



# The Omega's Beary Special Christmas (A Bear Under The Christmas Tree)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I'm beary ready for a snowed in Christmas.

I love the ocean. The coast is where I work and live my life. But this year I wanted something different for Christmas. When the opportunity arose to swap my condo for a cabin surrounded by snow, I couldn't turn it down. It'd be fun to get away for the holiday and relax.

Or so I thought.

First, I meet the hottest guy in existence, only to have him leave, then I slip on ice and sprain my ankle... oh and there's a naked man walking into the cabin... in the middle of winter. And what's with the footprints in the snow and the fake bear ears on the mailbox? And that's only the beginning...

This is going to be a Christmas to remember.

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

ONE

FERRIS

“Phone. Check.”

“Wallet. Check.”

“Winter gear. Check. Check.”

“A thousand times check. Enough with the checking.” My friend and business partner, Charlie, was tired of my repeated counting. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

We lived beside and worked at the beach, and no matter the time of year, the balmy air was warm enough for me to take a dip in the sea or walk around my apartment shirtless.

But I was doing a house swap for the holidays and going to a location that was far removed from my condo overlooking the ocean. Instead, I was heading to the deepest, darkest winter.

Maybe that was a tad over exaggerated, but there’d be snow to shovel, chimney fires to avoid, a furnace that fingers crossed wouldn’t break down, and a whole heap of winter clothes that I’d borrowed from Charlie. He’d worn them once after going with his folks on a skiing holiday and vowed he never wanted to see snow again.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.” I shrugged.

I’d wanted to experience something different.

Charlie and I were business partners, we lived near one another, and my friends were his friends. Growing up, I’d spent more time at his house than at my own, and we’d both moved from our small hometown to our present location together.

My lifestyle was the envy of many people, and yes, I never took that for granted. Going for an early morning swim, shower, and coffee in my favorite café, I headed to work which involved admin and serving customers but mostly teaching people to surf.

And both of us were so fortunate to live right beside the ocean. We could never have afforded our apartments now, but this area hadn’t been “discovered” when we each got our mortgages.

It was too late to back out of my wintery vacation ‘cause the guy I was swapping with, Hugo, was staying in my apartment for the ten days I was at his place. Charlie was his contact if something went wrong. But unlike a house buried in snow, an apartment overlooking the water was easy to look after.

Unless there was a hurricane. Or a tsunami. Yeah, both those weather events were bad. But how often did we get a hurricane at Christmas? Severe storms? Nah, not going to happen in the ten days I was gone. Actually, more like twelve.

Hugo would show me around his place before he flew here, and Charlie would let him in. There wasn’t much to know about a beachside condo, whereas a cottage at the edge of town, close to the woods, surrounded by snow...

“Sounds like a fairy tale, and you know what happens in the woods.” Charlie was still

trying to talk me out of going and instead going up the coast surfing with a group of friends for a few days.

We took turns taking Christmas and summer vacations, but this year, we'd hired a new surf instructor so Charlie could take a few days off during the holiday period.

"Can't back out. And besides, technically, Hugo's house is in town. It's on the outskirts, but he has neighbors on either side."

"Bears, probably. They'll sneak into your house and eat your porridge."

I grabbed him and swung him around so he was staring into my eyes. "You need to reread your fairy tales. The bears were the good guys. It was Goldilocks who trespassed and stole their food."

"Fine." He huffed. "But if there are three chairs, one too big, one too soft, and one just right, get out of there fast."

I held up my phone. "Don't worry. I've got my bear app set up. Any bear comes within a hundred feet and this baby will set off a screeching alarm."

My friend muttered he didn't see what good that would do. "Can an app smell a bear? I doubt it, and the noise might anger the animal and they'll attack." He growled, and I rolled my eyes at his bear impression.

I jostled him out the door because I didn't want to miss my flight, and I suspected some of his complaints were delaying tactics designed to do just that.

Three hours later, I peered out the plane window as the aircraft circled over the ocean, the wide strip of sandy beach, the town that hugged the coast, and toward the interior where snow lay on the ground for months.

Charlie couldn't fathom why I was going so far away, by myself, over Christmas. But my folks and younger brother who lived on the other side of the country were on a cruise. They'd invited me, but as much as Charlie hated the cold, the thought of being trapped on a boat with hundreds, maybe thousands of people was far worse and claustrophobic. I pictured lowering a lifeboat, putting on a life vest, and setting off.

"Fair winds and following seas," I'd yell as I was marooned in the middle of the ocean and the ship disappeared over the horizon.

I banished those thoughts from my head because I was doing something different: choosing activities, adventures, or tasks I'd never done and that challenged me physically, mentally, or emotionally. Christmas in the snow fit all three of the categories.

Hugo wasn't able to meet me at the airport, but he'd sent a friend to pick me up.

"Ferris?" A huge bear of a man with a wide smile waved and gave me a hug. "I'm Hector."

On the drive to Hugo's house, Hector filled me in on all things snow of which there was a lot. Despite the car's heating, I shivered and gulped as I looked out the window at the piles of white stuff, some of it shoveled and not so white, more grimy and icky.

"Ever built a snowman?" Hector took his eyes off the road, but my horrified expression had him staring straight ahead.

"Can't say I have." I did the "hit the non-existent brake" thing every time Hector swerved around a vehicle or pulled up too late so we were only a few inches from the car in front. Maybe the guy was a racing driver, but I wished he'd practice his skills on the racetrack.

“I can’t imagine going through life and not having the thrill of building a snowman or having a snowball fight.” His wicked grin didn’t inspire confidence, and I made a mental note to refuse a snowball fight with him. I could see me needing medical attention and was glad I had good insurance.

“Hugo should have finished his work call. He was sorry not to meet you.” Hector pulled off the highway and wound his way around narrow streets. When he passed a grocery store and pharmacy, I tried to remember first left, second right, third right, but lost track. My phone would direct me when I needed to stock up on food. Hugo said all the basics were in the fridge or pantry and I wouldn’t need to shop for a few days.

“This is my place.” Hector passed a white, two-story house with green shutters. Two doors down he stopped the car outside a light blue wooden house with a deck out front and a balcony on the second floor, both enclosed by white railings. The doors on the double-car garage were closed, and Hector drove into the driveway, more sedately than he had during the journey from the airport.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the house. Hugo had sent pics but none of them did the building justice, and as I got out of the car, I felt I’d stepped into a winter wonderland that shopping malls were always promising, and failing to deliver, with their Christmas decorations and Santa’s workshop.

The roof was covered in a thick layer of snow that reminded me of icing. I was tempted to clamor up the side of the house and lick it.

A red-brick chimney poked out of the roof, and the house was surrounded by tall pine trees, each with lashings of snow. If the snow on the roof looked like frosting, the stuff on the branches was similar to a light dusting of icing sugar. And on the mailbox there were what appeared to be bear ears. That was different.

The cold bit at my cheeks, but my attention was on the front door that opened and a man much taller than me stepped out. His red-and-black flannel shirt, broad chest, and muscular arms made me think of woodcutters from all the fairy tales I'd consumed as a kid. He was much more yummy than those fictional characters, though.

But I shook that image out of my head as I strode toward him along a path clear of snow. But instead of meeting me halfway, he sagged against the stair railings, and Hector murmured something as he raced toward his friend carrying my bags as if they weighed nothing.

"Not now. Not like this," Hector muttered.

Oh gods, Hugo suffered from an illness or condition and he was having a flare-up. Poor guy. Warm sea breezes couldn't cure him, but they might provide comfort. He had to get on that plane. I'd have to message Charlie and get him to forget the surfing getaway and stay close to home in case Hugo needed him.

But Hugo recovered and stood up, his huge frame towering over me. He smelled yummy, like freshly baked bread. I sniffed, filling my lungs with his scent.

"Sorry, I hurt my ankle a few weeks ago and it still twinges sometimes."

He was fibbing, I was certain, because a muscle twitched in his cheek, but it was his business to keep his medical issues private.

"Warm ocean water might ease your pain." I gripped his hand, and the poor guy jerked back as if I had one of those hand buzzer shock thingies kids used to use, or maybe they still did.

He smiled, but the guy must have been in agony because he was grinding his teeth.

“Why don’t we show Ferris around the house and the yard because you have to get on that plane.” I could have sworn there was a hidden message in Hector’s voice, almost as though he was threatening Hugo.

Hugo nodded right on cue, and we followed him into the house. I took off my boots inside the door, but as my slippers were in my suitcase, I strolled around in my socks.

“This is beautiful, so warm and cozy. I can see myself spending most of my time in this room.”

But Hugo’s pained expression suggested what? That he’d prefer I left.

I couldn’t fathom what his problem was and was glad he was leaving soon. But I would miss his jeans-clad ass. Shame he couldn’t leave that behind.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

TWO

HUGO

Hurry . My bear was desperate to be in a location where the surroundings weren't covered in snow.

The plane doesn't leave until this afternoon, and besides, we have to wait for Ferris to arrive.

Pfft . Hector can show him around .

Hector was my neighbor from two doors down and my best friend. His bear didn't mind the cold. He reveled in it, and they spent days frolicking in the forest.

Nobody frolics. Give me an example of frolicking .

I picked up my phone, but my bear yelled not to look it up. You said they frolicked, so you must know what it is .

Right. Of course I do . I had to think hard and made a leap then a pirouette and finally a twirl. That would convince anyone.

You don't know, do you? My bear huffed, curled up, and went to sleep, saying, Wake me when we're at the beach .

I had wanted to meet Ferris, but a big client scheduled a last-minute video conference

call, even though I was technically on vacation. Christmas was three days away. But I gritted my teeth, texted Ferris that Hector would meet him, and packed my bags.

And now that my friend and house-swap guest were coming from the airport, I'd checked in online for my flight and imagined I could already scent the salty sea air.

Peeking out the window for Hector's car, I was eager to be on my way. I'd calculated how long it would take to go over everything in the house. I'd made a list and sent it to Ferris, but I still needed to do the walk around. Hector would be nearby, but I couldn't rely on him to do my job.

The familiar humming of Hector's vehicle alerted me the wait was almost over. From another brief glance out the window, Ferris was much smaller than Hector and me. He was human, so it was kinda to be expected.

Not wanting to give the impression that I was curtain twitching, I waited until they got out of the car before opening the front door. A gust of wind whipped up the driveway, tugging Ferris's hair, and he shivered. But it also performed another function: it brought my house-swap guest's scent straight to me, slapping me about the face and chest, as if I was in a boxing match.

The human's scent did almost knock me out. I sagged against the railings, my vision blurry while air was sucked out of my lungs. The sensation woke up my bear who demanded we stay and not go to the beach.

Mate this man. Now!

Mate . That word penetrated my fuzzy brain. The human was my mate.

I can't. He's paid for a vacation at my house but without me.

Who cares? It's just money.

Despite living as part of me, my beast either didn't understand human conventions or chose not to. Probably the latter.

My stomach contents rose up my throat, but I forced them down. I couldn't throw up over my mate on our first meeting.

You don't feel it as I do . My beast was kicking and screaming inside me, giving me a belly ache.

I am experiencing the mating pull . Ten or a hundred times over. But he was on my doorstep, and I was leaving in an hour, and my tummy was hiccuping because we would be apart.

What a mess!

But I could spend ten days at the beach, and Ferris was supposed to arrive at his condo before I departed. Maybe then we could spend some time together. Perhaps go out for coffee or a meal. My mind was whirring at how to keep this human in my life until he... fell for me or experienced whatever humans did when they met their shifter mate.

What if he doesn't? My beast was more savvy than me because Ferris was human and who knew how and when it would affect him, if at all.

Okay, calm down . I have an hour to make a good impression . Or was that a second impression?

“Welcome to my home and your home for the next ten days.” My voice was higher than normal, maybe two octaves. Ferris probably expected me to break into song or

tap dance across the living room floor, twirling a top hat.

“This is beautiful, so warm and cozy. I can see myself spending most of my time in this room.” His gaze swiveled between two armchairs. “Oh.” His voice was more of a squeak. “There’s a big chair and a middle-sized chair.”

“Family heirlooms. There’s a small one upstairs.” I didn’t give a damn about the chairs ‘cause I pictured him lying on the fluffy white rug buck naked, fondling himself, and I tried to stifle the lust threading its way through my body.

He gave me an odd look, perhaps because my expression was more constipated than desire-filled.

“Glad you like it. I’ve spent many happy hours in here.”

Hector cleared his throat and tapped his watch.

“Let me give you the tour before I go.”

Ferris pulled out his phone and brought up the list I’d sent. I was conscious of how close he was as we went from room to room and I spoke of the house’s eccentricities.

We retraced our steps and went to the closet by the front door. I showed him the coats he was welcome to use and the snow boots. My college friend was about Ferris’s height, and he’d left his boots which should fit my mate.

I avoided the fireplace, leaving that until last and showed him the switch for the heated bathroom floor.

“Wow. That’s amazing.” He removed his socks and wiggled his feet on the stone. Even his toes were cute, and I imagined our legs entwined as we sat on the sofa.

Ferris glanced at the fireplace. “It’s so warm in here.” I showed him the thermostat and said while a fire was romantic—damn, why did I use that expression?—it was a lot of work. I didn’t add, “And I don’t want you to burn my house down,” but the guy was interested in how to start a fire, so I gave him the abridged version while shaking my head at Hector. He shrugged. And what was he supposed to do from two doors down if my home caught fire?

I grabbed the car keys from the small table in the entryway. “I’ve put the snow tires on the car.”

Ferris made a face.

Awww, he’s adorable. Mate him now while he’s making that funny face .

I ignored my beast as Ferris said he might walk everywhere.

“There’s a sled in the garden shed.”

His face lit up. “Sounds like fun. And I can’t wait to build my first snowman.”

Having lived here all my life, I was saddened that Ferris had never enjoyed rolling snow into different-sized balls to make a snowman.

“There are carrots in the kitchen.”

He raised one of his brows, and I bopped his nose. As soon as I did it, I realized my mistake. We’d just met, and yes, he was my mate, my lifelong partner, but he didn’t know that. Hector sent me a “What the heck are you doing” look.

“For the snowman’s nose.” I grinned, hoping Ferris wouldn’t think I was weird, or worse, invading his personal space.

“Oh. Okay.”

I covered up my awkwardness by showing him the candles and the flashlight in case the power went out. He shivered, and it took all my strength not to rub his arm and say it'd be okay.

“You have my number, so call if you have any questions.”

“But I don't want to interrupt your holiday. I'm sure I'll figure everything out.”

Damn, so I wouldn't get to hear his voice on the phone in the middle of the night.

I gathered my things, wishing there was a reason I had to stay longer, but I'd gone through everything, and the plane wouldn't wait just because I'd met my forever mate.

“Enjoy your stay.” I gave an awkward wave, and Ferris stood on the porch, shivering, his arms wrapped around him.

“How can I leave?” I whispered to Hector. “He's my mate and he's not wearing enough warm clothes.”

“I kinda figured out the mate thing.”

“Drive around the block. I want to make sure he goes inside.”

“For heaven's sake, Hugo. You're his mate, not his nanny or his mother.”

“Just do it, please.”

But Ferris had gone inside by the time we rounded the block. Shoot, I so wanted to

catch another glimpse of him.

“Let me stay with you tonight and I’ll catch a flight tomorrow”

Hector slammed on the brakes. “What are you going to do? Hide in the bushes all night and freeze your ass off?”

He had a point.

“Besides, his friend Charlie has the condo keys. He's expecting you.”

Hmmm, why had we done that rather than Ferris bringing them here? Charlie would call Ferris if I didn’t show up.

I reluctantly got on the flight and thought of Ferris the whole journey. Charlie was a hoot, and we went out to dinner and he filled me in on all things Ferris. He was going on a surfing trip and invited me, but I said I was going to lie on the beach, eat good food, and sleep for ten days.

What he didn’t know was that I was going to be at the airport bright and early and fly home. What was I going to do when I arrived?

I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

THREE

FERRIS

The sun, or I should say light as there was little sun, faded early, and I adjusted the thermostat. Snowflakes fluttered past the windows, and I shivered as tiny ice crystals stuck to the windowpane and slid downward into a pile of slush.

I closed the thick curtains on the dusk that was creeping toward the house and studied the fireplace. Certain that it couldn't be that hard to get a fire going—Charlie had always built campfires at the beach, and I'd toasted the marshmallows—I read and reread Hugo's list.

There was a stack of firewood beside the fireplace, and Hugo had mentioned there was more in the shed outside. I chewed the inside of my cheek as I wondered whether I should bring in more wood now before it got dark and even colder but decided to get the fire started before I raced outside.

After crumpling up newspaper in the fireplace, I placed small sticks I was using as kindling on top. I lit the paper and waited until the kindling caught alight and added a log. I sat back on my heels, proud I'd managed a task many people completed every day without giving it any thought.

The wind picked up, swirling around the house, and I glanced at the one window with the curtains still open, convinced the wind was peeking in at me. Damn, Charlie and his talk of fairy tales had me convinced a bear or a woodcutter was about to knock on my door.



But thinking back to Hugo's woodcutter impression, I almost wished he would charge in, saying he'd forgotten something. Charlie had texted saying he really liked the guy and did he have a husband, boyfriend, partner, or significant other?

How am I supposed to know? was my terse message. I'd added exclamation marks but deleted them before hitting send. My chest ached, not because of clogged arteries or heartburn, but with a flare up of jealousy which was every bit as painful as... well, how I imagined a heart attack would be.

What if Hugo was single and he and Charlie fell in love? Gods dammit, no. I was tempted to get on a plane and fly home to tell Charlie not to speak to the guy again and to go on his surfing trip.

My friend's text ruined my night, but the fire needed more wood, and I ummed and ahed about whether I should go outside now. I'd have to put the fire out before going to bed, but it was only four P.M. A little early for bed.

Wrapping my dressing gown around me that Charlie had lent me, I turned on the outside lights and peered through the kitchen window at the shed, perched near the fence. It wasn't far from the house and the path was illuminated, though it was covered in snow.

Hmmm. Okay, I'd better do it because there was only a tiny pinprick of light left in the sky. But as my hand grasped the door handle, I peered at the snow. Were those footprints leading from the shed to the side of the house?

I pulled back, wondering what animals lived in the woods behind the house. The home next door was in darkness, as Hugo explained the family had gone away for the holidays. And I couldn't see Hector's place from here.

Thinking back to Charlie's wild imaginative ramblings, I was pretty sure bears

hibernated in winter, so the pawprints, if that's what they were, couldn't be from a bear. A wolf? I couldn't see from this angle, but if I snapped a pic I could go online and compare them.

I grabbed the phone and found the bear-scaring app. The animals were supposed to be terrified of loud noises, so as I debated should I or shouldn't I? If it wasn't a bear, would the animal be scared or go on the attack?

"Just go," I said out loud and opened the door. Oh gods, it was cold, the wind whipping around me and under the robe. Damn, it'd freeze my bits if I didn't get my ass in gear.

My trembling fingers hovered over the app as I raced to the shed, but not being used to wintry conditions, I slid on the icy path and landed on my ass.

"Owww." My screech would have scared away a wild animal, but as I heaved myself up, wet and bruised, a shadow flitted around the side of the house. Oh shit. Man or beast? And did it matter because neither were supposed to be in the backyard?

Fuck, I tried to stand but had forgotten to wear my boots and just wore my slippers and they were saturated. That was a dumb move. I fumbled in the snow for my phone, and when I picked it up, I dropped it again, the cold metal searing my skin as I grabbed it a second time.

Forgetting the damned wood, I tried to run, but it was more of a limp, trudge, limp, trudge. It was only ten yards to the back door, but the distance stretched ahead like ten miles. My head hurt, tears crystallized on my cheeks, my ankle screamed in pain, and something loomed out of the shadows.

I shrieked again, but I must have dropped the phone. It was no longer in my hand. The darkness closed in, and I toppled forward.

Everything was dark, but there was a blast of warmth on my face and body. A constant flickering to my left suggested burning wood and I jerked up, my eyes searching the space, terrified the flames had escaped the fireplace.

But I was in Hugo's living room and the fire was burning fiercely right where it was supposed to be. There was a delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. In those fairy stories I used to read, the woodcutter often saved the day, so maybe there was a good Samaritan making me dinner. Or was the woodcutter a bad guy? I couldn't recall as I sat up and grimaced at the pain in my ankle.

How I wished Hugo had decided a beach vacation wasn't for him and he'd returned, though that would be a little weird.

"You're awake."

Not Hugo but Hector. I hid my disappointment with a smile, hoping he didn't pick up that I wasn't happy to see him .

"What happened?"

"You slipped and fell, and I was nearby and rescued you."

"Thank you."

He placed a tray, containing soup and toast, over my lap while I tried to fathom why he was nearby when it was freezing outside. Surely, he couldn't have been going for a stroll in this weather, but I said nothing, thankful he'd helped me.

"You shouldn't be alone tonight because of that bump on your head." He told me he'd sleep on the couch. I protested, but he insisted.

“Your phone survived.” He handed it to me. There were texts from Charlie who said he was worried he couldn’t get hold of Hugo and wanted to invite him to dinner. Jealousy reared up again. What was wrong with me? I’d hurt my ankle and my head, and I was peeved my friend was being kind to the man I lusted after.

“Have you been in contact with Hugo?” Hector was in the kitchen, and something metal clattered to the floor. “My friend can’t get hold of him.”

I secretly wished Hugo had returned, complaining the beach was too hot and sand got in all his nooks and crannies.

“Can’t say I have.” His voice had that weird sing-song quality that people sometimes had when they were fibbing.

But it wasn’t just his tone that gave him away. There was a scent that wafted around me, and I sniffed my dressing gown. Yikes, this wasn’t Charlie’s. His had red checks and this was green. I’d only been wearing boxers underneath when I went outside, and I couldn’t peek if I still was because of the tray.

But whatever I was wearing reeked of Hugo’s scent. I sniffed it again and my cock engorged. He wasn’t here, but had Hector put me in this because mine was sodden after I toppled headfirst into the snow? I pulled the lapel to my nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance. I wished I could bottle it.

“Why do you ask?” Hector walked in, a dishcloth over his shoulder.

I told him, and he shrugged. “He’s probably gone off on a hike or something.” He disappeared into the kitchen again.

“My friend is enchanted with Hugo and wants to know if he’s in a relationship.”

There was silence, and I counted the seconds before Hector replied, and when he did, he spoke slowly. “I don’t believe he’s in a relationship, but he’s not looking for one either.”

Disappointment settled over me as I’d hoped he’d said he was looking for love. But what if he was and Charlie was in his path? I had to get out of here and go home. I loved Charlie like a brother, but I couldn’t see him with Hugo.

“I have to leave, Hector. Can you take me to the airport?”

He raced in. “What? Why? You can’t.”

Okay that was a little odd. “Why not?” I said slowly. “I’m not a prisoner here, am I?” Charlie may have been wrong about bears, and while there might not be a big bad wolf, I felt like I was a prisoner in a tower.

I had to get out of here. I texted Charlie. Send help .

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

FOUR

HUGO

He can't leave .

If he did, I'd have to get back to the coast before him. I'd just flown east to west, and now I'd have to do the journey in reverse.

There was another shout from inside the house while my bear sat on the porch complaining about the cold, saying he wanted to be by the fire.

My wild cousins are hibernating right now. I shouldn't be here . He was dreaming of life by the ocean and shading himself under an umbrella.

"I have to leave, Hector. Can you take me to the airport" My shifter hearing picked up Ferris's cry.

That couldn't happen. I had to stop him, so I took my skin. Gods, at least my bear had fur to protect him. I shivered as I tore into the house yelling, "You can't leave. You're my mate."

Hector was standing just outside the kitchen door wiping his hands on a dishtowel. Or he was. His hands froze midwipe, and he mouthed, "What the fuck?"

I didn't know what his problem was, but my gaze went to Ferris. He was the one I was here for. My mate half stood, leaning against the sofa, his ankle wrapped in the

elastic bandage I'd put on him when I carried him into the house and before I got Hector to pretend it was him who'd rescued Ferris.

But my mate's face was equal parts drained of color and beetroot red.

That doesn't make sense .

It doesn't have to , I told him.

But Ferris's eyes weren't fixed on my face but lower. Not my waist. Much lower. His mouth was gaping because my cock was aroused and pointing straight at him. Shit, I was naked.

And when he did finally move, it was an eyebrow, just one, that shot up in a sharp V shape.

He pointed at my crotch. "You... you're... you're not at the beach."

I glanced at Hector hoping he'd help me out, but he rolled his eyes, folded his arms, and waited, maybe expecting me to come up with an explanation.

"I had to come back." That was all I had.

Hector sat in the bigger armchair and crossed his legs. I suspected he was enjoying my fuck-up.

"What?" Ferris sat down and hugged a cushion. "I'm trying to get back home and you did the same. Why?" He too glared at Hector, but my friend held up both hands as if to say, "Leave me out of this."

When Hector finally spoke, it was to make a suggestion. "How about you put some

clothes on, Hugo, and I'll make hot chocolate." He didn't wait for Ferris and me to agree about having a hot drink and left the room.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked Ferris when I came back wearing track pants and a sweater. Perhaps sweatpants weren't the best choice because I didn't bother with underwear. They were a little revealing.

A little? My bear facepalmed or as close as a shifter animal could get.

I sat in the chair Hector had vacated. "I had to come back regarding urgent business."

Hector yelled, "Pinocchio."

"Yeah, I'm not buying it." Ferris hugged the cushion tighter. "At Christmas? What was so important?"

"Ummm." I rifled through a list of excuses in my head but none was good enough.

"And what's this about wanting to be friends?"

"Friends?" My voice was louder than I wanted. "I don't want to be friends with you." I sat thinking about what I'd just said. Perhaps that gave Ferris the wrong impression.

His eyes filled with tears, and his lower lip trembled. He looked down at his lap and wiped a tear sliding down his cheek.

Fuck, I'd really messed up. "That wasn't what I meant."

Hector came in with a tray of hot chocolate. He glared at me and jerked his head at my mate.



“Is... is it Charlie?”

Is what Charlie? my bear asked.

“He was fine when I left him.”

Ferris shifted his butt and grimaced.

“You should put your leg up.”

“I should do a lot of things,” he snapped.

Hector stood in the middle of the room. “Let’s put a pin in this conversation until we’ve all had a good night’s sleep. I’ll sleep on the couch in case you need anything, Ferris.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.” Ferris furrowed his brow. It was kinda adorable, but I couldn’t say that as he was angry with me.

“Of course you don’t, but you’re in a strange house in a town you’re not familiar with and you’re injured.” Hector took a sip of his drink. “If you still want to leave in the morning, I’ll drive you to the airport.”

“This is my house. I’ll sleep on the couch,” I said as I clenched my jaw.

That’s not good for your teeth , my bear informed me.

Hector sighed and gave me one of his exasperated smiles he was so good at. “There’s no need for both of us to be here.” My friend waved his free hand at my crotch. “You and your appendage can stay at my place.”

I was fuming at Hector for interfering but said nothing as he insisted Ferris sleep in the third bedroom which was on this floor. No way was I leaving and I refused to sleep upstairs, especially if Hector was staying down here, so I grabbed bedding and a blow-up mattress for myself, as my friend was taking the sofa.

The night stretched on, the hours ticking over so slowly. Hector slept, but I lay awake listening in case Ferris needed me. He spent a restless night, tossing and turning, and there were frequent groans as his head or ankle hurt. Or both.

When light peeked under the living room curtains, I gave up on sleep and made coffee, making sure to tiptoe around, as Ferris had fallen asleep judging by his deep, even breathing.

Hector wandered in yawning, his hair sticking out, and took out three mugs from the cupboard.

“If you take him to the airport, I’ll be on the next plane,” I whispered.

“You have two choices. Either let him go or tell him the truth. No more stalking. Look what happened last night.”

I wasn’t proud of myself or my beast, hiding outside the house and scaring my mate-to-be. But as we stood in silence and sipped our coffee, Ferris hobbled out of his room, using crutches I’d given him. Not that a shifter would suffer a sprained ankle. Or if they did, they’d shift and be cured. But I’d bought them for a Halloween party.

“I’m going to call a cab once I’ve showered.” He glanced at his ankle. “Or had a wash.”

“I’ll drive you.” Hector helped Ferris into the bathroom, but just as he was closing the door, there was a banging and a shout outside the front door.

“Please tell me no one else is going to rush in here naked.” Ferris limped out of the bathroom.

“Ferris, are you in there?”

“Charlie?” Ferris yelled.

“Charlie?” My mate’s friend? “What’s he doing here?”

“Charlie? Is this a group holiday?” Hector looked from me to Ferris.

“I sent a mayday message last night, as he’s a good friend ...” I didn’t miss the emphasis on the last word. “He came to save me.”

There was more banging on the door. “I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow this door down.”

“Is that...?” Hector looked at me.

Ferris shrugged. “He has a thing about fairy tales like Three Little Pigs. Also Goldilocks is one of his favorites.”

Hector rolled his eyes. If Ferris ever saw my Christmas decorations, he’d understand how we felt about Goldilocks.

“Will one of you open the door or do I have to do it?” Ferris’s strained voice suggested he was close to tears.

“I’ll do it.” This was my house, though after last night, I felt like an unwelcome guest. “Charlie.”

“Where is he?” Charlie pushed past me, and I raced ahead of him, wanting to get my side of the story out before he dragged Ferris home. But Charlie froze after taking two steps. “Whoa!”

“Oh my gods!” That was Hector.

“What is that delicious scent?” Charlie sniffed the air.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Ferris waved a crutch at his friend. “I sniffed it first.”

“Ferris, no.” This was weird, but my mate had the wrong idea.

My mate swung his head toward me. “Is that why Charlie came here? For you?”

“Huh?” Charlie didn’t look at Ferris or me. “I’ve kind of forgotten why I came, but I’m so glad I did.”

“Me too.” Hector gave Charlie a silly grin, something that was so un-Hector-like.

Charlie panted, “This may sound really strange, but I want to see you naked.”

“Oh gods.” Ferris muffled a sob with his hand.

“Me too.” That ridiculous grin was still plastered on Hector’s face.

“What?” Ferris glanced between his friend and mine.

“I’m Hector. Would you like to come back to my place?” My friend extended his arm to Charlie.

“Can we get naked together?” Charlie grinned as he took the proffered arm.

Hector leaned close. “We can stay in bed until the new year.”

Charlie squeed, Ferris fumed, and I tipped my head to the side, thinking of the amazing coincidence.

Charlie and Hector walked out the door as Hector said, “You’re my mate,” and the door closed behind them.

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?” Ferris collapsed into the smaller armchair.

“And why is everyone talking about being friends?” He banged a crutch on the floor.

“Well, it’s like this.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

FIVE

FERRIS

“It’s like this.”

I stuffed a cushion and then a second behind my back. “This better be good. My bestie practically had sex with your neighbor in this room.” Ewww, as much as I loved Charlie, I was thankful he and Hector had left to do whatever they were doing. Not that it took much imagination.

But that was combined with relief that Charlie hadn’t taken a liking—or a lusting—to Hugo.

My head was still thumping from where I’d bumped it last night, and my ankle was sore, and everyone had annoyed me. And it was snowing again.

But I sat up as a thought popped into my head. “Charlie hates the snow.” I didn’t know why that was relevant.

Hugo rubbed his brow, and I admired his long slender fingers and his clipped nails. I almost said, “You seem overwhelmed. You can tell me later.” But when was that? I was staying in his house for Christmas, and he was supposed to be in my condo. Was I supposed to leave now?

Weird that last night I’d insisted on going home, and now? Despite the snow piling up outside the house, the warmth in the room hugged me, begging me to stay.

“Okay. I doubt they’ll be in the snow.”

I took a breath and concentrated on Hugo. That might have been a mistake because he was still wearing those sweats from last night, and they didn’t hide his enormous cock. Despite being taken aback by him and his big dick and naked butt rushing into the house last night, I was eager to get another glimpse of his length.

“Fine. Back to you. Start talking.” I crossed my arms and wore what I hoped was a serious expression.

“A mate is like a husband.” He left it there, expecting me to put all the puzzle pieces together.

“Are you saying you want to marry me?” That was kind of sudden. We’d only just met.

“No, not marry.” He glanced outside at the billowing snow. “It will be so much easier if I show you.” He pulled the biggest armchair to the window and offered to help me up.

I hesitated because I suspected I was getting played for a fool. But I took his hand and... and... I didn’t want to let it go. It fit into his palm perfectly as though that was where it was meant to me. I stared at it, hoping it would explain the intense emotions in my head and the butterflies in my belly. But it gave me nothing.

Hugo helped me to the window, and I sat. This armchair was just right. Goldilocks would have been jealous.

“I’m going outside, and I’ll be naked at first.”

While I was excited about ogling his cock and ass, it was freezing out there. Maybe

he was into endurance experiences. There were lots of people around the world who went for a dip at Christmas in freezing water. That must've been it, but why was he eager to show me?

Hugo disrobed in the living room so there was no need to go outside if the point was having me stare at his nether regions. But he opened the door, and I winced, yelling at him to close it, and he vanished into the world of white and more white.

A knock at the window made me jump, and I glared at him. I'd had enough scares since I'd arrived and didn't need another one. Hugo raised his arms, and very nice arms they were. He must work out.

But hair or fur began to ripple over him until there was no skin. His face morphed into a something. No, not a something, a bear. I gripped a cushion, my fingers digging into the stuffing. My heart sped up and pounded in my ears, forming a backdrop to whatever was happening outside.

I couldn't run away, not with my swollen ankle, so I hunkered down in the armchair and eyed the poker by the fire. If the bear could open the door, I'd have to whack him.

But the animal waved at me, and as he did, the fur faded and was replaced by skin, the snout vanished, and Hugo stood shivering, his gaze fixed on me.

My mind went blank. If this was an elaborate party trick and I was the butt of the joke, what was the point? I was nobody to Hugo.

He raced in, stamping his feet, still naked, his body crawling with goosebumps, and he got dressed and threw a blanket from the sofa over his shoulders. He huddled on the couch, his legs curled under him.



“I’m a shifter. Shifters are people with an animal inside them. Mine happens to be a bear. Hector is a bear shifter too.”

What was I supposed to do with that? He may as well have said he was from Mars.

“So are you not human?” If he was human, I wanted to order an animal to be inside me too, and I hoped they weren’t too expensive. Mine would have to move near the ocean. “Can I get one? An animal, I mean.”

“Sorry, no. People are born shifters.”

Damn.

Hugo launched into a long explanation about shifters and their history, and I sort of listened, but I was battling with a problem of my own. I’d envisioned having sex with Hugo, thinking something more might develop, but he wasn’t human.

“Hector and Charlie are mates. They might even be mated by now.”

His words brought me back to reality. Right. My friend’s reaction to Hector suggested they were off to fuck, so humans and shifters could be something to one another.

“They’re fated mates.”

“Mates.” I rubbed my stubble. There was that word again. Hector had said it earlier.

“So they’re together now? In a relationship?”

He nodded. “But that’s not the only couple who are fated mates.”

My head swiveled around the room, half expecting more people to prance into the house. “And who would that be?”

I’d never understood the expression, “My heart was in my throat,” until now. I couldn’t swallow, could hardly breathe, and I steepled my hands together, reminding me of elderly men in period dramas.

Hugo got up and squatted at my feet. He wasn’t kneeling, so this wasn’t a proposal, but he was a shifter, so maybe this was that.

“You and me, Ferris. As soon as you got out of the car two days ago, I scented you were my mate. My bear did too.”

I leaned forward and inspected his eyes. “Is he in there?”

“Yes.” He sat back on his heels. “But did you hear what I said?”

Had I? He said words, and I heard words. Mate. There was a sentence with “mate” in it. “I am your mate.”

The world outside the house went quiet, the snow muffling the sound of traffic, if there was any, and kids having a snowball fight in the yard across the street. Maybe they went inside, but I interpreted the silence as the universe waiting for me to make a decision or to just speak.

I gulped. “What does that mean exactly?”

“It’s similar to marriage, but there’s no way out of a mateship unless one person dies.”

My eyes welled with tears, thinking of Hugo passing away, and I took his hand and

stroked it over my cheek.

“But as a human, you have a choice whether to accept me as your mate.”

“And you don’t?” There was so much I didn’t understand.

“It doesn’t matter.” But his voice had that sing-song quality, and I suspected he was fibbing, as he’d done the day we met.

“Tell me.”

Hugo sat on the floor and crossed his legs while still holding my hand. I needed that connection with him and enjoyed the warmth following from his skin to mine. How was that possible when he’d been freezing his butt outside? But I was getting distracted.

“You are free to marry—or mate—anyone, but for me, you are it. I will never be with anyone else.”

Oh, wow! Thanks, universe. Way to pile the guilt on my shoulders. If I refused him, he’d be alone. But plenty of people lived a life with no partner. That was me convincing myself not to accept being Hugo’s mate out of pity.

“You alone have to make that decision. Look into your heart, Ferris. No matter how long it takes, I’ll be here. And I’ll accept your decision if I am not enough, if this life is not what you want.”

This guy. Every word he spoke made me cry harder. Tears spilled over my cheeks. But it was a life-altering decision, and I refused to be rushed.

“Maybe a coffee and some breakfast first. I don’t like to make mating decisions on an

empty stomach.”

Hugo grinned. “Got it. Do you like bacon?”

“It’s only my number one favorite food.”

He kissed my palm before heading into the kitchen. But I missed him. The lingering scent wasn’t enough. Him banging and cleaning in the kitchen wasn’t enough. I wanted Hugo beside me. For always.

“Okay, I’ve made my decision.”

Hugo raced out of the kitchen, and right there, I fell in love with him. Not that I hadn’t been already.

“Just before I make my decision, does mating come with a side of sex?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

SIX

HUGO

“A side of?” The bacon crackled in the pan behind me. Damn. I tore back and took it off the heat. “More than a side of.” I placed the greasy strips of bacon on a plate and brought it into the living room.

But Ferris wagged his finger at me. “Shouldn’t we take this into the bedroom?”

He was racing ahead, not literally ?cause he was sitting on the couch. But though I was the shifter who recognized him as my mate immediately, I was lagging behind, thinking we’d take weeks, months, or years to reach this point.

“Yes.” I put the bacon on a nightstand and helped Ferris onto the bed. He was still wearing the robe, but I could get rid of that easily. And maybe there’d be no penetration because of his injury, but we had the rest of our lives to have sex.

“I want you to fuck me. I’m so hard it hurts, more than my ankle.”

I was in awe of my human mate.

“But how do we mate?” He crooked his little finger. “Do we pinky swear?”

This was the difficult part where I had to explain there would be pain.

“I am me when we mate.”

“Who else would you be?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“My bear, but I’ll be in human form apart from my bear’s claws. They’ll break your skin, just a tad, and leave a permanent scar.” He might run, or call Charlie to come get him, or tell me that was weird and refuse. Or call the police.

Instead, he said, “Let’s do it now before sex. I don’t want to be thinking of blood and scarring while you’re inside me.”

I wouldn’t be thinking of anything other than my length in his hole when we fucked.

I kneeled at Ferris’s side—his good side, as I didn’t want to hurt his sprained ankle—and undid the tie wrapped around his waist.

“May I?” I held one edge of the robe, unaware if he was wearing underwear.

“Hurry.”

Pulling back the robe to reveal... his enormous cock. Gods, he was gorgeous. Forgetting he wanted me to mate him, I trailed a finger over his shaft, and he gasped, his mouth open wide, his hands gripping the comforter.

Air whooshed out of his mouth as I lowered my head and blew gently on his cock. Ferris lifted his hips so my mouth was less than an inch from his dick. Sticking out my tongue, I licked along the shaft, and my mate moaned and grabbed a fistful of my hair.

He tugged, the pain mingling with pleasure, and my length engorged. I trailed a finger over the base of his cock before circling his hole, slippery with slick. He bent his uninjured leg, but I wanted him to be comfortable, so I tucked a pillow under his lower back and another under his sprained ankle.

I prodded his entrance as his breath emerged in deep shuddering gasps, and he reached down and eased my finger inside him.

“Mmmm.” Ferris bucked his hips a little, putting his weight on his left foot.

I pushed in up to the first knuckle and out, adding a second finger, then a third. Keeping my eyes on Ferris, I finger-fucked him. His eyes closed as his teeth clamped down on his lower lip, and my other hand gravitated to his cock.

I wrapped a hand around the base, and Ferris’s eyes shot open, his mouth forming a huge O as I slid my hand up and down. Pre-cum dribbled from his slit as I pumped his length.

The pink flush of arousal tinged his cheeks, and his breathing became more ragged. He gripped my hand on his cock, and we pumped together. His chest heaved with each breath and his head tilted back while his fingers tightened their grip over mine.

When he gasped for air, he squeezed around the three fingers in his channel and cum spurted from his slit. His body became limp, the hand over mine flopping to the side.

Removing my fingers from his hole and releasing my grip on his length, I wiped up the cum and lay beside him, my lips on his brow, and covered us with a blanket. Maybe that was all we could do for now because of his injury, but I’d let him decide and guide me.

Ferris turned his head and nuzzled me. Placing his lips at the base of my throat, he sucked and grazed my skin with his teeth. Did he just mate me? If he broke the skin, then yes. But I didn’t need a mirror because my heart swelled with love and lust for my mate. He had placed his mark on me, and I was truly his.

“Did I do that right?” he whispered.

“You did, though there is no right or wrong way.”

“I love you,” he kissed me, and I kissed him back.

“Me too. I love you so much.”

“Your turn to mate me.”

I trailed a finger over his bare shoulder and my nails elongated until they became claws. Digging one into his flesh, he whispered to keep going. I scraped over his skin, leaving my forever mark and a sign of my love.

“It’s done.”

Ferris flapped a hand in front of his face. “I can tell. My body overheated, as though I’m sitting in a hot bath, and my muscles are all jelly.”

I kissed his nose.

“But you promised there’d be fucking.”

“I did?” I tapped my lips and grinned. “A man always keeps his promises.”

“How should we do this?” Ferris pointed to his ankle.

We discussed scissoring and spooning, him on top, with his weight resting on his right knee. But neither of us wanted to spoil our first time with theatrics and detailed plans of who put what where, so my mate lay on his back, his injured right leg flat on the bed, while I kneeled between both legs and lifted his left one.

My gaze lowered to his hole, glistening with slick, when my cock nudged it. Heated



blood surged through my veins when I pushed in the tip.

“Oh. You’re much bigger than your three fingers.” Ferris raised his head as I kissed and licked his ankle that rested on my shoulder before pushing in further, keeping my gaze on my mate’s. With our eyes locked together and our bodies fused, I pushed in all the way, my cock nestled in his tight channel.

“You fit perfectly.” Ferris swayed his ass from side to side, sending jolts of desire through my cock and into my body. My fingers and toes tingled when he squeezed around me, and I grunted that he was going to make me come.

He released his grip while sporting a wicked smile. “Can’t have you coming.”

“I want to come.” I pulled out and slammed into him, and Ferris whimpered. “But I don’t want to come early.”

Ferris blew me a kiss. “Is it better to be late than early when fucking?”

I plowed into him, which took my breath away, and his punctuated gasps were the only sound in the room, while the earthy aroma of slick mingled with my mate’s unique scent, creating a heady atmosphere that threatened to overwhelm me.

His nipples hardened, and he tapped one and pulled it, moaning and tossing his head from side to side.

I paused, admiring my mate in the throes of passion. I nuzzled Ferris’s calf and swept my tongue over the soft flesh while goosebumps streamed over his skin. “Mmmm, I love the taste of you.”

“I love the feeling of fullness with your cock inside me.” He angled his hips so my length slid in deeper.

A car revved on the street, reminding me of life going on in the outside world as I thrust my dick deep inside my mate. I gazed down at his puckered hole while my length surged into him.

My mate's come-hither eyes and his parted lips sent my temperature soaring, and I placed my lips on his leg and mumbled how much I loved him.

"Love you, too. Now stop talking and fuck me."

He matched my rhythm as I fucked him and he bucked his hips. His cock bounced with each thrust, and he grabbed it, tugging the shaft as I plunged into him. But I stayed where I was, buried in his depths, needing to prolong the pleasure, not wanting this to be over too soon.

He was so tight, my cock fit so snugly inside him.

His eyes fluttered open. "Taking a break?" He smirked.

"Just enjoying being inside you."

He squeezed around my length, sending a jolt of electricity through my veins, while heat radiated from my mate's body. I yearned to give in to the climax that was creeping up on me but wanted my mate to come first. But his body was convulsing, his words becoming mutters and mumbles, and I plunged into him, fucking him hard.

He tilted his head back, his mouth open wide as he yelled my name, and cum spurted from his cock. My orgasm sped toward me, shaking me as my body spasmed and cum surged inside my mate, followed by my knot swelling.

Seconds passed as we gasped and panted, and I placed my mate's leg on the bed. I lowered myself onto him, taking care to avoid his ankle, and held him tight, listening

to his breathing, thanking the goddess for sending him to me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

SEVEN

FERRIS

“What now?”

Thanks to my ankle we were in the downstairs bedroom. My head was on Hugo’s shoulder and his arm was draped around mine. It was hard to snuggle because of my sprained ankle, so my body was splayed at an awkward angle with one leg out to the side.

“You’re not a fan of winter, are you?”

“I never said that. That was Charlie.”

Hugo kissed my brow. “Maybe his perception will have changed. How long since we heard from them?”

I sniggered. There had been a message early this morning with emojis. An eggplant and a peach, more than one of each.

“It might be a while before they resurface.”

“But getting back to you, to us.” Hugo leaned back and lifted my chin so our gazes were locked on one another. “You can’t teach surfing here.”

“Right.” If I moved here, I’d have to find a new career.

“But I could run my PR business from anywhere, though there would be some travel.”

“How would you feel about living at the beach? And what about your bear?”

The town where I lived stretched along the coast and didn’t extend back far from the ocean. A few miles away there was forest that covered the hills and valleys.

“He says as long as you’re near, it’ll be fine.”

My phone beeped and so did Hugo’s. I groaned, thinking of more eggplants and peaches but I got a fir tree, a bear, and some snow. I showed the screen to my mate. My mate. I had a mate for life. I left home as a single omega, and within 48 hours, I met my one and only.

Hugo’s screen was identical.

“Let me guess. It’s snowing, and Hector’s bear has climbed a tree.”

Hugo stroked his chin, and I rubbed my cheek against his scruff. “Maybe we need to rescue him.”

I got up on one elbow. “Really? Couldn’t he get down by himself?”

“Hector’s bear is scared of heights.”

“Oh no, poor baby.”

My turn to guess. “Ummm. Hector wants us to meet him under a tree that’s laden with snow.”

“And then what? We all go home?”

I hoped the message was more exciting than that. I sent Charlie a thinking face and a shrug.

In return, he replied with a bear, a man, an ax, and a tree.

“They want to get a tree for Christmas.” I checked the date. It was Christmas Eve. How could I have forgotten?

Hugo had mentioned when we were communicating before I arrived that he hadn’t put up a tree but there was a fake one in the shed. But with both couples mating, maybe we deserved a real tree.

“According to the weather report, it will stop snowing by mid-morning.” Hugo tapped this phone.

I messaged Charlie saying we’d postpone looking for a tree until later.

Let’s play guess the message. That was Charlie. He loved games. Bear-themed ones .

“I’ll need your help to figure these out.” Hugo sat beside me, and we studied the phone.

A bear emoji followed along with a pot of honey.

“Hector wants to find honey? In this weather?” Much as I loved honey, I wasn’t going to deprive the bees of the food they lived on during winter.

“No. Oh, maybe this is a reference to sex.”

I didn't see how he reached that conclusion. Eggplants and peaches I understood.

"Charlie is going to pour honey over Hector and eat him."

"Stop." I didn't need to hear that about my friend, and I nudged my mate in the ribs.

"Maybe he's just hungry. Or his beast is."

I snapped my head in Hugo's direction. "Are we back to talking about sex?"

"No." He slapped his brow. "What made you think that?"

"Your beast." I dropped my gaze to his crotch, but he explained he was referring to his bear.

"Oh." I placed my lips on his ear. "But when we're in bed, can I call your cock your beast?"

He nodded, and it didn't escape me that his dick swelled.

Is Hector hungry? I texted. I hoped Charlie wouldn't reply with He's eating me .

That's right .

Oh goody. A point to us. I thought for a moment and sent three emojis: a man walking away, a big red cross, and the dotted-line face emoji.

Hugo's furrowed brow had me worried that no one would understand what I wrote, and there was silence from Hector and Charlie. When the phone finally beeped, we both stared at their guess.

An invisible man walks through a danger zone and now everyone can see him .

I snorted. That so wasn't it.

"I thought the guy was walking into the no-go area and turned into the invisible man." Hugo tapped the screen. "But he's walking the wrong way, so maybe they're right."

"No. The message is there are humans around so it's dangerous and shifters should hide."

Hugo narrowed his eyes. "Really? That's a huge leap."

Did we guess correctly? Charlie messaged.

No . When I told him what it was, my friend and his mate reacted as Hugo did.

Only you could get that message from those three emojis , Charlie said.

Even though they didn't guess right, I told them to take the next turn.

When it arrived it was a bear, a party popper, a tree, and a fire.

"Someone was celebrating in the woods with fireworks and started a fire," Hugo suggested.

"I hope not." But I sent Hugo's suggestion.

No. Let's have a bonfire in the woods .

"That has to have been Charlie's because no shifter would suggest a bonfire in the



woods. It's not safe, even in winter." Hugo growled.

No fires in the woods , I texted. Thanks for playing.

My tummy rumbled. "Do we have much food in the house for a Christmas Eve meal?"

"Pretty well everything except a turkey, but Hector is a chef. His fridge and freezer are always full. And I know he ordered a bird."

I hoped Hector understood he and Charlie were sharing their food with us.

"Shall we get the tree?" The sky had cleared.

"Not you, love. Your ankle, remember."

I glowered at my mate because it was his fault I'd fallen and hurt myself. "You have a toboggan. I'll sit on that."

"I can't convince you to stay home, can I?" He sounded as though he knew the answer already.

"Nope."

We ate bacon sandwiches for breakfast, and I dragged out all of the winter clothes Charlie had lent me. Hugo would have to help me with the pants. While my mate was getting the toboggan ready, Charlie and I texted back and forth.

Can you believe we both found our mates? he messaged and then added an eggplant emoji.

Dear gods, I didn't want to discuss Hector's cock and wasn't about to give my friend Hugo's dimensions.

And they're bear shifters! More emojis.

But I can't live here. Not in the snow .

It doesn't snow all year, I told him. Unlike Hugo, Hector might not be able to switch locations as easily.

My mate interrupted us by yelling, "The toboggan's ready."

Hugo helped me outside. He'd rigged a backrest on the toboggan for me and it was piled with cushions and blankets. He handed me a flask. "Hot chocolate for the invalid."

After tucking me in, he dragged the toboggan through the back yard to a gate hidden in the fence.

"Hi." Charlie hugged me and Hugo. "I wish I had a toboggan."

I showed him my flask, and Charlie nudged Hector. "Wow! You two came prepared."

Hugo reminded them I was injured so I got special treatment.

Even though Charlie was dressed warmly, he stamped his feet and blew on his gloved hands. It would take a lot for him to live here rather than at the beach.

"Follow me. I know where there's a perfect tree." Hector charged ahead, Charlie at his heels, while Hugo pulled me along. I asked more than once if I was a burden and poor Hugo was straining to pull me until he pointed out that shifters were much

stronger than humans. He also added they had better hearing.

“What do you think of this one?” Hector asked.

We stopped beside what they described as a sapling. A little tree compared to the towering giants surrounding us.

“Won’t we need two trees?” I asked. “One for you and the other for us.”

“True.”

“I have to warn you.” Hector’s serious expression had me worried. “Hugo’s tree will be all things bear. Batten down the hatches for an onslaught of bear this and bear that.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Hugo huffed.

“Let me think. Who slept in sheets dotted with bears until he went to college?”

“Hector, you’re telling all my secrets.”

I beckoned my mate closer. “I think it’s adorable.”

“You do? Great, because I still have those sheets.”

Looked like my life both awake and asleep was going to be surrounded by bears.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

EIGHT

HUGO

“Awww, it looks so pretty.” Ferris sat on the sofa untangling Christmas lights, and I stood back and admired how we’d decorated the tree.

All my Christmas tree ornaments were bear-themed. I had bear claws, bear faces, carved wooden bears, bears dressed as Santa, and ice-skating bears. There were papa bears, baby bears, and grandparent bears.

Our friends were helping us decorate our tree.

“There are a lot of bears.” Charlie examined one of the baby bears dangling from a branch. He looked at the adult bears and the three chairs beside them and the three beds. He swung around, trying to get Ferris’s attention. But my mate was concentrating on the lights, so Charlie sidled over to him and jerked his head toward the tree.

Ferris lifted his head and his mouth gaped as he counted the bear family ornaments. Charlie nudged him and whispered, “Told you.”

Both humans were newly mated and might have forgotten shifter hearing was ten times more powerful than humans.

Hector and I shared a glance. He shrugged, and I was as confused as he was. Ferris cleared his throat and caught my eye. He scratched his neck and opened his mouth to

peak, then closed it before asking me, “Is that bauble a reference to the fairy tale about the three bears?”

“It is.” And it was one of my favorites.

“Ummm, but isn’t that an awful story because Goldilocks destroyed the bears’ furniture and ate their food?”

“It’s treated as a huge joke in the bear shifter community.”

Hector chimed in with, “The bears would have scented her the first time she came and ate their food. They would have never allowed her back in.”

Ferris tilted his head and pointed under the tree. “We don’t have any presents.”

“It’s a little late.” Charlie checked the time on his phone. “The shops will close in a few hours.”

Ferris heaved himself off the couch. “I vote we go shopping in pairs.” He held up a hand to shush me as I opened my mouth to speak. “Not mated pairs. Either I go with Hector or we pair humans and shifters separately.

We all agreed to do one human and one shifter so each person could advise the other one on what their friend liked. We capped the price of each gift at \$10.

I drove to the closest mall, and we rented a wheelchair for my mate.

“We have one hour.” Ferris tapped his watch as Hector steered his chair in the opposite direction to where Charlie and I were going.

I stood with Charlie while my mate and friend turned a corner, wanting to catch the

last glimpse of Ferris.

“Sixty minutes isn’t long.” Charlie tucked his arm in mine. “They’ll be back before we know it. I miss Hector already.”

It took all my strength not to run after Ferris.

Charlie pulled me into a store that had a display of honey in the window. “Bears like honey, right?”

“They do.” I didn’t say how much because other than Ferris and my bear, honey was everything. But I told him Hector had a pantry of honey.

Charlie picked up a packet containing a bear head cookie cutter. “Hector’s a chef, so he must do a lot of baking.”

I nodded.

“Shame I can only buy one because of the ten-dollar limit.”

“He’ll love it,” I assured him.

“Right, that’s my gift chosen. Now you have to find something for Ferris.”

Charlie dragged me into another store. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I was eager to find my new mate the perfect gift.

“These are cute.” Charlie picked up a pair of socks with bear images dotted over them.

“They are, but the bears were poking out their tongues and making funny faces and

my beast objected. I didn't care for them either.

Ten dollars was really limiting, and I dismissed puzzles, water bottles, books, cards, slippers, and gloves. Charlie studied the slippers. "Good you didn't pick these. Living by the beach, Ferris doesn't really wear slippers except for the ones he bought for this holiday."

That had me pause, and I didn't like the sadness that kindled in my chest. My mood deflated, and I was close to tears thinking Ferris and I would be separated, because even if I went to live with him on the coast, it would take time to sell my place or rent it, pack, and wind up my affairs.

Charlie nudged me. "Hey, if Hector and I can make it work, so can you and Ferris."

"Maybe I should go back and buy the socks." I hadn't found anything I liked.

"That teddy is adorable." Charlie picked up the toy and cuddled it.

The teddy was nothing special, especially at 9.99. It might fall apart before we got it home. My bear was annoyed, saying it looked nothing like him.

It's not supposed to look like you. But that gave me an idea. It wouldn't resemble my beast, but I could get it to look like me.

It was the perfect gift.

We met up at the place where we'd parted, and Charlie fell into Hector's arms. I bent over and kissed my mate, wishing I could twirl him around.

"What did you get?" he asked, eyeing the bag I was carrying.

“You’ll find out tonight.”

We’d agreed to exchange gifts this evening, Christmas Eve, as Hector’s and my family always did presents the night before Christmas, and our families had Christmas dinner on the 24<sup>th</sup> as well. That was our tradition.

But for Ferris and Charlie’s families, the big day was the 25<sup>th</sup>, so we compromised. Presents on Christmas Eve and the celebratory meal the following day.

While we’d eat together tomorrow, we were spending the night with our respective mates. I loved Hector like a brother and was growing to love Charlie, but newly mated couples needed a lot of alone time.

I pulled a meal I’d cooked and frozen from the freezer, as I’d be spending heaps of time in the kitchen tomorrow. Hector, being a chef, had said he’d provide the food, but I told him I’d been cooking for myself for years and had never starved.

“My house, my food.” I was hoping to impress Ferris with my cooking prowess. “Except I need your turkey.”

I could tell by Hector’s expression when we parted that he wasn’t convinced.

Ferris hobbled to the tree and turned on the lights. “It’s magical.” He explained at the beach, he used to get driftwood and fashion a Christmas tree, so having a fir tree was very new to him.

“Do we do this now or after we eat?” He was jiggling with enthusiasm.

“There are no rules. This is our first Christmas together, so everything is new. We can create our own traditions starting right now.”



“Let’s eat first.” He put down the gift bag containing the present he’d bought for me. “No, maybe we do it now.” He handed me the bag and snatched it back. “I can’t decide.”

“How about we eat in front of the fire and you can see the presents under the tree. If you change your mind, we can open them mid-meal.”

“Okay.” He didn’t look convinced, but there were only two options.

We chatted about past Christmases with our families, and he said he’d have to get in touch with his folks and tell them about me. “But the wifi on their ship is lousy, so I’ll wait until they reach the next port.”

When we finished eating and I cleared away the dishes, Ferris was bubbling with excitement.

“You open yours first.” He gave me my gift, but I didn’t look inside, wondering if he was going to change his mind. “Or we can do it at the same time.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

I gave him the gift bag I’d taken from a pile in the pantry.

“We count to three and do it.”

“On three or after three?” I didn’t want to mess it up.

“After three. Let’s rehearse. One, two, three, open. Does that work?”

“Sounds good.” He was so adorable like an Energizer Bunny wrapped up in chocolate and marshmallows.

“Now for real.” We yelled in unison,” One, two, three, open.”

He pulled out the teddy I bought, but I’d stuck a pic of my face on it. Ferris sobbed and smothered my photo face with kisses. “I love it. I can cuddle him when we’re separated.”

A pang of disappointment niggled at me. I hated the idea of being away from my mate.

“Your turn.” His body jiggled despite his injured ankle.

I pulled a coffee mug out with a pic of a rooster on the side, accompanied by the words, “I love your cock.” I took his hand and placed it on my crotch.

“Merry Christmas, mate.” I placed my mouth on his and captured his bottom lip with my teeth.

Ferris giggled. “Maybe we can forget the dishes and you can show me what you have in your pants.”

“Best idea I’ve heard all day.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

NINE

FERRIS

I got a message to my parents and wished them Merry Christmas. As much as I loved them, I was pleased their wife was lousy because I would have had to hide Hugo—and I didn't want to start our relationship with a lie—or launch into an explanation of how it was love at first sight for both of us.

My parents were both very human, and I could see them getting off the boat at the next port and flying here. And if I told them Charlie had fallen for Hugo's friend, both sets of parents would have invaded our Christmas vacations.

While my ankle would take a while to heal, it was improving. I could put a little weight on it, but I was fearful that if I did too much "bounding about" I might injure myself further.

I so wanted to have more sex with Hugo. Blowjobs, tongue and finger-fucking were great, but I wanted his cock in my hole again. All day, every day.

But it was time to cook the turkey and all the trimmings.

Hugo positioned a comfy chair at the kitchen table. Sitting at the island would have had my legs dangling, not advisable for a sprained ankle.

"Where do we start and how can I help?" I wasn't much of a cook, and while I'd helped my family prep for Christmas in the past, it was more the peeling vegetables,

pouring wine, and getting things from the cupboard and fridge kind of help.

But now it was just me and Hugo. Me and my mate. The man I wanted to get naked with.

“Our first Christmas meal. We’ll always remember this.” My mate put his head on my shoulder, and I snapped a pic. Just like the meal, the first of many.

I eyed the ingredients laid out on the island and grabbed the honey. Maybe this was to put on toast we’d nibble at during the day while we cooked. I dipped a spoon in the velvety, syrupy substance and flipped my head back, allowing the honey to drip and drool from the spoon, twirling through the air until it fell into my mouth.

“Ferris!”

I shot my mate a glance. “Sorry, I only took a little.” Hugo’s face was pink, as were the tips of his ears.

He wiped his brow, and I side-eyed the bulge at his crotch. “You can’t do that now.”

Oh. Ohhh. He was hot and bothered, and I intended to get him even more turned on. I stuck out my tongue and licked around my mouth, capturing the remnants of honey. Holding out the spoon, I whispered, “You want some?”

“You’re talking about the honey, right?” he croaked.

Hugo ignored the spoon and kissed me, shoving his tongue between my lips and curling it around my own. “Mmmm,” he moaned into my mouth, and my body tingled. “Your unique taste combined with sweet sweet honey.” He pulled away. “Perfection.”

He smacked his lips together and picked up the honey, measuring out half a cup and combining it with mustard, rosemary, and some spices. He let me have a taste “Yum.”

But he made a face as he put a drop of the mixture on his tongue. “Needs more honey, I think.”

“Are you sure?” It was quite sweet already, though the spices evened out the sugaryness.

“You can never have too much honey.”

That might be true for a bear shifter, but then I looked the turkey in the eye and he agreed with me. You could definitely have too much honey.

We made the stuffing, and I got Hugo to pose beside the turkey while I took a photo. We got the bird in the oven which was a feat because Hugo kept eying the honey, and I grabbed the jar and refused to let him add any more to the glaze.

“And for dessert?” The gleam in Hugo’s eyes told me one thing: he had something with honey planned for after the main meal.

“What are we having?” I asked, hoping I was wrong and he’d say chocolate or citrus or anything but honey.

“Honey balls!”

“Yay!” I was mated to a bear shifter, so I had to get used to all things honey, but I made a mental note to get a dentist appointment after the holidays.

Hugo showed me a pic of a tower of tiny dough balls that had been dipped in a

mixture of honey and orange zest. It looked complicated, and I wondered if we'd be in the kitchen for hours trying to make the dessert match the one in the recipe.

Hugo beat eggs, butter, and sugar while I measured out the flour. He poked a finger in the flour and bopped me on the nose. "You're cute." I did the same to him but tapped his cheeks as well.

"You're more cute."

"Never. Impossible. My mate is cuter than anyone else on the planet." We kissed, and I could still taste the honey in his mouth.

We made the dough balls, lots and lots of them, both of us rolling them in our palms. As they had to be deep-fried, Hugo did the honors, as I couldn't stand, but I made the honey-and-orange-zest glaze.

When they were done, we piled them high like a pyramid, or a Christmas tree, and sprinkled nonpareils over the top. It did look amazing. We set the phone on a stand and took a pic of us holding the dish.

Hugo went to grab the one balanced on the top, but I smacked his hand away. He poked out his tongue and called me a meanie.

I was pleased to see some greenery in the vegetables. Everything was a little brown so far, thanks to the honey. I peeled carrots and chopped onions and grabbed some Brussel sprouts. I kept them away from the honey, but Hugo was busy peeling potatoes, so they were safe from the overwhelming richness of honey.

"I thought we'd try this recipe." I had hopes it didn't have honey; they were dashed when I saw the ingredients.

“But this is for sweet potatoes, Hugo.”

“Yes, the addition of honey makes them sweet.”

The recipe did contain honey, but he had the wrong potatoes. “Sweet potatoes are not the same as potatoes.”

“No, because they have honey in them.”

We were getting nowhere. It was interesting that a man who said he grew vegetables in his garden in spring and summer had somehow missed that they were two different vegetables.

I pulled up pics on the phone and did a comparison.

“Oh.” His small voice tugged at my heart. Despite the honey overload, I wanted him to be happy, so I did a search and found a recipe for mashed potatoes drizzled with honey. I could eat them without the drizzle, and Charlie too, because unless he’d developed a sweet tooth overnight, he wasn’t a fan of honey.

I sent my friend a text with honey emojis. Lots of them. But his response was, I’ve been warned .

Hector and Charlie were due in thirty minutes, so we finished setting the table with wreaths of holly entwined with silver ribbon, red candles, crisp white linen napkins, and some additional bear baubles strewn over the table that didn’t make it onto the tree.

We stood back and admired our work, and I took more photos.

“Ummm, I think we forgot something.” Hugo looked down at his sweats, covered in

flour, flecks of sugar, and honey drippings.

“No problem. It’ll just be the four of us,” so I texted Charlie. Luckily they hadn’t left the house.

“Get naked.”

Hugo's brows shot up. “We’re eating Christmas dinner naked?” He added more wood to the fire and turned up the thermostat.

“No. Let’s eat in our bathrobes. Who says we have to get dressed? For what?”

At the beach, we often ate the main Christmas meal outside while wearing shorts and flip-flops.

“We’re starting a new tradition.”

My mate got a red one for me and white for him. Unlike me, he had a selection of bathrobes.

The doorbell rang and Hugo opened it, letting in a flurry of snow along with Charlie and Hector. They took off their coats to reveal robes dotted with dancing bears.

Hector held up a basket of cookies and asked if he had to pull dinner together from whatever Hugo hadn’t burned. My mate harrumphed, telling him everything was perfect.

Our guests oohed and ahed over the honey balls tree, and they were impressed when my mate pulled out the turkey from the oven. Despite all the honey, the food was delicious, and we toasted the dinner, our new mates, and the future.



Later as we lay in bed, Hugo suggested we alternate Christmases. “Next year we can barbecue by the beach and watch the sunset as we sit on loungers and eat shrimp and drink cold beer.”

That sounded perfect, and I was happy to spend one year surrounded by snow and the other by a warm breeze and the ocean lapping against the shore.

“Wait, are there shrimp recipes with honey?” He grabbed his phone and scrolled. “Ahh yes, all's right with the world.”

If bears had such a thing for honey, why were they eating porridge in the Goldilocks tale? Ahh, it had to have been laced with honey. Now I understood.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

TEN

HUGO

My mate was leaving tomorrow, and because of his ankle, we'd left the making of a snowman until today. He no longer needed crutches, but he still limped, and he tucked his arm in mine as we trudged through the snowy backyard.

"I did some research." He looked so proud of himself as he flipped through the images on his phone of how to build a snowman.

"One big one, one medium, and a small baby one." He giggled, and we shared a glance. "That reminds me of Goldilocks." I tugged his woolen cap over his ears. "Are you sure the author of that tale wasn't a shifter?"

"Maybe." Anything was possible.

I rolled the snow into balls, and Ferris helped me put them on top of one another. I plopped an old hat on the snowman's head, and my mate wrapped some ivy around his neck instead of a scarf.

"Should we use rocks for his eyes or maybe a pair of old sunglasses?" Ferris peered around the yard, but the snow made it impossible to find any rocks.

"I have a surprise."

He slapped his mitten-clad hand over his mouth and chuckled. "Let me guess. You're

going to use bear-shaped cookies for his eyes and an empty honey jar for his mouth.” He tilted his head. “But wouldn’t birds eat the cookies?”

“Neither.” Though I hadn’t thought of the cookies. Maybe next year. I pulled out a bunch of shells from my coat pocket. “I found these shells in the attic. We can use these for his eyes and mouth, even his buttons. If you want.”

Ferris planted a huge kiss on my lips. “That’s so sweet. If we have Christmas at the beach next year, we can use seaweed instead of ivy.”

We added large twigs I’d collected in the woods for the snowman’s arms and stood back to admire our efforts. Ferris, who wanted to record everything about our first Christmas, took photos of us with our arms draped over the snowman’s shoulders.

“I’ll look at these pics when I get lonely and want you with me.” His voice cracked, and I hugged him close. Neither of us was looking forward to him leaving.

The original plan had been to sell my place, but I couldn’t. It held so many memories, including where my mate and I met. I could rent it out to holiday makers, but I wanted it for us whenever we decided to come back.

I would follow Ferris to the coast in about two weeks from now. Fourteen days wasn’t long, but being away from my mate even for an hour was an eternity. As we trudged back to the house, he rested his head on my shoulder and I inhaled his scent, imprinting it in my mind.

“Here.” We were in the downstairs bedroom. We’d never made it upstairs because of my mate’s injury. “I want you to have this three bears’ Christmas bauble.”

He pressed it against his chest. “Are you sure you want to part with it?”

“I’m not. I’m giving it to you to keep safe until we see one another again.”

At the beach? My bear was eager to go for a swim in the ocean and had been badgering me about whether he needed swimming trunks.

Yes. It won’t be long before we’re there .

“I’ll wear it next to my heart.”

“That might be a little uncomfortable. Also, how will you explain to your clients why you have a three-bear ornament on your chest?”

Our eyes locked on one another, and Ferris bent over, laughter bubbling out of him, and when he stood up, his eyes were filled with tears. “I just pictured me on the beach with this.” He held it up. “Stuck to my bare chest.” He snorted as another round of laughter shook his body. “Bare chest.” He put a hand over my heart. “This is also a bear chest.”

I gulped and looked away, not wanting Ferris to see how emotional I was.

“Hey, look at me.”

I lifted my head.

“It’s okay to be sad at the idea of us being apart. Me too. Please don’t pretend because you think it’ll upset me.” He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. “Humans might keep secrets, but from the little I know about shifters, they’re straight shooters.”

“Yes, unless we’re hiding our true identity from humans.”

With each item Ferris packed in his suitcase, my outlook became more gloomy, imitating the weather outside. While it was fine to pine after your mate, I had to overcome my sadness or at least manage it in order to wind up things here, put the house to bed, and get to the coast.

“I think that’s everything.” He glanced around the bedroom and did a reconnoiter of the living area.

“In case you get hungry on the plane.” I handed him a bag of goodies and pictured him devouring the contents as he flew farther away from me.

I slid my hand under his sweater and shirt and ran my fingers over the mating mark. “That mark is a part of me so I’m with you always.”

He nodded, and I cradled him in my arms.

I wasn’t great at goodbyes. Ferris on the other hand prolonged ours until the last possible minute at the airport.

“I’m really going now.” We kissed and hugged and he waved goodbye. Instead of turning away, he walked backward. People around him smiled and took some photos.

“One more kiss.” He puckered up and flung his arms around my neck. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

I love him too. My bear was urging me to either get on the plane with Ferris or make him stay with us. Two weeks meant little to him.

“One last kiss.” Ferris outstretched his hand, our fingertips touching until they didn’t. “Nope, gotta have one more.”

We'd attracted a crowd, especially as my mate was clutching the three bears' bauble. I didn't care if people were filming us and putting it on their social media, and Ferris didn't appear to notice.

He blew me a kiss and the guy closest to us clutched his chest and murmured it was so romantic.

One final wave and he was gone, but I refused to leave the airport. We texted until he had to turn off his phone, and I waited until his plane took off.

Despite being surrounded by people wheeling their luggage and passengers running to catch a flight, I was alone. The rest of the world was just noise and none of it mattered.

I sat in the car, not wanting to return to an empty house. Hector messaged and invited me to dinner with him. Charlie had gone home a few days ago, and the pair was still negotiating how they were going to live their lives. But I refused. I wanted to sit with my pain, feel every inch of it because at the root of my sadness was my love for Ferris.

When I opened the front door, Ferris's scent welcomed me, and I blinked tears from my eyes. Toeing off my boots, I ignored my bedroom upstairs and headed into the one my mate and I had shared. Wrapping myself in the quilt, I got the phone and tracked my mate's flight.

Ferris texted me when he landed and when Charlie drove him home. It was the early hours of the morning when he got into bed, but he posted a pic of his nightstand. The teddy with my face on it, the bears' bauble, and the jar of honey I'd given him.

We messaged until he fell asleep, and I calculated if I could wind up my life here in less than two weeks.

But as the days passed, it was obvious I'd been too ambitious and I couldn't finish everything in two weeks. We were both disappointed, but we messaged constantly, except when he was working. Phones and sea water weren't great companions.

And I was a little jealous of Hector who'd found a new job on the coast at a small restaurant up the coast from where our mates lived. And he didn't have to pack up his house as his sister was moving in. She'd sold her place, and they'd agreed she'd stay in the house for six months, and after that, Hector would decide to sell or rent it to her permanently.

My distress at being away from my mate was affecting my work. Everything took longer than it should have, and I had to rewrite press releases because they were so muddled.

It was while I was away for three nights, accompanying a client on a press junket, that I made a decision. When I got home, I'd take a week off and fly out and surprise Ferris. And I wouldn't tell Hector because he might tell Charlie, and that guy couldn't keep a secret. I wanted to surprise my mate. Maybe I'd rent a surfboard and sign up for lessons. And when I sauntered onto the beach, wearing my sexy boardshorts, he'd fall into my arms.

Yeah, that was a good plan.

ELEVEN

FERRIS

I hauled myself out of bed as the sun tipped over the horizon.

This was my favorite time of day. The earth was yawning and brushing off the sleepy cobwebs from the night before. Humans hadn't yet started making a racket, and the sunbeams clipped the tops of the waves as they rolled in from the deep to the shore.

But the past few days, I'd had to drag myself from bed to bathroom and then to make coffee. Except after taking a sip, I tossed the rest of the caffeine-infused brew down the sink. Ewww. I brushed my teeth, needing to rid my mouth of the taste.

Did mating a shifter somehow affect my taste buds and now I hated coffee? I'd have to ask Hugo when I next spoke to him. We were juggling life, love, and work, and he was traveling, so we messaged often, though if his client was doing an interview, his phone was on mute, and if I was riding a wave, my device was on shore.

I leaned over the sink, as a wave of nausea, so intense I almost collapsed on the floor and curled into a fetal position, took me in its grip and shook me so my teeth rattled. I sagged against the cupboard and slid onto the tiles, groaning.

There was no way I could conduct a lesson this morning, so I got up and searched for my phone. The sliding doors were open, and the ocean breeze rolled in, helping with the nausea and banishing it.



Maybe I could do the lessons. I hated canceling on students. A quick shower later and sucking on peppermint candy, I locked my condo and headed for the beach.

I wasn't my usual perky self jogging from my place to where I conducted the lessons. And I covered up my yawns and glanced at my watch more than once, hoping the hour was almost up.

We went through the basic steps on the sand by having them lie down in the center of the board with their toes at the end, and then they practiced paddling. From there they got to their knees. In the water, many students toppled off at this stage or the next when they had to keep their knees bent and their body low before standing up. Learning to balance was harder for some of the students than others.

But I got through the morning, and the clients had fun, both of them standing up for the first time and riding a wave. That was a huge accomplishment, and I congratulated them, and they took pics on shore with their boards

A second lesson followed and another. And when I was finally done, the searing sun was sapping my last bit of energy. I grabbed the boards and lugged them off the beach to our store across the road. When I checked my phone, I'd missed a message from Hugo, and now he was on a plane with his client. I texted, telling him I loved him and I was headed home.

My next lessons weren't until late afternoon, and we had staff manning the surf store. Charlie had the day off, so he wasn't around. I got home and crashed into bed, not even bothering to shower off the salty water. Gross, but my exhaustion was real and was weighing on my shoulders and crushing my chest.

A banging on my forehead roused me from sleep, but when I opened my eyes, I couldn't remember what day it was and why I was in bed. I reached out for Hugo but he wasn't there. I was at home by the beach, and he wasn't even in his house but in a

hotel. I couldn't picture him by the fire or standing near the window with a cup of hot cocoa. Instead, he was in an impersonal room that looked like thousands of others around the world.

But the banging continued. "Ferris, it's me. Open up."

Charlie.

I cracked open the door, and he let himself in as I flopped onto the couch and hugged a cushion.

"What's wrong? I heard you came home after your lessons." Charlie peered at me. "You're so pale."

"Tired, and my tummy's all jumbly."

He sat beside me and felt my brow. "No fever." His phone beeped, and his face lit up. It had to be Hector. I was envious that they'd be together soon. He tapped on his phone as I checked my watch and calculated how long I could stay here before going back to work.

Charlie studied a text he just received. "Oh. Ohhh." He glanced at me, his face as pale as I imagined mine was.

My first thought was something had happened to Hugo, and I sat up. "Tell me. Is it bad news?"

"I don't think so." His eyes were wary, and I tried snatching the phone from him but he pulled away. "Hector suggested something."

"Tell me, Charlie." I glowered at him, fury and fear combining inside me. "What did

he say?"

"You and Hugo had sex."

Now my face wouldn't be blanched of color because my cheeks were burning. Not that Charlie and I hadn't discussed sex over the years, but it was awkward, him talking to his mate about Hugo and me fucking.

"Charlie! What does that have to do with anything?" I put the cushion in front of my face.

"Sex leads to—" He waited as if expecting me to finish his sentence.

"Orgasm?" I mumbled, the cushion muffling my words. "Having a good time?" I filled the awkwardness with words, hoping Charlie would say something, but not a sex something. Maybe a different topic.

"Yes to all of the above."

I groaned, wishing he'd leave.

"But also something else? Something small that becomes big? Something expectant."

I tossed the cushion at his head, and because he wasn't a shifter with superior reflexes, it wacked him in the head. Good.

"A baby!" he yelled, his hands in the air.

"Huh?" I'd forgotten the thread of the conversation, but what did babies have to do with me feeling tired and yucky? Oh. Ohhh. I mimicked what Charlie had said. Sex. A lot of sex equaled fun, pleasure, orgasms galore, and could result in pregnancy.

“Could I be pregnant?”

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” Charlie pulled me off the sofa and twirled me around. “You’re pregnant.”

I yanked him to a stop because I was dizzy and my tummy was complaining.

“You don’t know that.” Excitement threatened to bubble out of me and the nausea faded, but Hugo should be the first to know. “I have to tell Hugo and take a test.”

Or take a test and tell Hugo. No, take the test while my mate watched. He wasn’t here, but we could call one another and it would be almost as if he were in the room.

“Test. I need to take a test.”

My mind was whirring. What if I jumped on a plane tonight, and we could be together when we found out?

“Can you cover for me tomorrow? Take my lessons.”

“Sure. You stay in bed.” His furrowed his brow as he studied me. “I know that look. You’re planning something. Spill.”

I told him what I wanted to do, and he said he’d run out and buy the tests while I booked my ticket. But I wanted the whole pregnancy or false alarm experience, so we went together. Neither of us had any idea what we were looking for, and when we found the tests, there were so many, Charlie grabbed a basket and took one of each.

“Not a word to Hector.” Charlie wasn’t good at keeping secrets, and I kinda suspected Hector wasn’t either, at least not when it came to Hugo. I could see him trying not to say anything and Hugo getting suspicious and forcing it out of him.

I sent my mate a text in case he had been delayed and wouldn't be arriving home tomorrow about an hour before my plane landed.

Looking forward to chatting tomorrow when you're home .

Me too. Heading to the airport soon . Miss you and so does my beast .

Charlie dropped me off and told me to text as soon as I confirmed I was pregnant. "Take lots of pics and we'll celebrate when you get back."

My belly was a little queasy, but we'd bought some ginger candy when we were out, Charlie telling me his neighbor used them to quell his nausea when he was pregnant.

I couldn't sleep, counting down the time until I landed.

As I rushed to the exit, hoping I could get a cab straightaway, I checked that my mate's plane had arrived. It had about thirty minutes ago. There was no line for the taxis, and when I gave the driver the address, he looked at me in the rearview mirror.

"I remember you. You were here at Christmas."

"Yes. That trip changed my life, and I fell in love."

"Awww. I'm a romantic at heart. Congrats."

I hoped there'd be another reason to congratulate me, and I checked my bag once more to make sure I had the pregnancy tests. When the taxi rounded the corner and we passed Hector's house, I put my hand on the door, eager to step into the snow and race to Hugo's front door.

The driver told me to have a great day, and I tramped over the path that hadn't been

shoveled. But my mate had only been back a short while. He might be in bed.

“Ferris?” The familiar voice behind me wasn’t the one I was hoping to hear. “What are you doing here? Has there been a change of plans.” Hector checked his phone.

“Yes, I decided to fly out and surprise Hugo.” I pulled his key out of my bag. “I’m going to let myself in.”

“But he’s not here.”

The phone rang as I responded to Hector with, “What?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:02 pm*

TWELVE

HUGO

I sat in the back of the taxi silently urging him to break the speed limit and get to my destination sooner.

It was early and people who worked nine to five might not be up, but people whose jobs didn't fit that schedule had been working all night, while others were just starting their shifts.

My mate and his business partner, Charlie, fit into the latter category, and even their surf shop opened early and closed late. From talking to Ferris, I knew he was teaching a class this morning, so I bypassed his condo and headed to the beach.

I yelled my thanks at the driver after giving him a big tip and ran down to the beach, ignoring the sand that filled my shoes. I waved at someone with a surfboard coming out of the water, but when he turned around it was Charlie. My stomach sank at not catching a glimpse of my mate.

I'd changed my flight at the last minute yesterday, and instead of flying home, I flew to the coast, not wanting to go another day, another hour, or another second without being in Ferris's presence.

Flinging myself over the sand, I shouted, "Ferris, I'm here." But despite being a shifter, my unwieldy suitcase affected my balance, and I ended up face down with a mouthful of sand.

“Hugo!” Charlie didn’t need to shriek. I wasn’t hurt.

Two pairs of hands helped me up. “You okay?” Neither of the people were Ferris.

“Hugo, you shouldn’t be here.”

Really? The beach was public land, but maybe Charlie was annoyed I’d interrupted his class.

“Sorry. Just point me to my… my… Ferris, and I’ll get out of your way.”

Charlie took me aside after telling his students to practice standing up. “He’s not here.”

“At the shop?” I jerked my head at the store that was just visible over the road. Charlie had driven past it the night I was here before Christmas.

“No.” He leaned in close. “He went to see you.” He checked his watch. “He should be arriving at your house about now.”

I stood unmoving, allowing the words to swirl around in my head. He was there to see me, and I was here to surprise him. Fuck! I called him and he answered straight away.

“What?” I heard him yell.

“What?”

“Sorry, babe. I’m talking to Hector.”

“What?”



“Oops. That was supposed to be a secret.” His voice got farther away. “Where is he, Hector? Did Charlie spill? Damn, that man can’t keep a secret.”

“Ferris,” I shouted into the phone.

“Ferris.” That was Hector.

“Is he hiding?” That must have been directed at Hector. His voice got louder as he spoke to me. “Are you in your fur? I can’t see you.”

“I’m not there.”

“He’s not here. I’ve been trying to tell you.” Hector’s voice was coming closer to the phone.

“Ferris, love, can you talk to me?” I had to break the bad news.

“Yeah, I’ve got something to tell you, but I wanted to say it in person which is why I’m here.” He flipped on the camera. “Now come out and I’ll show you what I’ve got in my bag.”

“Love, I’m on the coast. I can see your store, and I’m here with Charlie.”

“What?” He sank onto my front steps. “You’re supposed to be here.”

“I figured I’d surprise you.”

“Well, I’m definitely surprised,” he deadpanned.

“I’ll fly home tonight and be there in the morning.”

“No,” he wailed. “I’ll come back. I want to show you everything I love about the coast and where you’re going to live.”

“Okay.” That made sense. “What were you going to tell me? I’m with you virtually.”

Ferris adjusted the camera as he got off the step and walked around, saying he needed to move. Hector was in the background, and his expression told me he was bursting to tell something to someone.

“What’s Hector doing?”

Ferris moved the camera, and I could no longer see my friend. “Do not look at him. He knows nothing. Not one thing.”

That was odd. The pair got along great at Christmas, but Ferris’s irritated voice suggested my best friend had annoyed him.

“I’m going inside.”

“No.” Now it was Hector’s turn to whine. “I wanted to see Hugo’s reaction.”

“Did you fall down in the snow?” The path was probably treacherous with me being away all week.

“No.” My mate stomped up the stairs and fumbled with the key while holding the phone.

“Forgot your bag.” A shadow passed beside my mate. Hector was helping my mate, but Ferris told him to zip it.

“Lips are sealed,” my friend said as he walked off the deck.

Ferris got the door open, but I was trembling with anticipation wondering what the news was. Charlie had gone back to his class, but he kept glancing at me. Seemed everyone had a clue as to what my mate was going to say except me.

“I sort of hoped we’d be together for this. But I can tell you now and do the test tomorrow at home.”

“Test? Do you need to requalify to be a surfing instructor?”

“Not that sort of test.” He giggled and rummaged around in his bag. He pulled out a bunch of small boxes, but I couldn’t read what was on the packages.

“What are those?” He waved them in front of the phone, but I still couldn’t read them.

“They’re the tests.”

Now I was more confused. What sort of test came in a box that you administered yourself? Unless... unless he was sick. But he’d go to the doctor and a medical professional would take blood or whatever.

“I haven’t been feeling well and?—”

He was ill, and he was doing his own diagnostic tests. I wanted to reach through the phone and hug him.

“You stay there. I’ll come home.”

“I think I’m pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” I must have shouted because Charlie’s students swirled in my direction.

“You’re having a baby? My baby?”

“I don’t know.” He held up the tests. “That’s why I got these.”

I thought back to Hector’s behavior. I loved him, he was my best friend, but I was sad he found out before I did. But I shook off that, especially when Ferris told me Hector had been the one to suggest to Charlie that my mate might be pregnant.

“Should I take the test now or wait until tonight when I get home?”

I wanted to be with him, but being on the phone and seeing the test result was almost as good. And I didn’t think I could wait hours until he flew here.

“I’ll wait.” He put down the tests and said he’d call back once he’d booked the flight and called a cab.

I sat on the sand and shaded my eyes as I stared out to sea. Our child would grow up here, and maybe we could wrangle it so that we could spend part of the year at my place too.

Ferris called, and his face told me he wasn’t pleased. “I can’t get a flight until this afternoon.”

“Okay, there’s food in the freezer, or Hector will make you something.”

There was a banging on the door. It had to be Hector. He’d want to know if we’d taken the test.

“Any news?” Ferris turned the camera around to capture my friend’s face.

“No, he hasn’t taken the test.”

Hector clamped his mouth shut. I knew what he was wanting to say, which was, “Why not?”

“How would you feel if I took the test now?” The phone swung around to my mate. “I can show you first before I look.”

“Or,” Hector butted in, “I’ll hold the camera and you hold the test, Ferris.”

My mate cocked his head. “How will that work?”

“Well, you hold the test up so Hugo can see and... oh right, you can’t see it.”

“I’ll hold the phone and you hold the test, and ummm, yeah, that works, as I can see it and Hugo can too and does that work?” He giggled. “You don’t need to see me pee on the stick, I hope.”

“Nah, I’m good. Wait, is that what you do? How had I reached my mid-thirties and not known that was how those tests worked?” But many shifters went by scent and didn’t bother with a pregnancy test.

“Okay, I’m going.” He gave Hector the phone, and it jiggled until it focused on my friend’s face.

“I’m so excited.” He grinned and checked his watch. “What’s taking him so long?”

His phone beeped. It was Charlie, and he turned on his camera, and now we were all waiting.

“Maybe he didn’t aim properly or he dropped it in the toilet? He is kinda clumsy,” Charlie informed us.

“Am not.” Ferris appeared and said we had to wait. So the four of us waited and waited.

“How much longer?” The baby would be here before we got the results.

“It’s time.”

Everyone argued about who should hold what, but Ferris held the phone and Hector held the test up in front. Charlie complained he couldn’t see, but when Ferris said, “I am,” and I said, “You are,” Hector and Charlie cheered, and my mate told me how much he loved me.

“Come home, Dad. I need to kiss you and Little Bear.” I lowered my voice though Hector would still hear me. “And maybe do other things to you as well.”

THIRTEEN

FERRIS

I'd always bounded out of bed with the sun, eager to start the day and my lessons. In our business, every day was different, and I was never bored or wished I was doing something else.

But now I had to set an alarm, and my mate had to coax me out of bed and put me in the shower while making me my one coffee of the day and an egg sandwich to eat mid-morning when I wasn't so queasy.

Charlie was taking more of my early morning classes and I did the later ones, though sitting in the office where the aromas from the nearby food trucks wafted into our office was worse than teaching people how to stand up on a surfboard.

And Hugo wasn't always at home. He traveled, sometimes twice a month for five days. But if he was working from our condo and he was free around lunch time, he'd come see me at the store, though I didn't have regular lunch breaks either. And if Hector had a day off, he'd often come too.

My folks and little bro had come to stay for a week and everyone got along well. They were thrilled they were going to become grandparents.

"Guess what?" Charlie charged into the store where I had my feet up on a chair and my hands resting on my tiny pregnant belly while I studied my laptop screen.

“Your students all rode a wave for the first time.”

“No. Well, yes, they did.” He waved his hands around as if batting away unnecessary details. “No, I got you and Hugo a present.”

“That’s sweet.” I craned my neck, trying to see what it was, but he wasn’t carrying anything. Maybe it was too big. “Diapers?”

He made a face. Poor Charlie had a problem with poop. I wasn’t sure how he’d cope if he and Hector had kids. “Not for the baby. With the baby. The first family pic.”

“Great, thanks.” That wouldn’t be for a while, because from everything I’d read, we’d be too exhausted to do much except keep the baby clean, fed, and loved. I resumed my work and tapped the computer keyboard.

“Next week.” Charlie yanked a piece of paper from his pocket.

“Not sure how to tell you this, but the baby won’t be here by then.” I pointed to my small bump. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted the baby to come earlier so Hugo and I could meet our Little Bear or for the baby to stay safe inside me for longer. What did I know about being a dad? Besides, the world could be a dangerous place. I wasn’t sure I wanted my child exposed to any of that.

The nickname Little Bear had stuck, even though they wouldn’t meet their beast, assuming they were a shifter, for years.

“No, silly. It’s a pregnancy photoshoot.”

“A what now?”

My friend pulled up a website on his phone and scrolled through images just as Hugo



walked in. I sent him a “help me” look.

“What’s going on?” He leaned down and kissed me and blew another kiss to my belly.

I plastered a smile on my face. “Charlie has given us a gift.” My mate peered around the store until my friend waved the paper under his nose. “A pregnancy photoshoot.”

I expected Hugo to react as I did, but his face lit up and he clapped. “That’s amazing. I love those.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I had a bear shifter friend who did one with his mate.” He shimmied his hips. “And they were naked.”

“So it’s done in a studio or your home?”

“Anywhere you want.” Charlie added. “And you can keep your clothes on.”

That gave me an idea. If I was going to do this, it had to be relevant to our lives, not just be random pics taken of me and my mate and the belly.

Charlie handed me the information and said I had to schedule it and choose the location.

“Okay. Great.” I tried to add enthusiasm to my voice. Charlie went off to help a customer sign up for lessons while Hugo squatted in front of me.

“You don’t want to do this?”

“I don’t get it. You can take pics of my belly. Heck, I’ve taken lots.”

Hugo nibbled a nail. “How will we tell Charlie? We can’t lie and pretend we did the shoot.”

“No, we’re going to do it. It was a kind gesture, and I love him to bits. It would be cruel to refuse and ungrateful.”

“I love you.” He kissed my nose. “You’re a good friend.”

A friend who had to research pregnancy photoshoots.

One week later I was again up at the crack of dawn. But not for a lesson. Today was the big photoshoot, and after I had given it a lot of thought and spoken to the photographer, I had warmed to the idea a little. I wasn’t dreading it, and I was happy because Charlie had given the gift with love.

And the weather was perfect. Yesterday had been stormy, but the clouds cleared and the wind dropped, and I inhaled the fragrance of a brand-new day.

“Do I look okay?” Hugo walked into the bathroom.

“Perfect. Let me zip you up.”

He nuzzled my ear. “I wish you were unzipping me.”

“Later.” I smacked his butt.

We grabbed the food we prepared last night. Now that my nausea was a distant memory, I was hungry first thing, during the day, and had cravings at night.

Hugo drove us to the beach where we met the photographer who it turned out was a shifter. Not a bear shifter. A wolf.

“It’s a beautiful morning, and the light is perfect for the shoot,” Vince, the photographer, said. Hugo raced down from the shop with two surfboards, and we posed next to them, my belly on display covered in my wetsuit. Vince snapped pics of each of us holding a board, with Hugo’s arm wrapped around me, and asked me to move slightly when my mate cupped my belly.

A gentle breeze blew in from the sea, ruffling our hair and bringing with it the salty ocean scent.

“Wait. I almost forgot something.” I rummaged in my bag and pulled out the teddy Hugo had given me with his face on it.

“Awww. That’s so cute.” Vince took more photos of the three of us, no, four: Me, my mate, the bump, and the teddy.

Vince scrolled through the pics he’d taken so far. He would send us everything after the shoot, and we’d choose the ones we wanted.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Hugo shaded his eyes and stared at the small waves that rolled into the beach.

“Yes.” I was only just into my second trimester, and we’d be close to the beach. I knew what I was doing; this was my job. While there was a small risk of surfing in the second trimester, I’d done my research.

Being a shifter, my mate’s coordination was better than most humans, but he hadn’t taken to surfing as easy as Hector did who stood up on his first try. Hugo had to take lessons like everyone else.

We had practiced how we were going to do this on the beach, and when I thought Hugo was ready, we did a few practice runs in the water.

One of our employees brought a tandem surfboard from the store, and I told Hugo to leave the teddy on the beach. That was my security teddy. If I woke up in the middle of the night and Hugo was working away from home, I cuddled him.

“He can watch.”

I couldn’t lie on my belly, so my mate paddled out on the board, and I swam. Vince waded into the water. I heaved myself onto the board behind Hugo as I was the more experienced surfer. I paddled hard since I was at the back, and as we caught a wave, I yelled we had to stand.

The board skimmed over the wave, and Hugo reached behind him and put a hand on my belly. Vince was taking a video and with the sun and the wind behind us, we laughed and shouted, “We did it.”

Early morning walkers, joggers, and dog walkers clapped and cheered.

Vince was wet up to his waist as he waded onto the beach, and Hugo hauled the board onto the sand.

“That was amazing.” Vince played the video for us. “I thought you might have to do it multiple times.”

“Oh my gods, you didn’t tell me you were surfing for your pregnancy photoshoot.” Charlie raced over the sand. “That is so cool.”

I hugged my friend and thanked him for the gift. “I wasn’t sure about it at first.”

“Maybe we’ll get clients asking to learn how to tandem surf.” Charlie did a little dance. “Or pregnancy surfing photoshoots might become a trend and we started it.”

Hugo pulled down his wetsuit so he was bare-chested. He was so hot I wanted to jump him right there, but he was never comfortable in a wetsuit, saying it made him itchy.

“Go home and shower.” I grabbed Teddy and brushed sand off him.

“Can you get time off during the day?” He nuzzled my throat.

“Maybe. What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like to get you naked.” He squeezed my butt, and I draped my arms around his neck.

“That can be arranged.”

FOURTEEN

HUGO

“Today’s the day.” Ferris was leaning over me while I opened my eyes, wondering if I could go back to sleep.

While my mate was no longer surfing, he was still doing classes on the beach, with Charlie or one of their other instructors taking the clients into the water. We all told him he could start paternity leave, but he said the nursery was complete, we had all the clothes, equipment, and paraphernalia, so what was he supposed to do at home?

“Put your feet up,” was my suggestion.

But as my mind processed him saying, “Today’s the day,” I shot up and grabbed the hospital bag, but dropped it as I pulled on sweatpants and a hoodie.

We were having a home birth, like most shifters, but just in case, my mate had packed a bag that included a spare set of car keys, snacks, and the clothes we’d wear to the hospital.

“How far apart are the contractions?”

“Not the baby. The baby shower .”

When Charlie had suggested a shower, my mate was enthusiastic, and the pair had been planning games, decorations, and food for weeks. At human baby showers, the

alpha father often didn't attend, but I wasn't human, and I planned to be there with my mate, celebrating our baby. And Charlie insisted Hector be there too.

He didn't have much choice as it was being held in their condo. We had decided not to find out the baby's sex, and when my mate discovered shifters had their babies at home and many didn't consult a midwife during the pregnancy, he decided to do exactly that, though we did attend birthing classes.

"This is our baby, and I want to be in control during the pregnancy, the birth, and afterward."

Maybe that was one reason he was so excited about the shower.

"Ta-da," Charlie yelled as we walked into their apartment.

"Did you do this?" I turned to my mate.

"I helped plan it, but Charlie and Hector executed those plans."

Garlands had been strung up around the room with images of bear prints and honey pots—my favorite things after my mate and Little Bear.

Packets of homemade cookies shaped like bears and jars of honey were on a sideboard, each labeled with a guest's name.

"Oh, it's the good stuff," I noted as I sniffed the honey.

"Only the best for you, your mate, and Little Bear's baby shower." Hector clapped me on the back. "And the cookies are Ferris's favorite chocolate chip."

Teddy bears were dotted in between greenery on the tables. But while we had

befriended shifters since I moved here, most of Ferris's friends were humans—though he had discovered a couple were shifters. What would they think about the bear-themed shower? Not that it mattered, but it might be a little awkward if someone asked.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Ferris put his head close to mine.

“I doubt it.” I didn’t want my mate thinking I didn’t love and appreciate everything bear.

“Because we call the baby our Little Bear, it seemed appropriate to have the baby shower be all about bears.”

We didn’t have to come up with an excuse or fib. I kissed the top of his head. “I love you.” But as I angled my head, I asked, “Is that a photo booth?”

“It is.” Ferris took my hand. “Let’s take the first pic.”

Outside the booth were bear ears, and we put them on our heads. My beast complained he didn’t like fake ears and he had his own. But I explained that he and I couldn’t be in the photo together.

Ferris and I put our arms around each other, and I smooched my mate’s cheek.

“Ready. On three. One, two, three.” The camera flashed, but rather than wait until the photos were ready, we took more. We made funny faces and poked out our tongues.

Not very bear-like. Why can’t I take a photo with Ferris?

You can. Just not here. Guests will be arriving soon .



I won't forget you promised me a photo .

When the photos came out, they were adorable.

"I'm putting these in the baby book."

I had been taking pics of my mate and his bump every week, and he pasted them in the baby book, preferring a physical one rather than a digital version.

"You'll enjoy the games," Charlie told me as I wandered around the apartment.

People started arriving, and they brought gifts. That part of a baby shower I'd forgotten about. The gift table was groaning by the time everyone sat down.

Charlie took charge and announced the first game was Pin the Tail on the Bear.

"Do bears have tails?" a human guest asked.

I can show them mine. It's small, but it's definitely a tail . My beast was indignant, but I told him most humans had never seen a real bear.

Ferris was first, and I blindfolded him.

"Don't peek," I told him, and everyone laughed. I hovered nearby, my arm just under his elbow in case he tripped. But he pinned the tail on the bear's tummy. My beast cringed and said Ferris should have cheated.

No, we don't do that.

None of the guests were very good at pinning the tail anywhere near where it was supposed to be. Charlie took a turn, and he was perfect .

“You must know a bear,” a human guest said with a laugh.

“I do,” Charlie joked and winked at Hector. “And now it’s time to diaper the teddy bear.”

This was a race, and Hector and I gave each guest a teddy and a small diaper.

“I didn’t know diapers came in this size. Are they just for teddys?”

“Don’t you remember the packets we bought?” Ferris chided me.

Those days when we went shopping for baby stuff were kind of a blur. My mate had a list, and he was on a mission to buy everything on the list. I was the porter who carried the goods to the car.

“I do, but I didn’t recall they were teeny.”

As this was a timed activity, Hector held his phone, ready to start the “diaper race.”

“Ready, set, go,” he yelled.

There was a lot of cursing, fumbling, shrieking, and laughing. Even Ferris who’d been practicing wasn’t that great, and we all clapped the eventual winner.

“Who likes gummy bears?” Charlie held up a jar full of the candy bears. “The lucky winner who guesses the correct number, gets to take these home.”

Yum. I loved gummies, and I hoped Ferris would win, but he said he was sitting this one out as he had been with Charlie when he was putting them in the jar.

“Can I play?” I asked

“Of course.”

“Me too.” Hector loved gummies as much as I did.

Charlie handed everyone paper and a pen, and we wrote a number, making sure no one else could see what we wrote. We went around the room calling out our numbers, and while no one got it right, Hector was the closest. He cheered and brought the jar to me.

“I know how much you like gummies, so this is for you, Hugo.”

Charlie announced it was time to eat. Hector and I shared a few of the gummy bears, and I joined my mate as we filled our plate with yummy treats.

Before the guests departed, Ferris made a little speech. “I just wanted to say how much we, and our Little Bear,” he cradled his belly, “appreciate your friendship and your gifts. I had so much fun. Thank you.”

Ferris leaned on me as the last guest departed. “I’m pooped. Thank you so much, Charlie.” My mate hugged his best friend.

Charlie urged us to go home, saying he and Hector would clear up. Ferris protested, but his protest was interrupted by a huge yawn.

“Go. You can collect the gifts tomorrow or we’ll bring them to you.”

“That was a great afternoon.” Ferris rubbed his tummy. “My belly is kinda tight. What’s up with that?” He grunted as we left Charlie’s place and walked to the elevator. He sagged against me and squeezed my hand, digging his nails in and squealing.

“Owww. That hurt.”

“Ferris, did you just have a contraction?”

“Nope, I did not. My due date isn’t for two weeks.”

“Okay.” We’d both read the books and watched the videos and attended the birthing classes—shifter ones, so we were both aware babies didn’t respect schedules or due dates. They came when they were ready.

“I just need to soak in a warm bath to ease my aching muscles.”

The elevator door opened, but Ferris had his head down, and tiny moans escaped his lips.

“What’s going on?” Hector’s shifter hearing must have picked up us talking.

“Ferris is in labor.”

“I might not be.” He stood up straight but cringed a moment later.

“Owww! Owww! Hugo. It’s the baby. I am in labor.”

Gods, we weren’t at home, and what if we had to go to the hospital? Charlie joined Hector and guided Ferris into their apartment.

“Today really is the day!”

FIFTEEN

FERRIS

“Maybe we should go to the hospital.”

I’d been fine when we discussed having the baby at home as most shifters did. But now that giving birth was a reality, Hugo was panicking a little. Not that most humans would notice but his breathing had sped up, and he was clenching and unclenching his hands.

“I’m a little scared and a lot excited.” A contraction gripped my belly, and I leaned my head on my mate’s chest. “Okay, add to that I’m in a lot of pain. But my body can do this. It knows what to do.”

Hugo put his arms around me.

“And if you’re here helping me emotionally, I can do this. We can do it together.”

The way his face blanched of color didn’t assure me he was as confident as I was, but he would recover and rally his strength.

“If you are sure.” He placed a hand on either side of my face and our gazes locked on one another. There was the Hugo I mated. He exhaled and nodded.

“What I didn’t expect was to give birth in Charlie and Hector’s place.” And surrounded by all things bear. The first scent the baby would get a whiff of—other

than their two dads—would be honey. Maybe that was appropriate, as there would be a lot of it in our child's life.

“Better get used to it, kid,” I whispered to my bump

“Do you want us to leave?” Charlie and Hector were dragging a mattress into the living room from their spare bedroom, while saying I could use their bed if I wanted to.

I wanted to walk, and stop, and lean on my mate, grunt and groan as the contractions took hold of my belly. Being in the bedroom wasn't where I wanted to be. Hugo cleared a space on the floor, and as I gazed at the decorations and the remnants of food, I couldn't think of a better place to bring my baby into the world.

But having my best friend support me and my mate's bestie by his side was perfect, as Hugo had no close relatives and my family were hours away. Charlie and Hector were our found family.

“I'll boil water.” Hector headed into the kitchen.

“What is that for?” Hugo hissed at me. “Humans always do that on TV.”

“It's for the tea they drink afterward,” Charlie said confidently as he placed a mattress protector over the mattress and covered it with a sheet and blankets. “Did you want a rolling pin?”

Hugo looked at me. “Please tell me you're not planning on cooking while giving birth?”

That hadn't been included in our birthing classes, but Charlie and I had read about it one day at the store. We'd made jokes about rolling out pastry that we'd eat after the

baby arrived.

But my reply stuck in my throat as a cramp squeezed my belly. Hugo helped me onto the mattress, and I got on hands and knees and panted. But I was still dressed, and when the contraction passed, my mate removed my clothes.

“Help me up, love. I want to walk.”

We paced around the living room, and I gazed out the sliding doors, past the balcony to the ocean. Back and forth the waves went, and I calmed my breathing so it was in time with the sea rolling toward the beach.

The beach has always been the place where I was happiest, and now the ocean, along with Hugo at my side, helped keep me present, to stop my emotions wrecking havoc and freaking me out as to how I was going to push a baby out of me.

“Ice.” My mouth was dry, bottom of a bird cage dry. Charlie gave my mate a cup of ice chips, and I sucked on a few, the frozen liquid partly quenching my thirst.

The next contraction almost split my body in two, or that was how it felt. Now I was a little afraid. My baby was being pushed down the birth canal, and what if I couldn’t perform the last part? Oh gods. Now I was panicking, and it bubbled up my throat, threatening to choke me.

I twisted around, clutching Hugo’s shirt in my fists. “What if... what if... I c-can’t do this?”

Maybe it was the terror in my eyes or the way my face was twisted, but instead of freaking, my mate did the opposite. He turned me to face the water.

“Do you remember when you learned how to surf? How long it took and how many

times you fell?”

I panted, and with each gasp of air, I recalled my frustration at falling off the board but also my determination to get back on and try again.

This pain had a purpose; to bring our baby into the world. I'd told Hugo my body knew what it was doing, and it did. But my head and befuddled thoughts kept getting in the way. Reaching that point didn't make the pain disappear. It was with me every step of the way, but I tried to see us as partners with the same aim; a healthy baby.

“Help me onto the mattress, love.” It was time to push, and soon we'd meet our child.

I got on my hands and knees but had my mate help me onto my back. He sat behind me so I rested on his chest. He put his hands on the bump.

“I feel that,” he whispered as a cramp took hold of me. I bit back a snarky response, because he didn't feel what I did, and pushed. Nothing happened. Even though we'd been to birthing classes, I still sort of expected the baby to pop out after a couple of pushes.

“Charlie, look and tell me if you see the baby.”

“Not yet.”

I tried to tamp down the panic that was threatening to take hold of me. Where was the baby? Charlie should be able to see my little one?

More pushing, but what was the point? Negative thoughts penetrated my mind, and my breathing was coming in spurts and starts.

“Breathe with me.” Hugo took long deep breaths in and out, in and out, and at first I



didn't copy him. It was too hard. But he rested his head on my shoulder and kept repeating, "In and out."

More pushing, and Charlie shouted, "I see something."

"Like what?" Was he looking out the window at a boat? One of the decorations which had floated loose and was blowing around the room? Or was he talking about the baby? I couldn't separate reality from panic.

"Hair. Pretty sure it's the baby's hair."

"Well, if someone else is in there, they can get out right now!" I was in no mood for silliness.

"Push, Ferris." That was Charlie, and after two more big pushes, he yelled he could see the baby's head.

"Our baby has a head, Hugo. Did you hear that?" I was doing something right.

But I'd used so much energy, I was flagging—probably all the cupcakes I ate at the shower—and when I grunted as a cramp took me in its grip, Hugo yelled, "Push," and again, "Push."

"The baby's head is out."

I'd almost done it. The hard part was done, sort of.

"Hector, bring me a blanket."

I lifted my head as my bestie draped the blanket over his hands, and I reached down and pushed the baby out of me.

“It’s a boy.”

“A boy,” Hugo and I said together.

Charlie wrapped up our little one and placed him on my chest before he and Hector left the room.

“Hello, Little Bear.” I rested my head on his head, inhaling his scent and kissing him. I never wanted to be apart from him and envisioned us living in Charlie’s living room forever. “Unwrap him, love. I want to see him.”

“He has ten toes and ten fingers.”

“What does your bear say?” I couldn’t imagine a shifter’s animal meeting a baby who might eventually have an animal inside him. It boggled my mind.

“He can’t speak. He’s too in awe of our son.”

Yummy smells were coming from the kitchen, and I hoped whatever they were cooking was for me, for us. Giving birth had made me ravenous.

“Does he look like a Julius?” I stroked the baby’s jaw.

“I think he does. What do you say, little man?” Hugo was now beside me, both of us on pillows and covered in a blanket.

Our son yawned and closed his eyes. “Is that a yes or a no?” Hugo asked.

“If he didn’t like it, he’d be complaining, so I take that as a yes.”

“Welcome to the world, Julius.” Hugo kissed our son’s tummy. “But I might call you

Little Bear sometimes.”

“I wonder how soon we can get him surfing?” I mused. I’d learned in my teens, but I wanted our son to have lessons long before that.

“Are you going to be a surfer, Little Bear?” Hugo grabbed his phone.

“What are you doing?” I strained my head to see the display.

“Checking if there are baby surfboards.”

SIXTEEN

HUGO

“Hard to believe a year ago you were still in Daddy’s belly”

I blew raspberries on my son’s tummy as he giggled and kicked his legs. I finished putting on his diaper—I’d become an expert in the last 364 days—and could undo, wipe, put on diaper cream, and get a clean diaper done up in less than a minute. I figured I could try for a world record in one of those diaper-fastening competitions.

I’d finished dressing Julius, my precious Little Bear, when Ferris poked his head in the nursery. “Ready?”

“How’d I do?”

“Awww. He looks so cute.” Ferris picked up Julius and kissed him. Our son snuggled against my mate’s chest. “Hello, Little Bear.”

The nickname we’d given Julius before he was born kinda stuck. And while we wouldn’t find out for sure if he was a bear shifter, my beast insisted he was, saying he could scent his beast who was in a deep sleep.

We weren’t doing a formal birthday party but meeting Charlie and Hector on the beach. They were setting up an umbrella and bringing most of the food, while my mate and I had baked a cake. A chocolate cake with honey and lots of frosting.

I shook the snow globe at Little Bear, the one I'd had made especially. It contained a miniature house, plus two dads and a baby.

"Don't forget the ears." Ferris scooped up the baby bag and headed for the front door.

Before I met Ferris, I'd never considered mating a human. Not that I was against it, but I assumed if I met my fated mate, he'd be a shifter. Not necessarily a bear, but he'd have had a beast inside him. But I couldn't imagine a shifter being any more accommodating with my honey obsession and love of all things bear than my human mate.

"How do I look?" I popped on my bear ears, then got the smaller pair for our Little Bear and adjusted them. "How do we look? Cute?" I took our son from my mate.

"Beyond cute. Adorable." Ferris snapped a pic.

"Your turn." I handed my mate his ears, and he put his at a jaunty angle and posed while I took his photo.

When we arrived at the beach, I got all of the baby's paraphernalia out of the car. Who knew tiny people needed so much stuff? And so many clothes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Charlie whined as he lay on a towel under the umbrella, a large sun hat over his head.

Our friend was pregnant and suffering terrible nausea. He lifted the hat and glowered at my mate.

"You were with me the day I found out!" Ferris dug in his bag and handed Charlie ginger candy. "This will help."

"Doubt it." Charlie sat up and sucked the hard candy. "Not until the baby is in my

arms.”

“Anyone hungry?” Hector held out a plate of bear-shaped sandwiches, and poor Charlie turned green.

“Maybe you should stay home this afternoon.” Ferris munched on a sandwich and broke off a little for our son.

“No. I want to come. Maybe the lower temperature will make me feel better.”

“If we want to get to our second activity, we should get this first one started.” I handed Hector my phone.

“Stay here, sweetheart.” My friend lifted his mate’s hat, kissed him, and replaced the hat. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Charlie mumbled.

Ferris rubbed sunscreen on Little Bear’s face, but our son didn’t like it and squirmed. I sang his favorite song and bounced him on my knee while my mate placed a hat on him. Ferris bopped our son on his head, put on Julius’s life vest, and pronounced him ready.

My mate grabbed the tandem surfboard as onlookers oohed and ahed about us in wetsuits and wearing our bear ears. They took pics, and Ferris waved as if he was a celebrity. More people gathered. I was the PR guy and yet I was weirded out by all the attention my family was getting.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have worn the ears.”

What? How can you say that?

Seriously? You're the one who always complains about the fake ears and paws .

Yeah, but I'm not about to put on a wetsuit and get on that damned board .

Instead of paddling out, my mate had to swim beside the board because I sat on it with our Little Bear against my chest in a baby carrier. Julius kicked his little legs and gurgled as we bounced over the ocean.

"This is far enough."

My mate turned the board around, got on it behind us, and waited. "Okay, here comes a wave." He paddled, then stood up, and wobbled a little. I held Little Bear tightly, and we caught the wave.

Little Bear loved the water, and this wasn't his first time on a surfboard. But we planned on doing a video every birthday with us as a family.

"That was so cool." Hector rewound the video for us. "I hope Charlie will teach our son to surf."

"Charlie might never stand up and not feel dizzy again at this rate." Ferris's bestie was attempting to sit up.

"You don't need to come with us." Ferris put an arm around Charlie's shoulder. "Go home. Ernest and Josie have the shop under control, and Jake is taking today's lessons."

"No, I want to come with you. It's the start of a new tradition."

"Okay." Ferris put his head against Charlie's. "I'm glad you'll be there."

Looking at their close friendship, I got all warm and melty inside, hoping Little Bear

and Hector and Charlie's child would be as good friends as their dads were.

"We'll meet you there." I waved to our friends as we headed to the car. We had to go home and shower and change from our wetsuits into something more suitable to where we were going.

Ferris and I had worked out a schedule in conjunction with Hector and Charlie. While we lived at the beach most of the year, we had agreed to spend some time in Hector's and my hometown.

Charlie and Ferris's business now had enough employees that they could take a month off over the Christmas season. And my PR work slowed over the holidays. Hector had left the restaurant and had a food truck business. It was a huge success, and he now had four trucks. Again, he had reached a point where he could take time off and his employees would keep the business running.

But as it wasn't winter, we couldn't celebrate Julius's birthday in the snow in my hometown, so we did the next best thing: We were going to Snow World. It was an amusement park with snow slopes, toboggan runs, an ice skating rink, and enough snow to make snowmen and have snowball fights.

We could rent jackets, hats, pants, scarfs, and mittens there, but Ferris always said they were gross because we didn't know what other people had done to them.

My beast agreed, saying he could scent some of the yuck when we were there last time.

Great, now I'd look at everyone in their rented clothes and think of the big yuck.

We met our friends at the door and showed our tickets on the phones. A blast of cold air hit us in the face.



I've decided I'm a coastal bear, not a snow bear .

Were you ever? My beast had always complained about the cold weather.

We weren't going to take Julius ice-skating. I wasn't great at it and needed to take lessons before taking my son on the ice. Charlie and Ferris were really good skaters. Not surprising, as surfing required excellent balancing skills.

But there was a gentle toboggan slope, with toboggans suitable for little ones and their parents.

"Look, Little Bear." I lay down in the snow and flapped my arms and legs. "Snow angels."

Julius who had just started walking toddled over to me and collapsed on his butt. He lay down and wriggled his arms and legs, giggling the whole time. Ferris lay on the other side of him and made a snow angel. Charlie, who had some color in his cheeks, took pics, and Hector videoed us.

"Time for Julius's first snowman."

I placed some snow in my son's hand, and he tried to eat it. Luckily my shifter reflexes stopped him.

Ewww. My poor bear almost fainted at the thought of Julius putting that in his mouth.

Little Bear crawled over the snow to where the four of us were making a snowman.

"Shells for eyes and mouth." I pulled them out of my pocket.

"And don't forget seaweed for his scarf." Ferris draped the seaweed around the snowman's neck.

“I remember making your first snowman.” I hugged my mate tight.

Ferris pulled up the pics on his phone. “Me too. I’ll never forget how I met a bear that night.”

“Oh, look. They’re like the three bears,” a little boy called out. “The big bear, the middle sized bear, and the baby bear.”

I’d forgotten we’d put the bear ears over our beanies.

“We are.” Ferris hugged me, and I put an arm around my mate and our little bear. “And we’re all just right.”