that Finsucker guy," I said, trying to lighten the mood again.

"Finsecker," he corrected. "No, not him. Her name is, was, is Karin. I got her pregnant. I come from a little town about two hours from here, and that's what you do when you get a girl pregnant and you live in a little town. You get married. It wasn't too horrible. I mean, there was no way I could have a boyfriend. Not where I grew up. Not then. Now there are several kids flaunting their gayness. Shocked the shit out of me.

“Anyway, Karin and I got married. Then she had a miscarriage. Our parents said it was a good thing, although it messed with Karin’s head pretty bad.”

Shawn looked out the window of the car and didn’t say anything for a minute or so. Just when I was about change the subject, he started up again.

“We decided not to rush things and to wait for the next kid, which was a hell of a relief to me. I mean, I’d always expected I would have kids. You do that in small towns too. I just wasn’t ready. When she lost the kid, it was such a relief, but I couldn’t tell her. She was so devastated.... And I didn’t have anyone I could talk to.”

I turned the stereo down, trying not to be obvious about it. There was just something awful about Lady Gaga telling us about her bad romance at that moment.

“So we both worked and saved and got us a little house. You can get a really nice little house for a couple thousand dollars where I come from.”

I thought I would drive off the road I was so astonished. A couple of thousand dollars for a house? Jesus. And I’d estimated that my Lexus might cost more than his parents’ house? If it was anything like the one he and his wife had bought, he could have bought fifteen houses for the price of my car. That’s a neighborhood. No wonder he’d looked at my car that way.

“We’d been married twelve years, and I suppose I was happy. I loved her, you know? But I loved my best friend Talbot a lot more, and there were a few times I thought we were going to do it, you know? Have sex?”

Shawn turned red then, something I was beginning to see he did a lot. Funny that a man in his thirties could still do that. How long had it been since I'd blushed last? But was he embarrassed or getting turned on? I wondered.

"We'd be camping or something, and we'd get drunk, and it would almost happen, but I could tell he was going to make me make the first move, and there was just no way. What if I'd been wrong and he punched me out? I mean, the whole town would have known and then what?"

I didn't say a word. Shit. All I'd done was ask a simple question, and suddenly he was opening up to me. Really opening up. I was getting his life story.

Shawn ran his hands through his dark hair, and I could see it was really thick. Mine was just starting to thin, and I'd begun to realize I might be taking after my mom's brother. Shawn's hair looked like it would be thick forever, and I wondered if it would feel soft.

"Then she got pregnant again," Shawn began again. "She was so happy. I was like totally freaking out! Because I had finally built up the courage to tell her I was... gay. I wouldn't have used that word then. I was going to tell her I was in love with Talbot, and she got pregnant, and that was the end of that. It was horrible, Elliot. El, I mean. Fuck."

Shawn looked out the windshield and didn't talk for a few minutes. I didn't know if I should say something or not. Mom always told me that sometimes people just needed to talk, and they didn't want your comments.

After another of his pauses, he spoke up. "Then she had another miscarriage, and the doctor advised us not to try again. She was hysterical, and I suddenly knew it was time

to do or die, you know? I was picking an awful time to do it, but it couldn't get much worse. Not for her. But me? I was so goddamned relieved there wasn't going to be a baby.... Makes me a slimeball, right?"

"No," I said, breaking my silence. "You are not a slimeball."

"I was that night. I told her. I told her that I had feelings for men. I told her that the miscarriage might have been some kind of sign from God that I was supposed to tell her. Oh, if I'd thought things were bad before, they got even worse then!" He suddenly laughed, and that was a horrid little sound and unsettling as well. I figured he'd be crying, and he was laughing. My stomach was a mess.

"She didn't believe me at first, and then she just very suddenly did. She told me she'd always known. She'd watched me for years watch Talbot, and she asked if we were lovers. I told her we weren't, but I wished we were. She said she'd known something was wrong in bed, because I never touched her like she wanted to be touched."

Shawn turned back to me, and I could see those eyes I was getting so enamored of were filled with tears. "You know what she did then?" And he laughed in that horrid tone again.

I shook my head.

"She hugged me," he replied and then looked back out his window.

Again, I was just silent. What did you say at a time like that? What was there to say? I couldn't make a joke about it, and I couldn't say I understood, because I didn't. I could

hear raw pain in his voice, but he was managing to hold back his tears. That was the worst part of it. If he'd cried, I could have pulled over and held him. I wanted to be anywhere than right where I was. "Right after that I made a really big mistake...."

"What?" I almost whispered.

"I told Talbot. I asked him to go camping with me, and there we were in a tent just like all those other times, and I told him, and he went apeshit. I thought he was going to kill me. He demanded we go home, and we tore down the tent in minutes and went home. The next day he told everybody."

"Oh shit," I said. "Shawn...."

"So Karin and I got a divorce, and I moved to Kansas City. My aunt lives here, and I stayed with her until I got a job. And that's what I did for all those years, El."

I reached out and laid a hand on his thigh and gave it a squeeze.

"I didn't mean to judge you," I replied. "Sorry if I've come across as an ass."

"You haven't," he laughed and gave a little shrug. "You *are* a little overwhelming."

"I am?" I asked. Was that good or bad? I mean, it was good if you were trying to outwit a man in business, but not so good when trying to make friends.

And where had that come from? This wasn't about making friends. Shawn and I were both accounted for, and the last thing we needed was to get any more involved than

we already were. Distance. I needed to maintain a professional distance.

That's when we got to Carter's stable. He was waiting for us. Shawn got out of the car all sweetness and light, like nothing had happened. I decided to play right along with it.

"I'm dying to know how you got yourself into this," Carter said with a smirk after I'd made introductions, and he had a moment to pull me aside. "You trying to get that little fox in bed?"

"You know I'm seeing someone," I told him. "And I don't cheat." That and bedding Shawn would be just about the worst mistake I could make.

"No. No you don't cheat, I'll give you that," Carter acknowledged and led us to the large stable. Inside, I realized I might have gotten in over my head. The place was a lot bigger than I remembered. Carter showed us what to do. This was going to be a messy job.

"This won't be that bad," Shawn said. "Not much different than my Grandpa's barn."

"Barn?" I asked turning to face him. "I thought you said you had never been around horses."

He shook his head. "I never said that. I used to visit my Grandpa every summer, and he had a horse. I guess I figured stables were a lot different. Shadow's stall isn't really any different than these."

Carter gave a high laugh. "I am going to enjoy this," he said.

I did get horseshit on my hands. Under my nails, and even on my face when I forgot and swatted one of the seeming million flies that swarmed around that place. Who would have imagined that Carter would have *allowed* flies in his stables? It was fucking sweaty work, too, even though it was December. It had been unseasonably warm the last week. In no time I'd taken my shirt off, and when I saw Shawn was bare-chested, I took off my undershirt as well.

"Jesus," said Shawn when we met in the main aisle at one point. "Look at your chest!" he exclaimed.

I felt a little thrill at his admiration of my body. I think anyone who spends a lot of time working out enjoys finding out their efforts haven't been for nothing. And I liked the fact that it was Shawn who was doing the admiring. I also found I was staring at Shawn as well. For a man who didn't work out, Shawn looked mighty fine. He had a nice chest with a little triangle of hair nestled between his pecs and small brown nipples that just begged to be touched, and he was glistening with sweat. "You don't have anything to be worried about," I said, and tore my eyes away before he gave me a boner. Carter would never let me hear the end of that.

When I finally finished my last stall and went to proclaim my victory, I found Shawn sharing a Coke with Carter. What the fuck?

"He wins," Carter said pointing at Shawn.

"Want a Coke?" Shawn asked and had the good grace not to gloat.

SO WE were back at The Radiant Cup, and Shawn had insisted on paying this time. I wanted to argue, but I also knew not to step on a man's ego. It was like stepping on his dick. The only reason I even saw the look of distress on his face when the barista gave him the total was because I was watching him carefully.

Invading his privacy, came my inner voice again, and I hushed it. *Privacy? Ridiculous.*

The look was only on Shawn's face for a fraction of an instant, but it was there all the same, and I knew he was thinking about Aldi's again. Hopefully it wouldn't spoil his enjoyment of his coffee.

It didn't seem to. He'd printed out an article on the Labors of Heracles, and we were looking them over.

"Slaying the Hydra?" he asked. "I don't think we should kill anything."

"That eliminates three out of the twelve then," I said counting.

"And what's this one about capturing the golden hind of Artemis? What's a hind? I refuse to believe it's talking about her butt."

This time I did spit out my coffee. It came out of my nose as well. "A hind is an animal," I finally managed. "It's like an antelope or a deer. The kind that can climb real high and on these really sheer surfaces, like a mountain goat."

"So is it a goat or a deer?" he asked.

"Just picture a big stag," I offered.

He nodded. "Except I don't think we'll be capturing any animals."

"That's going to eliminate quite a few more," I pointed out.

"And I don't think we should steal anything either," he said.

"Does that leave anything?" I asked.

He shrugged and finished his coffee.

"You want some more?" I asked him.

"Nah," he replied.

"You get a second cup for free," I explained.

His eyes lit up. "Oh! Sure," he said with a grin.

I took his cup and went and got us seconds, trying not to think about his cash flow and worries about the cost of second cups of coffee. I hoped his man appreciated what he had in Shawn.

When I got back, I of course had to open my mouth and ask him if his man was worth all this.

"You bet," Shawn stated, voice filled with confidence. "He taught me that what I'd begun to suspect wasn't true."

"I'm not following you," I remarked.

"Oh!" He laughed. "I mustn't forget to tell you my great coming-out story!" He took a sip of his coffee and rolled his eyes. "So after I get to Kansas City, I finally build up the nerve to find some gay bars. Now, I don't do this until I get my own apartment. That took a few months, too, finding a job and everything. I just couldn't take some guy home with

me while I was living with my aunt. She knew I was gay, and she was supportive and everything, but there was no way I was going to have sex with a man with her just down the hall. I would have been mortified.”

I nodded. I couldn’t really picture myself fucking Steve with my aunt within listening distance either. Of course, she was a nun.

“So I meet this guy in a bar,” Shawn continued, “and we went home, and I finally had sex with a man. Oh hell! It was fireworks and tidal waves and everything Karin never was. It was fucking incredible. If I hadn’t known I was gay before, I sure knew then. And he was a stranger. I just knew I was in love, and I practically stalked him. He let me hang around for a while, and then I caught him with this other guy. He didn’t even try to hide it. He wanted to be caught, because he didn’t have the balls to explain the gay birds and bees to me.”

“Gay birds and bees?” I said and managed not to laugh.

“That men just fuck. That’s what we do. We fuck. No love, no home building. I left a home and a loving wife to discover you can’t have love with another man.”

“Oh shit,” I said.

“But then it happened, El! I found it. I fucked for a year, and then I found love. I really did. He’s not perfect, believe me. I don’t get to see him much; he works a lot. But I found love, and that’s why I want that bed. I just know if I get him that bed, he will be so shocked, and he’ll see how much I love him, and then we can really be together.”

Damn, and there were so many holes in that philosophy I couldn't even begin to tell him. It was also the last thing I was going to do. How had things gotten so serious?

Because you went and got nosy, said my inner voice. You should have just left things alone.

But I didn't believe that. Because now I knew why Shawn wanted that bed. Who cares if it was for the wrong reasons? How did I know it was for the wrong reasons? Maybe he was right. Just because I'd never found love didn't mean it wasn't there to be found.

"I guess we better get back to your list, then," I suggested.

Shawn nodded and looked back down at the sheet of paper.

"You know we don't have to steal anything," I said. "We can alter that."

"What do you have in mind?"

"This one about the girdle of the Amazonian Queen...?"

"What about it?" he asked, a boyish expression on his face. "This I gotta hear."

"Well," I explained, "what if instead of stealing it, we talk her out of it?"

"The Amazonian Queen? So where are we going to find her?"

"There are certainly plenty of queens around Kansas City. What if we have one night to talk a drag queen into giving us her girdle? The first of us to get one is the winner."

Shawn burst into laughter, and it was like music to my ears. "Oh my God!" he said. "That's hilarious!"

"Well?" I asked. "Is that a yes or a no?" I bobbed my eyebrows. "You brave enough to try it?"

"Sure," he all but squealed. "Let's go for it."

"I'll pick you up again," I said. "That way we'll both get there at the same time."

"Okay," he said. "And tonight would be a good night. Sunday is when The Male Box has The Liddle Awful Annie Show."

"I've never heard of it," I said, and I hadn't.

Shawn rolled his eyes. "You're probably too sophisticated. It would be *way* beneath you."

"I've enjoyed a good drag show," I said offended.

"Then you'll love this one. Pick me up at nine, and we'll get good seats. And drinks are only two bucks," he added.

"Well drinks that is," I reminded him.

"Snob!" he said, and we both almost fell into each other's arms laughing.

SO I picked Shawn up at nine, as per our plans, and we were back at The Male Box. To my surprise, The Liddle Awful Annie Show was everything Shawn had said, and more. The hostess was this buxom and very funny lesbian dressed as a naughty version of Little Orphan Annie. Wild wig, eyes painted to look like the blank eyes of the famous comic strip,

and tits that threatened to explode out of her red velvet dress and corset.

She could sing too. Not lip-syncing, but actual singing. She did this filthy version of “Tomorrow” from the musical Annie, and then followed it with that hilarious radio song “Walkin’ ‘Round in Women’s Underwear.” She was joined in the second number by the rest of her cast: a huge man known as Billy the Bear and two drag queens with the names Dixie Wrecked and Gena Talia.

“There we go,” I said. “Which one do you want?”

Shawn laughed. “I don’t want either one of them,” he remarked. “But for girdles I guess I’ll go for Gena?”

“Okay,” I replied. Dixie was the smaller of the two. I couldn’t imagine why Shawn had picked Gena. Maybe Karin hadn’t been the petite thing I’d conjured up in my mind?

The show went on, and it was crazy sexy. Why, just at the beginning Annie pulled two very hot men up on stage, and I thought they were going to have sex right there in front of us. How would Shawn have reacted to that? But the sex didn’t happen. Annie broke it up, and the hotties hightailed it out of there, presumably to go and have the sex we weren’t going to get to witness.

So we watched the rest of the show and had a ball. The only weird moment was when Shawn went off to the bathroom and came back with drinks for us both. He had a hell of a shell-shocked look on his face too. Shit! He’d bought me the Lagavulin, and I knew it was about the price of six of his two-dollar drinks. So I had a car that cost as much as fifteen houses in the town he came from, and I drank a whisky that cost as much as six of his drinks. What was he

thinking of me? Was I turning into a major ass in his mind? A complete and total snob? For some reason, his opinion of me had become really important to me.

“I want to pay for this,” I told him, and he turned and stared daggers at me. Shit. I had gone right there and walked on his dick. What the hell was wrong with me? Knowing people and how to deal with them was my major gift, and a major reason I made good money. What was it about Shawn that was turning me into a social moron? “Sorry,” I said and resolved to taking in a night of Shawn’s two-dollar drinks the next time we went out.

Next time? said my inner voice. *What do you mean next time?*

As the show came to an end, Liddle Awful Annie promised the audience that we’d be able to find her and her cast upstairs on the dance floor. That was our cue, and Shawn and I headed up.

“You know what to do?” I asked.

“I do,” he said, and we split up.

I found Dixie a short time later leaning against the bar. She was in her full outfit except for her shoes. I immediately bought her a drink, something that she called a pixie stick, and it wasn’t any two-dollar drink either. There was something hilarious about trying to flirt with a man wearing a bright nearly florescent blue wig and a goatee that had been painted to match. It just wasn’t something your dad taught you how to do. Or your mother for that matter. But like I’ve said, knowing people—and charming them—was what I did. My boss said I could charm the Pope out of his

little red Gucci shoes. It didn't matter that Dixie was already barefoot.

After a second "pixie stick" (it was the color of her hair), I let her know what I was after.

"You want my what?" she asked.

"Your girdle," I explained.

"You are a *kinky* bastard, aren't you?" she slurred. I doubted two drinks did that. The booze must have been flowing backstage.

"It's a bet," I explained. "I don't want to keep it. I'll give you a fifty as collateral."

"Honey," she said. "You could *have* it for that price. Thing is," she said, poking her plump belly, "I don't wear one."

Holy shit, I thought in surprise. *Why, that hadn't even occurred to me.*

"But I do," came a loud voice, and we turned to see Gena Talia and Shawn.

Shawn was holding a girdle. A large one.

It turned out Gena had a soft heart for men with big, sweet blue eyes.

So Shawn won again. It was two to one.

I was losing. I don't lose!

But those eyes that Gena had a soft spot for? Looking at Shawn at that moment, even with that girdle, made my heart melt.

“WHAT’S today’s challenge?” Shawn asked me on the phone. He was at work, and the poor dear apparently had a hell of a hangover. One more reason not to buy cheap booze. I refrained from telling him so.

“It’s your turn,” I said. “I’ve come up with two, and that’s not fair to you.”

“Screw fair,” Shawn moaned. “My head feels like it’s got about a ton of cotton stuffed inside, and I can’t think, let alone come up with a challenge.”

“Well,” I said. “I did have an idea.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Well, in regards to the list. The Labors of Heracles? The capturing part...?”

“I thought we agreed that there would be no capturing?”

“What about capturing with pictures?” I asked. “It’s a pretty standard scavenger hunt kind of thing. We take pictures of the items instead, meet tomorrow—say for lunch—and the one with the most items wins the round.”

“Goodness,” he said. “That doesn’t give us much time since we’re both working today. I guess that means I won’t see you tonight?”

“I have a date with St... with my man.” A fuck was more like it. I was going to go home and find a burglar in my apartment and threaten to call the police. Then Steve—I mean the burglar—was going to plead with me and tell me he’d do anything not to go to jail. What’s more, he was going to be a “straight” burglar who’d never been with a man

before. I'd been hard all morning thinking about our evening, and it was difficult not to jack off in the shower.

"Ah," Shawn said, and did I detect a note of disappointment in his voice?

El, you're an idiot, my inner voice told me. Don't go there!

"Monday night is one of those nights I don't get to see... my boyfriend," he said. "He has a class that night."

See, he was just thinking about his boyfriend, just like you should be doing.

I'm doing, I'm doing, I told myself. That's why I'm already getting blue balls!

"So anyway," I said. "The Labors I figured would work include the Nemean lion, or just a picture of a lion. The Golden Hind of Artemis would be any kind of antelope, gazelle, you know? The Erymanthian Boar—"

"A pig?"

"Exactly," I replied. "The Stymphalian Birds would just be birds. Then there would be a bull, a horse, a cow of some kind, apples, and a dog."

"If that last is supposed to be Cerberus, it better be a mean dog. No toy poodles or Chihuahuas," he said.

"Fair enough. We can just use our cell phones and—"

Shawn cleared his voice. "Ah, I don't have a cell phone."

"You don't have a cell phone?" I asked, incredulous. Who didn't have a cell phone?

"El! Do you know how expensive it is to have a cell phone?"

"You can get them for free," I said, although *I* certainly didn't own one that had been free.

"With a two- or three-year, mega-expensive contract," he remarked. "I haven't been able to find service for less than about sixty-nine dollars a month. I can't do that."

Once more verifying to me that Shawn had no business buying that bed. Because as I thought about it, new numbers hit me. That bed cost more than the house he and his lady had lived in. Not that huge a deal for me, but for him? He must really love his man, which was another reason for me to watch my feelings. And just what were they? Why was I thinking so much about Shawn? This was a contest, nothing more.

"So this idea isn't going to work?"

"Wait a minute," he said, putting me on hold and filling my ear with Christmas music. A moment later he was back. "A digital camera will work, right?"

"You have a digital camera?" I asked.

"No, but my cubical mate does, and she wants to help." I could hear giggling in the background.

"That'll be just fine," I said. "So do you have the list?"

"A lion, antelope, boar, birds, bull, horse, cow, apples... dog? Is that right?"

"Yup," I said. "And an extra point if you can get a picture of a monster."

“A monster?” he asked. “Where am I going to get a picture of a monster?”

“Well, how can I tell you that?” I answered. “You’d go for the same thing I was shooting for.”

“You’ve already got something in mind, don’t you?”

“Nope,” I said and meant it. “But my eyes will be peeled!”

“All right, El,” he said. “We meet for lunch tomorrow?”

“Yes, sir. Tell me where you work, and I’ll pick you up. Do you get an hour?”

“I wasn’t going to take that long... overtime, you know.”

“Oh,” I said. I’d already forgotten.

“But this is an exception, so okay.” He gave me his work address.

“I know right where that is,” I told him. “And I know a great little Indian place we can go. Do you like Indian?”

“I’ve never had it,” he said.

“You haven’t?” I asked, surprised once again, and then kicked myself. Bumblefuck, Missouri wouldn’t have Indian restaurants. “How about Thai?” I said and then kicked myself again.

“Haven’t had that either, but I’m ready for an adventure.”

I could actually hear his grin over the phone, and my heart gave a little skip.

“We’ll go wherever you want,” he said.

I nodded and tried to swallow the knot that had formed in my throat. “Noon?” I managed.

“Noon,” he said. “I’ll wait outside.”

“You got it,” I replied. “And I am buying, hear? No arguments!”

“El!”

“No arguments,” I repeated and hung up. Then I called my personal trainer and told him I wouldn’t be in that day.

At lunch I headed over to the Kansas City Zoo. In no time I had my lion, antelope, my boar—a wild red river hog actually, but I figured it would do—plenty of birds, and two dogs. One was an African hunting dog, which looked pretty scary to me, kind of like a hyena. I even took a picture of the New Guinea Singing Dog, which was actually kind of pretty, except I bet he’d be less pretty if I got in his cage.

That left only the bull, horse, cow, and apples. Bull and cow? Weren’t they close enough to be the same? And the monster of course.

I was having fun, and I was on a roll. I also needed to get back to work, though.

Thankfully I saw one of the horse and carriages that go through Kansas City’s famous Plaza and snapped a quick one there. My secretary coincidentally had an apple on her desk she hadn’t eaten at lunch, and that took care of that.

On the way home, where Steve should be pretending to burgle my apartment, I took a picture of one of many painted cows around town left over from when the CowParade international public art exhibit came to Kansas City.

That left only a monster. But Steve's tight little ass was calling, and I decided to leave that one to fate.

Steve was right where he was supposed to be. He was pretending to unplug my sixty-inch flat screen. I yelled and shouted and threatened to call the police, and in no time he was blowing me like only Steve could. Not long after that, I was fucking him rougher than I'd ever fucked anyone in my life, and he was urging me to fuck harder. I thought I'd die when I came. God, Steve knew what he was doing.

"I went by Derringer's today," he mentioned while he smoked his after-sex cigarette. It was annoying, both the smoking (which I had never done in my life except for a good cigar), and bringing up the bed. I wondered if Shawn's boyfriend kept dropping that into conversation or if he had the good grace to keep quiet.

"Don't you worry your sexy little ass about that," I told him and asked him to brush his teeth before round two.

The second time I fucked Steve, I found myself wondering if Shawn was a top or a bottom. With his shapely rear end, it would be a shame if he weren't at least versatile.

SHAWN was waiting outside his office building just as planned, and I was right on time. I figured when he said he had an hour, an hour is what he meant. Menial office jobs could get so Nazi about the time clock.

I took him to Zardagan's, a sports bar that has the best hamburgers on Earth.

“What happened to Indian or Thai?” he asked as we pulled into the parking lot. “Sheila coached me on what to order.”

“You seemed to be humoring me,” I replied. “Figured you were a meat and potatoes kind of guy, and you won’t believe these burgers.”

He shrugged. Even looked a little disappointed. “I told you I was ready for an adventure,” he said and then gave me those deep eyes again.

I felt a shifting in my pants and adjusted myself the second he looked away. Shit!

“Next time?” I asked.

“Do you think there really will be many more next times? Christmas is almost here,” he said. “We’re going to have to finish this up.”

I felt a drop in my stomach. “That doesn’t mean we can’t still do things,” I said. “I like you, Shawn. We can be friends, can’t we?” I didn’t like the almost whine I imagined I could hear in my voice.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Losing could cause some hard feelings.”

We went into Zardagan’s. I held the door for him, and I waited until we were seated to answer him.

“Let’s make a deal,” I said. “No hard feelings.”

He gave me his sweet little smile. “I can’t promise that, El. But I’ll try.”

I found it hard to talk suddenly and was grateful that our waitress arrived with glasses of water. I took a drink

while she explained their unique menu. First, you picked the type of meat you wanted and how you wanted it cooked. Next, you decided on one of three types of buns, then chose one of the almost dozen kinds of cheese, and last but not least, your fixings.

"Give me a minute?" Shawn asked her, and she nodded and went off to get our Cokes.

"The bleu cheese is heavenly," I suggested.

His nose crinkled, and somehow it was sweet and not ugly. I hated it when Steve got that look on his face.

"Okay, no bleu cheese," I chuckled.

Shawn studied the menu, and then, being "adventurous," ordered the buffalo with baby Swiss.

"I really would like to be your friend," I suddenly blurted.

Shawn looked up, eyes all funny, and blushed. "That would be nice, El," he replied. "As long as... my boyfriend is okay with it."

"Why wouldn't he be?" I asked.

"You and I have been spending a lot of time together," he remarked, not looking at me.

"Well, we'll just play it by ear," I said. "Now what about the pictures?"

"Can we eat first?" he asked. "I might not want to eat if I lose this round."

"You won't lose the contest; you are already one ahead of me," I reminded him.

“Let’s wait anyway?”

“Sure,” I replied, and we just immediately fell into a very natural conversation. He told me about where he worked and how much he liked it even though it didn’t pay much. He worked at a call center and was good at his job, and it looked like he might get a promotion to team lead, and that would be a dollar raise at least.

I tried to explain my job, which wasn’t the kind he’d ever really heard of. “I find properties and such, whatever my clients might be in the market for, and convince them to buy. It could be anything from a business to a yacht. Even planes. Sometimes they call me for a very specific item. Then I get 10 percent. It makes for a sweet little life. I’ve traveled all over the world.”

Shawn sighed. “I would love to travel,” he replied. “St. Louis is about the farthest I’ve ever been.”

“Oh! That’s a shame,” I said. “You need to see Europe.”

“Rome is where I would love to go,” he said. “I’d die to see the Coliseum.”

“Oh?”

“I fell in love with Rome the first time I saw *Ben Hur*,” he continued. “I would love to see the Roman Forum, the Pantheon, the catacombs, and oh, to see Pompeii! And of course the Vatican. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel...”

“Then go!” I cried.

Shawn rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“Shawn, it is so beautiful. Romantic. You and....” I took a big drink of water. “You could go with your boyfriend.”

“He makes less money than I do,” Shawn said.

I would love to share Rome with Shawn, to watch him take in the eternal city with those big beautiful eyes of his. He would be like Alice in Wonderland. “Maybe I can take you?” I said stupidly and was saved by the waitress bringing our burgers.

“Damn,” Shawn said, all wide-eyed. “You weren’t kidding me when you said they were big. I could make a meal out of these fries.” He picked up a fry easily the size of a dozen from McDonald’s and bit into it. “Oh my God,” he said, and I could just see he was in heaven. It was just a French fry! How had he been so deprived of such simple pleasures? But then just his meal would cost more than both of ours together at McDonald’s.

“Try the burger,” I said, eager to see his reaction.

He nodded and opened his mouth wide to take a bite of the monstrous hamburger. His eyes closed in pleasure, and I wondered if he looked like that when he came.

Damn it, what was wrong with me?

I was developing feelings for this man. Me! Hadn’t I given up on love? And I’d known him, what? Three days? This was ridiculous. I was acting like a kid who’d just come out of the closet. But as Shawn experienced pure ecstasy over nothing but a big hamburger, I was reminded what it had been like to discover such things. Sure, I’d been a lot younger than he was now, but Shawn somehow brought back all the childlike wonder to my life. I couldn’t help but want to see what he’d look like when he saw the Coliseum.

Or making love in my bed. What expressions would cross his face...?

Shit, I said to myself. This is bad. This is really bad.

I changed the subject and started talking about sports, and thank God I didn't have to fake it. Shawn knew less than I did. I'd figured it was all a country boy had to do.

"I like to read," he told me. "And play music."

"You play?" I asked shocked. Why had this never come up before?

"Violin," he said. "Fiddle as my Grandpa would have said."

"You any good?" I asked, enchanted to think of this beautiful man making music.

Shawn gave a shrug. "I can play a tune," he said and grinned.

"I can't even play the kazoo," I said. "But I can carry a tune with my voice."

"Big karaoke man?" he asked.

"Oh no!" I cried. "I am not standing up in front of a room full of drunks and trying to follow the words on those little screens."

"Not classy enough for you?" Shawn teased. "Got to have a piano? I can just see you in a tux, leaning against a baby grand while somebody plays for you." He giggled. I hate it when grown men giggle, but like everything else, Shawn somehow made it charming.

"Picture time," I proclaimed.

“Okay,” he agreed, taking one of his last bites.

I brought out my cell phone, and he brought out his workmate’s camera.

“I bet you’ve beat me,” he said. “I went to the zoo after work only to find out it was closed. Can you believe that they close at four?” He handed over the camera and showed me how to go through the pictures. Despite his attitude, he’d done quite well. There was a picture of the statues of the lions in Swope Park, minutes from the zoo. I hadn’t even thought of them. I laughed to see his photograph of a Christmas reindeer from the roof of a house.

“Does that count?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

The next was a picture of the bronze boar fountain on the Plaza, which was a copy of a Greek marble statue at the entrance to the straw market in Florence. That made me think of another place I’d love to show Shawn—Florence.

Then there was a picture of a cardinal sitting on a bird feeder.

“That one took me forever,” he said. “I was afraid it was going to get dark.”

And another of the CowParade cows. With the picture of one of the horses that pulled a carriage through the Plaza, it just showed the ways we thought alike. Then there was a whole bin of apples from some grocery store and finally Cookie Monster from Sesame Street.

“A monster!” I barked with laughter. “Where did you find him?”

Shawn blushed.

"Is he yours?" I asked.

He nodded and blushed all the harder. "You are the cutest man I've ever met in my life," I said and then wished I could take it back. Shawn looked totally shocked.

I quickly took out my cell phone and we counted. Shawn had seven, and I had eight.

"Damn," said Shawn. "If I had just found a mean looking dog, I would have tied with you."

"We are tied," I told him. "Two for two now."

"So we need a tiebreaker then?"

I nodded, and the waitress appeared. "Two brownies with a scoop of ice cream," I said.

"Oh no!" Shawn said. "I'm stuffed. I couldn't."

"Then make his brownie to go," I told the waitress.

"So?" Shawn asked.

"So what?" I asked.

"The tie-breaker?"

"Hmmm," I said, biting my lip. What could it be? Maybe prove I wasn't a snob once and for all? "You know a place that has karaoke?"

Shawn turned green. "I was just shitting you!"

"Nevertheless, it would be a good challenge. Whichever of us that gets the most applause wins?" I challenged him.

Then, as if someone else besides me were speaking, I said, "What's more, if you win, you don't have to pay for the

other half of the bed. I pay for it all. If I win, I get the bed, and I pay you back what you put into it.”

“What?” said Shawn, his face slack in obvious shock. Hell, *I* was shocked. I didn’t know what had made me make the offer.

“El, that isn’t fair to you,” he said. “I can’t do it.”

“You’re afraid, aren’t you?” I asked, trying to goad him.

“Oh fuck,” he said. “I don’t break glass. Why the hell not? Let’s get this over with. It *is* Christmas Adam. We only have another day.”

“Christmas Adam?” I asked, trying not to think about only one more day.

“The day before Christmas Eve,” he explained.

I burst into laughter as our brownies arrived, and Shawn gave them a look of pure lust. “Whoa,” he replied.

“One bite?” I asked.

“Sure,” he nodded and took a bite. I found myself watching the whole journey of that forkful of brownie from his to-go container up to his open mouth, the twitch of his pink tongue, his full lips closing and then, oh yes, forming into ecstasy.

I actually felt a drop of precum form at the head of my cock. Was this just lust? *That* I could deal with.

“Amazing,” he said. “You get what you pay for?” The brownie cost just about what his meal would have cost had we gone to Mickey D’s. Why was I suddenly obsessing about prices?

“You should have gotten the ice cream,” I said.

He just smiled. “I would never have been able to eat it all.”

“A bite then?” I held out my fork with a bit of brownie and a dollop of white ice cream with the little dark flecks of vanilla bean.

He giggled again and opened his mouth, and when I placed my fork on his tongue, as his eyes closed again, and he gave a heavenly shudder, I almost cried. Weird. Cried. I wanted to cry. Stupid.

“You guys look so sweet together,” our waitress said, appearing without warning.

Shawn’s eyes went huge.

“Oh, we’re not together,” I said.

The waitress smirked.

“No really, we’re just friends.”

“Okay. The customer is always right. But the way you two are googlie-eyeing each other, I would have thought you were in love.”

“I have a boyfriend,” said Shawn indignantly. “And so does he.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be *your* boyfriends,” she said with a smile. “I’d be jealous as shit.”

I could hardly talk. All I could think about was her words, “googlie-eyeing each other.”

I can admit I’d been caught.

But she thought Shawn was looking at me the same way?

I GOT to The Male Box before Shawn that night. He had a date, and I wished him well with that. Or tried to. His boyfriend had to make it an early night, and Shawn and I had agreed to meet at ten. I was there by nine.

As I sat there drinking my maybe-pretentious, ten-year-old, twelve-dollars-a-glass Lagavulin, I wondered what I was about to get into. I had the bar's karaoke book open in front of me, and I was trying to pick out what I was going to sing. Should I go for what I was best at? Something by Michael Bublé, like "How Sweet It Is" or "Try a Little Tenderness"? Or should I get a little wilder? Try some Lady Gaga? I laughed aloud. No, not that. Tom Jones's version of "Kiss"?

I was still trying to make up my mind when Shawn laid a hand on my shoulder. When I turned to see who it was, sparks shot across my skin where he was touching me. Oh goodness. I was in deep. Three days.

Why?

What about Steve?

Who is giving you hot sex but is dumb as a box of rocks, came my inner voice. *Steve is fine as long as he doesn't speak outside of talking dirty while you have sex. You don't care about him! He's insipid.*

"Wow," Shawn said. "You look fantastic!"

Damn if I didn't blush. I was wearing my tux. It fit the songs I sang best—set the mood. Then there was the fact that if this was going to be the last time I saw Shawn, I wanted to make one last impression on him. I mean, let me be real, The Male Box was never my idea of a hangout, so when was I going to bump into Shawn?

"Thanks," I said.

Shawn had certainly taken a different approach, but I dare say it got to me even more than my tux affected Shawn. He was wearing a dark T-shirt, black jeans with the knees torn out (I didn't know knees could be so fucking sexy) and black boots. And he had his violin.

I asked about it.

"From what you've said about your voice, this is the only chance I have of winning. There's nothing in the rules about that, is there? I still want to win, El. Even if I can't afford that fucking bed."

I took a swallow of my whisky. "Okay."

"Okay to what?" he asked with a nervous sounding laugh. "To the violin or me wanting the bed."

"Both," I said.

He smiled. Shit, damn, fuck, and my heart was in my throat. I tossed back my Lagavulin to wash my heart back down where it belonged. "Want a drink?"

"You buying again?" he asked with a grin.

"I am."

“How about I try some of that?” he said, pointing at my glass. “This might be my only chance to try something so hoity-toity.”

It doesn’t have to be, I wanted to say. Instead I nodded and got our drinks.

“Now don’t slug it down,” I said, handing him his glass. “This is a sipping whisky.”

“Okay,” he replied and swirled the liquor in his glass and then brought it up—and closing his eyes—took a breath. “Hmmm...,” he said and took a sip.

His eyes went wide, and I wasn’t sure if he was about to cough or what.

“Wow,” he said. “Whoa...”

“You like?” I asked, wanting nothing more.

He smiled. “Vive la différence.”

“You like then!” I said, immensely pleased.

“Very smoky. Like drinking a fireplace.”

I grinned. A pretty apt description.

“Maybe you’re not so hoity-toity after all, El.”

“I hope not,” I replied.

He took another sip, waited, took it in, appreciated it. “Smooth. Not like that gasoline filtered through sweaty gym socks I’ve had before.”

I burst into laughter. “No gym socks,” I said. “It’s from a distillery near the coast of Islay. It has a legitimate claim to being one of the oldest in Scotland.” Another place I’d love to

take Shawn. I had an idea he could make anything seem new and fresh.

“Thank you, El,” he said. “Thanks for sharing with me.”

“No problem,” I muttered.

So we went to the DJ, told him the songs we wanted him to play, and at the last minute I picked something different. Then, while we waited for our turn, we chatted politely, both avoiding anything deep. I got us another round, but this time I got two rum and Cokes, house rum. It earned me a huge smile.

“Not hoity-toity at all,” he said.

It made me feel so good that Shawn had to point out that the DJ had just called my name. So I went up on the stage and the music came on, and I did my best to knock everybody’s socks off. Not to win, but because there was something I wanted to tell Shawn.

Stupid maybe, but I had to.

I sang “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” And as I sang the lyrics, I sang them to him. I sang about how he was deep in the heart of me. I told him I tried not to give into him, but finally I couldn’t resist. I had never so obviously put my heart on my sleeve in my entire life. Had this been big business, the other man could have destroyed me. When I was done, the bar burst into applause. I was a hit.

But was I a hit with Shawn? There was no way he could have missed my message, was there? What was that look on his face? He was usually an open book, but I couldn’t read him now. Was it anger? Was it returned love? I didn’t know.

Then the DJ called Shawn’s name.

He stood, walked right past me, and stood on the small stage. He brought his violin up under his chin, and he closed his eyes. The music started, a song I'd never heard before, and he began to play.

I wish there was some way for me to explain what happened then. I'm a businessman, and I can always come up with the perfect words to make any deal. But I am no poet, and that's what it would take to describe what happened next.

I don't know what I was expecting, but what Shawn did then hit me in a way I could have never prepared myself.

First, he was fast. And who would have thought the violin played so fast could be so beautiful? I wish, I wish I could describe it. I want to express the sounds and the beauty, and I just can't. And he sang! He sang while he played, and he moved, and his foot pounded the stage, and shit if I wasn't crying.

I saw something else I hadn't really noticed. His arms were strong. He just might have beaten me in that arm wrestling contest. His biceps and triceps flexed and bounced like the hair on his bow.

Some kind of ballad I guessed. Traditional? About a ship that sank years ago and mermaids dressed in tears. I was frozen, and I wanted him to go on forever.

His voice.... Oh, it wasn't gorgeous. I'm sure there are those who could say it was flawed technically. But the passion! It poured out of him like the music from his beat-up violin, like his heart was breaking and it was all he could do to tell us his story. Those eyes that had so enchanted me were filled with something I don't even know how to explain.

Pain and love and joy. That doesn't do it justice, but it was obvious in that moment that playing the violin wasn't a hobby for Shawn. It seemed to connect him to something higher than himself. Damn. I just don't have the words. He was laying his heart bare and letting us witness it.

When he drew his bow down one last time across the strings of his instrument and the music came to a stop, the bar was silent. Not a sound. Not one.

Then came the applause, and I knew who had won our little bet—I knew, even if the bar's patrons disagreed with me.

Tears were flowing down my face, and my throat was locked, and I was in love. To the marrow. Heart deep. Every word I'd sung and more.

And now he had won, and I might never see him again.

IT WAS stupid, but I went to Derringer's the next day. It broke unspoken rules, but I wanted to see this man of Shawn's. I wanted to see his face when he found out the bed was his. I wanted to see if he appreciated the man who loved him, to see if he deserved Shawn.

Fuck.

I wanted to see Shawn one more time.

I got there first, made sure Mr. Derringer knew the bed was Shawn's, and told him it had to be delivered today.

"But it's Christmas Eve," he said, playing with his glasses and speaking in that fingernails-on-blackboard voice.

"I don't give a shit what day it is," I said. "I know you can find someone to do it. That's what you do. And I'll pay whatever I have to pay."

"Why are you doing this?" Mr. Derringer asked.

"That's not your concern," I said.

"El?"

I turned, and there was Shawn. He was wearing that peacoat he'd been wearing the day we met. Even the shoes.

"Hey, Shawn," I said, my heart pounding in my chest.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Just a few last things I had to do," I said. "It is Christmas Eve, and like a lot of idiots, I've waited to the last minute to get the last of my shopping done."

Shawn nodded. "Is he going to be upset?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Your boyfriend," he said.

I took a deep breath. "You know, I don't know that we're still together," I said. "So it's perfect you won."

"What happened?" he asked, and I could see the genuine concern on his face, heart right out there on his sleeve like always.

It was all I could do not to look away. "I realized I was in love with someone else," I said.

Silence ruled for a moment while I prayed for the impossible.

He knew. He had to know. Didn't he know?

He knows, said my inner voice. And he is in love with someone else. Don't make this worse than it has to be.

I had to try, I told myself. Otherwise, I'd wonder forever.

Imagine, that voice responded. El in love. Who would have thought?

"I guess it is a good thing I won, then," Shawn said, his voice suddenly dead, his face void of expression. "You can't give someone something like that when... you don't love him."

I did give the man I love that bed, I thought. But of course I didn't say that.

"I hope your man loves it," I said. "I hope he loves it, and you two make beautiful love, and he asks you to move in with him, and you have everything you've wanted all your life."

Why couldn't I read him? He always wore his emotions right out there for me to see. Why did he suddenly close up?

"I... I... Elliot... El... I...."

"Yes?" I asked, feeling like my heart was just ready to burst.

"I... ah... thank you, El. For everything. I do hope we are going to be friends."

"We can be as far as I'm concerned. No hard feelings here. Hey, I'm done with my man."

He smiled and then surged forward and hugged me. He hugged me tight, and goddamn if I didn't get hard. Stupid!

"Thank you," he whispered.

"El? Shawn?" came a voice, interrupting our moment.
"Oh, fuck!"

Shawn and I pulled away and turned.

Why, it was Steve. What was he doing here?

"Steve?" I said.

"Steve," Shawn said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Steve. "I told you the bed sold."

Shawn turned to me. "You know Steve?" he asked.

"Fuck me running," Steve said.

"Yes," I said. "He's my... he was my boyfriend."

Shawn's mouth dropped open. "Steve is your boyfriend?"

"Yeah," I said, still too stupid to see what was happening.

"My Steve is your boyfriend?"

"Your Steve?" I asked.

"Oh goddamn Jesus Christ," Steve said.

Finally it hit me.

I turned back to the man who didn't know that it was over between us. Especially now. "You're seeing the both of us?" I said.

Steve was as pale as paper.

"Steve?" Shawn asked. "You mean, this whole time?"

"I... I...." Steve looked like he'd faint.

“You fuck!” Shawn shouted. “Liar! You fucking cheat! Do you know what I was doing for you? Do you have any idea? And you’ve been cheating on me?”

Steve’s shoulders slumped. “I really wanted that bed, babe,” he said.

Shawn strode up to him, and before I could stop him, hauled off and slapped Steve. “You ass! Get out. Get the hell out of here.”

Steve turned to me. “Daddy?” he said.

“You heard the man,” I said, stomach rolling. “Leave.”

“Well what about you two?” he shouted. “I saw you! I saw the way you were hugging. Don’t you judge me! You two were cheating too,” he said and ran out of the store, leaving Shawn and I standing there with that huge empty bed.

“YOU okay?” I asked Shawn. We were sitting on the edge of the bed that had been the center of our lives for the last several days.

Shawn nodded. “You know... it’s funny. But I am. It’s a relief. Whoa! I said it out loud.”

“A relief?” I asked.

“Yeah. Because I wasn’t in love with him. I’ve known it for awhile. I knew I was making a mistake. Just like I knew it was a mistake when I married Karin, but I did it anyway. I don’t know if I ever loved him.”

“You’re not?”

"I was in love with the idea of being in love," he whispered. Then he turned to me. "The fact is, I realized last night I'm in love with someone else," he said.

"You are?" I said, a sudden blazing hope rising phoenix-like within me.

"El?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Last night..."

"Yes?" I said.

"When you were singing that song? About having someone under your skin...?"

I smiled. "Yes," I said.

"Were you...?"

"Yes, Shawn."

"Oh God," he said again, and then I don't know who kissed who first. But I can say this. I had never experienced anything like it. I'd been out and kissing men for twenty-five years, but nothing prepared me for that kiss. It was like every corny movie I had ever seen. Like that famous black and white one where the waves crash over the couple lying on the beach. Because it felt like a wave had crashed over my head, a force rushing all around me. It felt like my heart was swelling up inside my chest. I felt dizzy.

"Oh my!" squeaked Mr. Derringer. "Oh my!"

We ignored him as we opened our mouths to each other, breathed from each other.

"This will just not do!" Derringer cried. "This will not do at all!"

We broke our kiss, Shawn laughing and me leveling Mr. Derringer with a steady gaze. "Then I hope you made the arrangements for delivering this bed. Otherwise, we are using it right here and now," I informed him.

"I found someone! I found someone to move it. I just need to know where!"

I turned to Shawn. "Your place or mine?" I asked.

Shawn smiled. "I don't think it will fit in my bedroom," he answered.

"My place it is," I said and stood and gave Mr. Derringer my spare keys. "Right away."

"I can have it there in two, three hours?" he said.

"Perfect," I said.

I took Shawn out to the most romantic place I could think of for dinner. The restaurants were packed. It *was* Christmas Eve. But it's nice to have some influence now and then. Shawn and I didn't have to wait.

THE bed filled even my large bedroom. It was immense. King-sized from a time when such a thing was rare. Four-poster, dark oak, beautiful. The room was lit only by candles, proving once more why people did business with Mr. Derringer. It was almost funny in a way. The bed we were both trying to win for someone else would be our wedding bed. But it wasn't really the bed we were looking at. I can honestly say we were lost in each other's eyes.

I was actually scared. What if he'd changed his mind?

“Are you sure?” I whispered in his ear.

“Never been more sure of anything,” Shawn said, and kissed me lightly on my lips.

I pulled him close and kissed his ear.

“Yes,” he whispered.

I ran my kisses down his neck, licked from ear to the opening of his shirt, and he hissed his approval. I don’t think I had ever wanted someone so much in my life.

I licked his throat, sucked at it, and he threw his head back. “Yes, yes,” he muttered, and I sucked at his Adam’s apple.

I couldn’t believe how excited I was. I’d met this man not even a week before, and now?

I reached for the top buttons of his shirt and began to unbutton them. Slowly, that chest I’d lusted after in Carter’s stables came into my view. Smooth mostly and then that small triangle of hair between his pecs, his very nice full pecs, and around his small brown nipples. I breathed him in and then went for one of those nipples.

“Yes!” he cried out and hugged me against him, put a hand behind my head, and pushed my mouth against that hard nub of flesh. I sucked and then gave it a little bite.

“El! So good.”

Shawn was so sensitive, and what can be more pleasing than that when you are making love? I slipped his shirt off his shoulders, let it fall to the floor, and then pushed him against the edge of the bed—our bed. The back of his knees hit the edge of the mattress, and it was easy from there to guide him back so that he was laying down crossways. I

clambered on top of him, straddled him, took his hands in mine and raised them above his head, exposing his armpits. The hair there grew quite thick, more than I would have expected, and I buried my face in the scent of him. He smelled good, like man and soap, and the hair was so silky soft it teased my nose and lips. I licked him there, too, and he arched up against me. This was too wonderful.

I went back to those nipples, went back and forth between them sucking and nibbling. My cock was so hard, I'm sure he could feel it through my pants as I humped it into his crotch. I could feel him, hard, as the lengths of our cocks rubbed alongside each other.

I so wanted to see that cock and began to travel down his torso, licking and kissing all the way. But he changed my course of action. He reached down and pulled me up into a kiss, our tongues dancing together, and rolled me over so that he was on top, and began to unbutton my shirt as well.

"Oh God," he sighed when he saw my hairy chest. "So beautiful! I've wanted to touch it since that day at the stables."

"Really?" I asked. Him too? That far back?

"Really," he said and pressed his face between my pecs, doing what I had done to him. Kissing, licking, sucking, and nibbling at my nipples, then burying his face in my pits. I had less hair there than he did, despite my hairy chest, allowing him to tease at it, biting with his teeth and pulling back.

"Oh, Shawn!"

I rolled him back over, and we kissed more, only to have him roll me back as well. "So big," he said, running his

hands along the muscles of my chest and through the hair that grew there.

I reached out and touched his chest as well, and while he may not have had my definition, he was beautiful. Just beautiful.

“Gotta see all of you,” I said, and used my strength to roll him back under me and scooted down to unbuckle his belt and pop open his pants. Anxious as I was, I pulled that zipper down slowly, and the underwear clad length of him pushed up through the divide. There was a wet spot, his precum, a sight that always thrilled me, and I lowered myself to suck up the moisture, allowing my tongue to run across his cockhead. The flavor was sweet and gamey, all man. The little taste wasn’t enough, and as I pulled what I could of his underwear down, his cock popped up into my view.

“Oh,” I said and felt my mouth fill with saliva.

“You don’t mind?” he whispered.

“That you’re uncut?” I asked surprised.

“Some men don’t seem to like it,” he said.

“They’re crazy,” I said, and tugged lightly so that the foreskin slowly revealed his wet glans, like unwrapping a present. My Christmas present. I sucked it into my mouth, and he cried out, and I remembered how sensitive he might be. I carefully licked up the precum, swirled my tongue around the marble-smooth head, took him as deep as I could. It still wasn’t enough.

I stood and took the waist of both his pants and his underwear in my hands and said, “Lift up.”

He did, and I pulled them down over his legs, beautiful muscular legs covered in dark silky hair that had a sheen in the candlelight. I pulled off his socks—he must have kicked off his shoes somewhere—and I saw his feet. Even they were beautiful. Strong and perfect, his toes long but flawless, a smattering of hair across their knuckles, just like the tops of his feet. Their scent, delicate but manly, rose to greet me, and unable to help myself I lifted his feet and kissed them before sucking each toe, one by one.

“Oh El!” he cried. “Oh! I... never had....”

“Never had your toes sucked?” I asked with a grin and then nursed on the next one.

“So... intense.”

My grin widened with the thrill of it. There’d been so many men who had told me they were too ticklish or worse, disgusted, when I tried to make love to their feet. I was doing something Shawn had never done, and he was allowing himself to experience it. When the final toe had been carefully taken care of, I ran my tongue wide and flat down the sole of his feet. He shouted out, started to pull his feet away, and didn’t, started to pull them away again, and didn’t. He was trembling, his head thrashing from side to side, his cock leaping.

And, oh, I had to have that.

I released his feet, let them fall around me as I moved in between his legs, spreading them with my hips, and right before I could suck his lovely cock, I heard him quietly say, “Are you going to fuck me?”

I stopped. “Do you want me to, Shawn?”

"Yes," he sighed.

"You're a bottom then?" I asked. Nice.

"I don't know," he answered.

"You don't know?"

"I've... I've never been...."

"Fucked?" I asked, incredulous.

"No," he whispered. "Is that bad?"

"No!" I said. I crawled on top of him, kissed his cheeks and his mouth. "I thought you said you've been fucking for a year."

"But I didn't let them fuck *me*," he said. "I wanted to wait...."

"For what?" I asked. *I'd* been desperate to lose *my* virginity.

"For you?" he asked and smiled.

We kissed. Oh, did we kiss.

Then I kissed my way back down his body, heart pounding, stunned and excited about what was about to be given to me. I gave his beautiful cock, which I'd been so desperate for, only a few kisses, sucked up the precum gathered in his foreskin like dew from a flower, and moved further down.

I was standing again, and I lifted his legs, showing me a beautiful rounded ass that, like his legs, had a fine covering of dark brown hair. I pushed his legs back and his ass spread and those cheeks opened, revealing a trench with just the right amount of hair, and there in that cleft was the dark mark of his most private place.

I pushed his legs further back, and that asshole was fully exposed to my loving eyes; I lowered my face, kissed his cheeks, then ran my kisses and tongue up and down his cleft, and finally kissed that secret spot.

“Oh!” He arched up to meet my kisses, and I licked his asshole. Licked it and sucked on it gently, using my tongue to slowly relax the folds in his pucker until he relaxed fully and opened to me. I dug deep, tasting the tang of man and feeling the smooth inside of him, like wet velvet. He was crying out, thrashing his head back and forth again.

“Oh, El! I never. Oh, El! I never knew. Oh my God!”

I sucked and licked him for a long time until finally he begged me to fuck him. I hadn’t even opened my pants, but I let his legs fall over my shoulders, tore open my pants, and my cock leapt out like a beast. My dick was shining and wet from my precum, and I nudged it against his opening—and as smooth and simple as that, my cockhead popped through his sphincter.

“Christ!” he shouted, and I waited for him to get used to it. “Oh, El!” He was breathing hard, his eyes wide with wonder, and then he pushed down so that another inch of me slid into him. “Oh,” he said again, and we waited. Another minute, and he shoved himself further down on me, and I pushed in. I was halfway in and after one more pause, I buried myself in groin deep.

“Yes!” he yelled.

I waited until he begged me to fuck him before I began my slow and deliberate motions, in and out of his tight hot depths.

“I love you,” he said then, and I could only answer alike.

I let my speed increase, and he wrapped his legs around me tight, threw his arms around me, clutched with clawed fingers at my back, and urged me on. “Harder,” he kept saying, and soon I was pounding into him, and still he begged me to fuck him harder.

And I thought Shawn would be vanilla?

Sweat was pouring down my body as I fucked him, and the pleasure was unlike any I had ever felt before. I was up on my toes, fucking, near hammering into him, and then he shouted, “Oh my God! I think I am going to....”

I grabbed his throbbing cock, and he came.

His semen arced out of him in long ropes that shot over his shoulder, fell down across his chest, landed on his right cheek and over his belly. His ass clenched down on my cock, and then I was cumming. It felt like I was shooting my very being out of my cock. I couldn’t believe how hard I was cumming. It seemed like it went on forever, and my mouth crashed down to meet his, and we fed on each other’s souls.

Finally it ended, I came down from the heights of ecstasy and collapsed across his semen-covered body, my face next to his, nearly blacking out.

When I could finally move, I somehow pushed with wobbly legs—still clothed by my pants—up onto the bed and beside him. Slowly I urged him to move so that we were lying lengthwise on the big mattress, our heads cradled by the pillows. We drifted off for a short while, and then I managed to rouse us both up long enough to take a shower.

Afterward, we climbed back into the bed.

"I'm sorry it didn't last longer. There is so much I should have done...."

"Shhhhh," he said, "plenty of time...." And he kissed me.

I snuggled tight against him, unable to believe my fortune.

"Love you," he said.

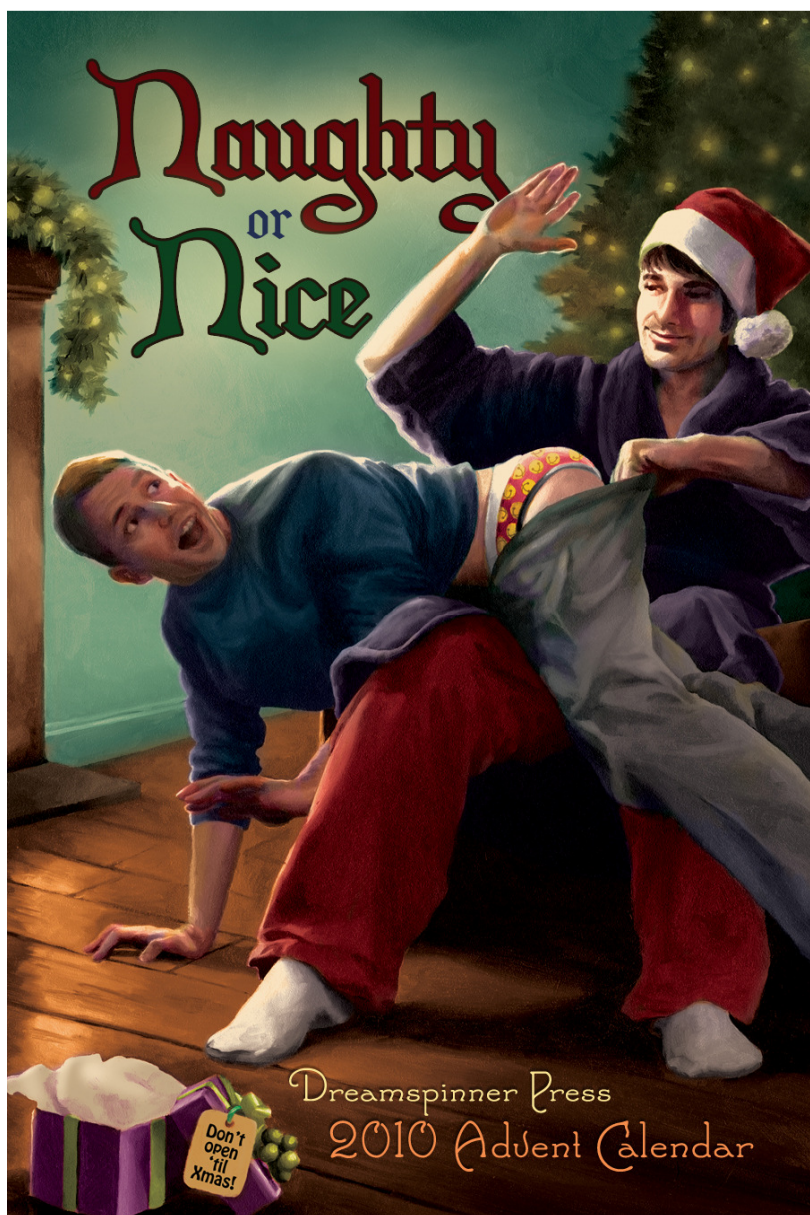
"I love you too," I replied, and felt my heart swell.

"Merry Christmas...."

"Merry Christmas," I said. "Sleep tight."

"Yes," he sighed. "All snug in our bed, visions of sugar plums...."

I laughed and pulled him tighter against me and soon joined him in sleep.



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B.G. THOMAS lives in Kansas City with his husband of more than a decade and their fabulous little dog. He sees his wonderful daughter just often enough to miss her when she isn't there. He has a romantic soul and is extraordinarily lucky to have many friends.

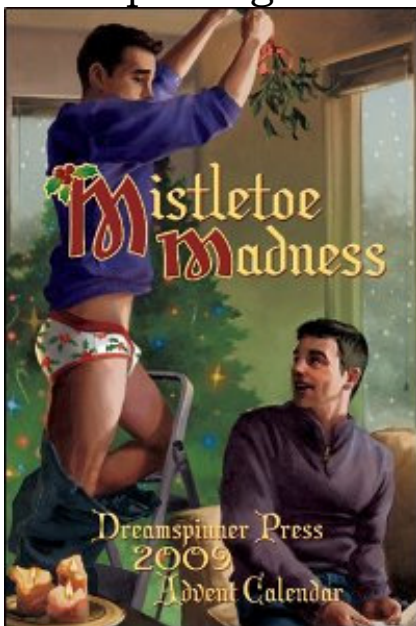
He loves science fiction and fantasy, horror, and romance, and has gone to SF&F conventions his entire adult life. He's been lucky enough to meet many of his favorite writers. He has made up stories since he was kid; it is where he finds his joy. In the nineties, he wrote for gay magazines but stopped because they wanted all porn without plot.

Excited about the growing same-sex romance market, he started writing again. He sent out a story and was thrilled when it was almost immediately accepted.

"Leap, and the net will appear," is his personal philosophy. "It is never too late," he states. "Pursue your dreams. They will come true!"

Visit his web site at <http://bgthomas.t83.net> or his blog at <http://bg-thomas.livejournal.com>.

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