

Bears Discover Smut

by Michael Bishop

I had no business in that corner of Snooky's Newsstand pawing through its raunchiest offerings. So when another late-night customer sidled in, nervousness and guilt made me drop the magazine in my hands, incriminating centerfold up. That the new guy stood four inches taller than I and stank of the contents of a fast-food dumpster did nothing to ease my nerves. And it *really* didn't help when my first clear look revealed that he was no homeless bum in a ratty fur coat, but one of the gene-tweaked black bears that our Bureau of Wildlife Labor Management had franchised to do menial jobs after our last sweeping deportation of illegal immigrants.

Take a deep breath, I advised myself.

I did. It worked. (What do bears know about the morality of erotica, anyway?) I knelt, closed the covers on my girlie book, and reshelved it. It glistened there like a recruitment poster for Old Nick's pitchfork brigades, as did the sleazy titles around it, all of them addictive goads to sin.

"Pardon me," I whispered, but only an eavesdropping gossipmonger could have heard me.

The bear grunted.

I should have turned and left. My wife and children awaited me at home, but this secret bondage to my animal side, and to the knee-weakening adrenalin surges attending my every trip into Atlanta, had short-circuited my logic centers and my soul. Sinning, I trembled. Trembling, I burned. Burning, I exuded a glow—God forgive me—akin to the renegade Lucifer's.

Besides, that smelly bear had begun to crowd me. With his stiff-wristed paws he pulled *Big Girls Bimonthly* down, braced it on his forearms, and, with his prehensile lips, opened it to the centerfold. He squinted. Even genetically jiggered bears don't see too well, and unless their augmenters have given them color receptors, their vision consists of light and dark dapples, a shadowy paste. Anyway, this shaggy guy didn't see what I saw, and maybe his poor eyesight caused him to bump me.

Words that should never pass a minister's lips passed mine—"Out of my space, ursey!"—but I belonged in Snooky's about as much as any Top

