



Wrong Number, Right Bear: An MM Mpreg Shifter Romance (Dial M For Mates Book 1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Sometimes the wrong number is the exact one you need.

Who is the fool who left their phone on vibrate during the most important presentation of their career? Yep, that's right. Me. And it would be fine if the blasted thing wasn't blowing up during the QA. Whoever is calling me better have a true emergency on their hands, because if they don't, they're going to the land of the blocked.

The room finally clears, and I discover my phone is filled with picture after picture of adorable kittens in a box. WTH? And then I scroll back far enough to see the initial message. Some guy got this number from an answering service and thought he was calling a rescue. I'm no rescue, but I know a thing about abandoned kittens, and something tells me this wrong number isn't an accident at all... it's fate.

Total Pages (Source): 24

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

Going to the dumpster often resulted in finding pretty cool things—gross things too, but also the odd treasure. Unlike many people, I didn't mind the task. I considered it almost an adventure.

Over the years I'd found a mid-century modern lamp, and it fetched me \$500 on eBay, a coffee table that I was able to fix up and use myself, and one time I even found a box filled with someone's complete set of hardcover fantasy books. That find was one of my favorites. I had countless hours of enjoyment reading between those covers. And then there was the day I found a person dumpster diving and nearly jumped out of my skin.

I considered myself ready for anything when I took the garbage out.

I was so not prepared for today.

Carrying three heavy bags, I didn't really see much of anything as I walked. I kept my eyes focused on the dumpster and called it good. That was a mistake. I tripped on trash someone was too lazy to put inside the metal box and toppled over.

"That's what I get for not looking," I grumbled, glad that the garbage I was carrying both broke my fall and was office trash, not from a restaurant.

I rolled off the bags to right myself and caught the corner of a box with my foot.

"Fuck." Could today get any worse? "Why are people so freaking irresponsible?"

I got my trash and what I'd tripped over and went to grab the box, intending to break

it down and make sure no one else got hurt. Only when I opened it, four little balls of fur popped their heads out.

“What the...?” I scooped one of the kittens up. “Where is your mama?”

I set the little one back in the box and looked around for anything that would give me a clue as to who those little guys belonged to. Nothing. And no sign of their mother. Someone had abandoned them.

My knowledge of kittens included that they were cute and got into mischief. That was the sum total. I couldn’t tell if they were old enough to be away from their mama. I looked back in the box for any food or water, but there were not even any remnants.

“Well, I need to find you a home.” There was zero chance that I was going to leave them there.

I grabbed the box and went back into my office. I wasn’t going to leave them in the garbage, that was for sure.

“I thought you were taking the garbage out, not in,” Sarah, one of my coworkers, teased.

“Not garbage.” I set the box on her desk and opened it up.

“People really do that?” She was every bit as appalled as I was. “The poor babies.”

“Apparently. Do you know anything about kittens?”

“I know about puppies. They can’t be that different, can they?” I was confident that they were very different. “Are you going to keep them?”

“No. I need to find someone to take them.” I wasn’t sure who that would be. There was a shelter in town I planned to call, but aside from that, I was lost. Fingers crossed they had room.

“Don’t call animal control.” She reached in the box and petted the most active kitten who was peering around, taking in the new surroundings.

I wasn’t loving that they weren’t moving around a lot. But then again, human babies slept a lot, right? Maybe they were just exhausted. Or maybe they were sick or dehydrated. There were so many possibilities, and until I found someone who could educate me, I was at a loss.

“Because?”

“Because they do a cost analysis to decide which ones are going to be given treatment, and it’s kitten season. I saw something about it on the news.”

I had no idea what kitten season was, but it didn’t sound good.

“Okay, so no animal control.” Even though it sounded like a rumor, I wasn’t willing to risk it. “I’m going to ask Ken for the rest of the day off to deal with this.”

He was probably going to be pissed, but oh well. What was the other option? To let them go hungry and die in the box under my bed while I organized the latest data? No, thank you. Not going to happen.

“Let me know how it goes. I’d offer to take them, but my apartment has a strict no-pet policy. They even gave crap to someone with a service dog and they can’t legally do that. I can’t imagine the fees that would rain down if I had four bundles of cuteness living with me.”

She picked the little one up that she'd been petting and snuggled them close. "You be good, now."

She set the kitten gently back into the box, and I marched straight to my boss's office. The door was open, and he waved me in.

"Delivery?" he asked.

"No. I found this by the dumpster. Want to see what's inside?" I set it on his conference table.

"Do I?" Ken was already crossing the room to look.

"Maybe. It might make you sad."

I opened the box, and his face fell. "Those were thrown away?"

I nodded.

"Have you called animal control?"

I filled him in on what Sarah had told me.

"Take administrative leave and see what you can do."

Best. Boss. Ever.

Kittens in tow, I went to my car, and once they were settled beside me, I looked up the directions to the nearest shelter. It was closed one day of the week... today. Because of course it was. Thankfully there was a second in the next suburb over, and I pulled up the address.

I was expecting the kittens to be loud. They weren't. They weren't active either. Each mile I drove, that made me more nervous. When I pulled into the shelter's parking lot, relief flooded into me. Someone here would help them.

"I'm here with some kittens," I told the man at the front counter.

"No surrenders today. We're full." He barely looked up. Jerk.

"I'm not... They aren't mine. I found them by the dumpster at work, and I think something is wrong with them."

That caught his attention.

"You want us to put them down?"

"No!" Gods, no, I refused to let them do that. "No. Absolutely not. I want someone to take care of them and find them a new home."

He shook his head. "We have no room. It's kitten season. We're overflowing with them." And finally, I understood what the term meant. All the stray cats were having kittens. Ugh.

"What am I supposed to do?" I had no idea what my next step should be.

"Call around?"

A woman came out wearing scrubs. "I'm done for the day."

"See you tomorrow, Dr. Jan."

"Doctor? Are you a vet?" Of course she was. Who else would be called a doctor? But

I was desperate.

“I am. Why?” She looked at me and the box.

I related the story, and while she couldn’t get them into the shelter, she offered to take them out back and look them over. The hour she was there was so stressful. I had assumed it would be a case of ten minutes and done.

When she came back with them she was smiling. “They’re healthy, but were they ever hungry. I fed them.” She set the box down. “Here’s a card for a rescue that should be able to help and instructions if you end up keeping them longer.”

I teared up with relief. “Thank you so much.” I took out my wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing. I’m a volunteer.” She smiled. “But if you want to donate to the shelter, I’m sure they would appreciate it.”

I did and brought the kittens out to the car. Unlike before, they were full of energy. They must’ve just been hungry.

“Okay, guys. Let’s see about finding you a place to stay.” I started the car to make sure there was some airflow for the kittens and called the cat rescue.

It rang and rang and rang, and after a weird click, someone answered. It was an answering service. Great.

“Hi, I’m Theo, and I found a box of kittens at my work’s dumpster, and the vet at the shelter said you might be able to help.”

“What is your message?”

“I need to talk to someone.” I pleaded my case.

She asked me to leave a message.

I pleaded some more.

She asked me to leave a message.

I cried.

She gave me the emergency phone number to call, and when I did... mailbox full.

“Okay, little ones, let’s get you out of here and into some decent light. It’s time to take some pictures that no one can refuse.” I wasn’t going to let a full mailbox let me down.

Not when I could text them adorableness that no one could ignore.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

This can't be happening.

I'd been preparing this presentation for weeks. Me and my team had spent weekends and late nights perfecting it, doing dummy runs and checking the time, the slides, what worked and what didn't. We'd brought other employees in to criticize anything and everything, from my delivery, to the content, to the quality of the slides.

We'd planned for disasters such as the power going off or someone drilling next door, as well as a fire alarm. Not much we could do about the latter except continue my presentation at a fast food joint down the street. All the cables were taped down because I didn't want to trip or land head first on the carpet, and we'd even prepared for the wifi wobbling.

I'd memorized what I was going to say, though in a presentation it wasn't necessary, and often, sounding as though you were giving a prepared speech turned off the recipients. I had to be flexible, and if people started side-eying one another or checking their phones, I had to change tack and drag their attention back to what I was saying.

My team had flung every possible question they could think of so I wouldn't be caught out umming and ahing, though as one of my mentors used to say, "You don't have to have all the answers. It's not possible."

The purpose of the presentation was a new project we were hoping to get. We were pitching to win a contract to construct a new museum, a project that would take years to complete. It would lift our firm into the stratosphere in terms of profit.

Everyone filed in, and they were welcomed with coffee, tea, and bakery treats, and despite my nervousness and sweaty palms, my voice was clear. I didn't cough or have to clear my throat—gross—and I had everyone's attention.

But as I got close to the end, a rattle almost interrupted my train of thought. I kept it together and didn't miss a beat as I used a laser pointer on the screen. It was my phone, and I'd left it beside the computer, thinking I'd turned it off, but I must have put it on vibrate.

Damn, all that hard work and not one of us had considered me being a fool. I slipped it in my pocket, hoping with the lights turned down, no one would pick up on my mistake. And while it was no longer jiggling on a hard wooden surface, it was vibrating against my side.

It was a little ticklish, but I ended my talk and adjusted the lighting, while hoping whoever was sending me messages would give up. At least until my audience had finished with their questions.

Predictably, with a budget of millions of dollars, they didn't go easy on me, pummeling me with questions, wanting to drill down on our time frame and budget. I'd done many presentations since taking this job of project manager, and I was prepped for chaos, but the vibrations in my pocket came close to making me giggle. I tried to catch the eye of my assistant, hoping he'd take the device outside, but he couldn't decipher my expression. I didn't blame him.

Come and get this damned phone wasn't easy to communicate with just my gaze.

The questions didn't let up, and I stood in front of the people who could make or break my career trajectory for over an hour, and when they were done, they huddled together outside the conference room.

We wouldn't get an answer today and maybe not this week, as there were other companies vying for the job. I didn't want to grab my phone because the universe would choose that moment for the people we'd pitched to charge back into the room and toss more questions at me.

But I slid my hand into my pocket and turned the phone off. Peace reigned, at least in my clothing, though my bear was bored with being inside and asked if we could go out.

I need fresh air.

Later.

The guy in charge of the project poked his head back in the room, thanked me and the team, and said, "We were very impressed. You'll be hearing from us."

My boss escorted the group to the elevator, and when the doors closed, me and the team high-fived one another. We might not get the job, but we'd done a great job.

"Well done, everyone. Lunch is on me."

Everyone clapped at my boss's generous offer, and they filed out of the room as I turned on the phone, anxious to discover who was so eager to get hold of me.

"That includes you, Carlton." My boss held the conference room door open and jerked his head toward the elevator where my team was whooping and hugging one another. It was a little early for a celebration, but we had worked so hard, drank too much coffee, and eaten a lot of pizza and donuts that my stomach would welcome a nutritious meal.

All I got was a peek at the number on my phone. Not my parents and not my brother.

My folks would have called. They hated texting, and my brother never messaged either, often phoning in the middle of work. Just because he worked from home, he assumed I could put up my feet, have a coffee, and chat to him when he was on a break.

Throughout the meal, I was itching to check the messages, but in between us demolishing the platters of food, there were speeches and cheers, especially when the boss gave us the rest of the day off.

“I know you were at the office all weekend and late last night. You deserve to go home early.”

I caught the eye of my assistant, Doug. There had been many weekends and all-nighters, but we weren’t about to point that out to the boss.

Outside the restaurant, some of the team called rideshares, others walked to the subway, and a handful headed to their cars or to school to pick up their kids. I’d left my laptop at the office, and the boss chose to walk back with me. With him at my side, I couldn’t check my messages. Was the universe conspiring against me? Maybe I’d won the lotto and only had a short time to confirm I’d received the message.

The phone weighed heavy in my pocket as we took the elevator to our office on one of the highest floors. It was crowded and it stopped so frequently, I cursed the little dinging sound. I studied the floor selection buttons on the control panel and counted each floor as we zoomed upward.

As it was only my team who’d been given the afternoon off, the boss was met with employees asking questions and waving letters for him to sign. I excused myself and shut the door to my office. Sinking onto the chair, I tapped the last message, expecting to be greeted with a wall of text.

Instead, it was a picture of kittens. Four of them in a box.

Cats, my bear sniffed. He wasn't fond of felines, neither the domesticated variety nor the big wild kind.

The kittens were very young, barely old enough to leave their mom, if that. They were adorable, despite my bear saying he didn't trust anything that said, "Meow."

I scrolled back to more kittens and yet more. When I finally reached the initial message, I skimmed the text. Whoever had sent it had gotten my number from a messaging service thinking it was an animal rescue.

I rubbed my brow, wishing I'd been able to respond earlier. If it'd been an ordinary day in the office, I could have called the guy, told him his mistake, and given him the number of a rescue where my friend volunteered.

"Carlton!"

My boss's secretary burst in without knocking. "The boss needs to see you." He gripped the door handle, his eyes dancing as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "The boss has heard from the company you pitched to and they've got more questions."

It was lousy timing, but I couldn't ignore it saying I had kittens to save. With my laptop tucked under my arm, I sent a quick text saying I'd be in touch after work.

Putting the phone in my pocket where it had spent a large part of the day, I stalked toward the boss's office, wishing my team were here and I had five freaking minutes to call the panicked guy who was wrangling a bunch of stray kittens.

"It's promising that they have more questions." My boss waved his hand, indicating I

should close the door. “But it was fate that you had to come back to the office, otherwise, I’d have had to haul you in from home.”

I sighed because I doubted I was getting out of here before five. But he was right about one thing.

It was fate that I’d been the one to get the messages about the kittens.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

I spent far too long staring at my phone, waiting for a response. It was complete bullshit that a rescue didn't answer their messages. Their job was literally to save animals. Or maybe it was to save animals during their limited office time.

Was I being fair to them? No, I absolutely was not. Odds were the rescue was a thousand percent staffed by volunteers who were donating their time and money. They didn't owe anyone 100% round-the-clock access. That didn't stop me from freaking out over them not replying. I had no idea what to do with the kittens. Sure, they were cute, and I could talk to them in a super-sweet sing-songy voice all day long, but that didn't keep them alive. I was lost in that department and needed a solution, and fast.

"Don't worry, guys, I'll figure something out." I wasn't sure what that something would look like, but it was a promise I planned to keep.

I looked at my phone again. Still no reply. The day was ticking away, too. There had to be another rescue, or possibly a shelter. I could drive a decent distance if need be.

The next hour was spent researching with two kittens sound asleep on my lap. They had been meowing, begging to get out, and I did not have the ability to ignore them. Their little cries broke me, and if they'd asked me to take over the world next, I'd have been planning my attack. I was such a pushover.

And yeah, my youth might've been spent watching too many fantasy and sci-fi TV shows, but I was fine with that. Much more fine than I'd be if the kittens started to talk about world domination.

I found three more shelters; two were completely full, and one had a residency requirement. Zero of them were any help other than to deny the kittens a chance. I'd been so oblivious to the world of shelters and how much they struggled. It was heartbreaking.

When the rescue still hadn't called me back and I knew we were getting close to feeding time, I popped them back in the box and drove across town to the pet center that was always on the radio. It was a grand idea. Or so I thought.

The road it was on was under construction, and when I finally reached the plaza, the kittens were pleading for attention. But the parking lot was empty.

"What the?" Assuming it might've been that people were unwilling to navigate through construction chaos, I made sure the kittens were all secure in the box and carried them out of the car and to the front entrance.

The front entrance that proudly announced: Closed for renovations. Please visit one of our other locations throughout the state.

That sounded fine and dandy, until I discovered their "other locations" were exactly one location and a four-hour drive... each way.

"Okay, little ones, this is not going to cut it." And back into the car we went. "Don't worry, I'll find someplace to get what you need before we go home."

Home? Where did that come from? They weren't all coming home with me... except they were. There was no way I was going to take them to a shelter that wasn't no-kill and the rescue was a dud. The only other option was that I became the proud papa of a bunch of fur babies, super adorable ones that I wanted to snuggle and cuddle and throw toy mice for.

“Guess you’re mine now.” Which meant I needed to call a vet. I wasn’t sure how booked up they got, but if they were anything like human doctors, it could be a while before we got in. “I’ll find us a new pet store after I make a phone call.”

It turned into five, but I did manage to get a vet, and they also recommended a large pet store and we were on our way, making a pit stop for some water at a drive-through. They weren’t interested in it, but I’d have felt bad not offering.

When I pulled into the parking lot, I decided to offer the kittens water again, and this time not only did they not want it, but I managed to spill it on the inside of the box. Great.

“Now how am I going to carry you inside? This thing will fall apart, and if it somehow managed not to, people would think you peed on it.” They were too busy curling up on the dry part of the cardboard to notice me talking.

It took a few seconds for me to come up with a plan, a brilliant one... probably. The little ones were so tiny they could fit into my coat pockets. It would be all snug and warm in there and they’d take a nap while I filled my cart and done.

“Come on, purr-ty ones, it’s time to go and buy you... I don’t know what. Maybe they’ll have a list for new pet parents the way box stores had lists for school supplies at the beginning of term.”

I had them each settled in, grateful that I had both two outside and two inside pockets for them, and headed to the entrance, when my phone began to ring.

“Hel... Hello.” I was not a fan of talking on the phone, and while I planned to walk around and help the kittens sleep, they were not asleep yet, and there were cars. Multitasking was one thing. Multitasking when there were huge vehicles that could run your sweet little furballs over if you lost concentration was another.

“Hi. This is Carlton. You phoned me before lunch.”

Before I could respond to him, one kitten in my inside pocket started to climb out.

“No, sweetie, you can’t do that.”

The next aisle over, a car decided right then and there to show me how bad things could be as they backed into the cart return, three other cars slamming on their brakes to avoid hitting them.

“Where are you?” he asked.

The accident had me momentarily forgetting that he was on the line. Not that I knew who he was just yet.

“I’m outside a pet store.” I looked around to make sure the coast was clear and crossed over to the walkway in front of the store. At least that would be safe-ish.

“It’s... it’s Puppy something.”

Why was I telling him that? He still hadn’t mentioned who he was. I glanced at the phone, and then looked at my text messages, relief filling me as I saw they were the same. This was the cat rescue. Which also meant that maybe I wasn’t taking the kittens home.

I very much didn’t like the thought of that. But I did need this man’s help. I read the sign above the entrance.

“Love,” I said, and then, sensing a weird silence between us and overthinking my answer, quickly clarified. “Puppy Love.”

He didn’t wait a single beat before saying, “I’m coming. Stay there.”

He didn't give me a chance to respond, hanging up as soon as he finished telling me what to do. I mean, it wasn't him being a bossy pants in the red flag kind of way, more him jumping into action to save the kittens. And that right there was a green flag—a ginormous one. It also hit weird. If he was rushing over for the kittens, that meant it wasn't for me.

And what a silly notion. I'd only spoken a few sentences to him and heard just as many back. There was no connection there—there couldn't be. Except there was.

We went inside before another car did something stupid. The place was huge, and they had everything, from a groomer to a buffet type set-up for dog treats, and that was all from my first few seconds in the space. It would be so much easier if it was Kitten Love and only sold kitten things, in kits, all boxed up.

“You little ones need to be good,” I said in my firmest voice... the firmest one I could manage around the kittens, anyway.

I slid my hand into my pockets one by one to make sure they were in there and relaxed, only to have one bite my finger. I wasn't sure if they were playing or hungry, but whatever the case was, it meant I was on borrowed good-kitten time, that was for sure.

“Welcome to Puppy Love. Let me know if I can help you find anything today.” The poor sales associate had no idea what they had just gotten themselves into.

“I actually need help finding a lot of things, and I'm not even sure what all they are.” I took out my phone and started to tap away, showing them a picture of the kittens.

Before I could explain their story, one from my inner pockets jumped out and onto the floor. I went down to try and collect them and the second got away... then a third... It was kitten mayhem.

“You need help?” the sales associate asked.

“So very much so.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“Thank you, Carlton.” My boss put a hand on my shoulder. “I appreciate you staying back, and I’m certain the extra effort will see our company awarded the contract.”

I nodded, my mind not on the big bucks but on kittens who first needed to be safe but also needed a home. Plus, I was thinking of the man who rescued them.

Making sure I was out of the office before I called him—I didn’t want any more interruptions—I raced out the revolving glass doors onto the street, gripping the phone.

The thudding of my heart had me grunting and leaning against the outside of the sandstone building. I dreaded the caller saying something had happened to the kittens or they’d succumbed to an illness in the hours since he called. Kittens, like other baby animals, were susceptible to diseases, especially before they’d had all their shots.

I counted the rings. One. Two. Three, and begged the universe to make everything alright.

Someone picked up, and the pounding of my heart was making me gasp for breath.

Say something. Even my bear was paying attention despite his lack of interest in kittens.

Instead of the expected “Hello,” tiny mewling pitterpatted through the phone, and I almost dropped the device. The babies were alive. I just hoped the guy was. I pictured him collapsed and the kittens climbing over him, licking his face, trying to wake him up.

“Hel... Hello.” The harried voice didn’t give me confidence that the guy wasn’t about to crumple into a heap.

“Hi. This is Carlton. You phoned me before lunch.”

There was a grunt on the other end followed by, “No, sweetie, you can’t do that.” There was a pause and a thunk and a screech of tires. Gods, no.

“Where are you?” I blurted out. I didn’t often bring my car to work; the traffic made taking public transport more efficient and cheaper, to say nothing of saving the planet. But I’d jump in a rideshare, and I’d opened the app, ready to punch in my destination.

“I’m outside a pet store.” His panting and the thunking through the phone didn’t give me confidence he’d get the address out before the kittens cut him off. “It’s... it’s Puppy something.”

Tapping on my phone, I scrolled through the city’s pet stores. There were ten with Puppy in the name.

“Love.” The kitten tamer’s voice was strong and clear, the first time since he’d picked up the phone.

People fell in love with babies and baby animals in a millisecond. It was the universe’s way of making sure we kept them safe.

Love? He loves us? My bear was very literal; he couldn’t think outside the box when it came to humans and how they expressed themselves. Not that I knew if the guy was a shifter, but I was pretty sure if he had been, his beast should have calmed the kittens.

He's talking about the kittens. I doubted the guy had fallen for me based on my voice or my desire to help him. But perhaps he was trying to express his gratitude.

"Puppy Love."

Oh, both my bear and I were wrong. I tapped in the store location, and the goddess must have been smiling on me because it was three blocks away. I must have walked past it countless times.

"I'm coming. Stay there."

After slinging my messenger bag across my chest, I charged down the street, swerving around passersby, some of whom cursed me, and rather than waiting for the lights to change at a crosswalk, I tore across the road, weaving between cars to the sound of screeching tires and more curses.

"It's an emergency," I yelled as a cab driver gave me the finger.

My laptop bashed against my ass as I ran, the constant banging matching the hammering of my heart and was a reminder that the babies needed help.

Despite being a shifter and having superior strength to humans, I was out of breath as I skidded to a halt outside the store. There was no guy and no kittens, so I lunged toward the door, narrowly avoiding an elderly lady and her dog emerging. I tumbled onto the floor, doing a somersault before righting myself.

Three pairs of eyes were fixed on me. The sales clerk, a customer he was serving, and a guy on the floor surrounded by kittens.

"I'm here for him." I jerked my head at the guy.

Oh, his scent. My bear was big on smells, especially faint ones, often undetected by humans.

Yes, he's covered in kittens. They'll be masking his scent.

The guy glanced up, and for some reason I saluted him as if I was reporting for duty. My bear facepalmed.

No, smell him.

Not now. I had to help the poor guy.

Carlton, you're a shifter. You can spare five seconds to scent him. My beast only used my name in emergencies.

As my eyes darted around the store, I didn't sense the place was about to burn down or we were about to be trampled by a herd of elephants. I took a moment to breathe in deeply. There were multiple animal aromas, cats, dogs, a tortoise, even a goat, but snuggled underneath was something else, something so enticing, the room spun around, and I grabbed a shelf to steady myself—tipping over chew toys—and it sent a message to my cock.

Gods, not now. Down, I told my dick. He's our?—

Mate! My bear finished the sentence.

Our human mate was sitting in a pile of kittens.

After sending the store clerk an apologetic grin and picking up the toys, I got on my knees and shuffled over the floor.

What are you doing? My bear expected me to grab the guy by the throat and sink my teeth in.

But the human, my mate, was on the floor. I wasn't going to tower over him. Besides, I'd already made a fool of myself saluting and tipping over the toys. The guy, if he had clicked as to who I was, was probably regretting calling me.

"Hi. I'm Carlton."

"Theo. Ouch." One of the kittens sank its claws into his wrist.

I reached out to grab one, and the little one lunged at me, but my shifter reflexes were quick enough that I picked up the feisty guy and brought him close to my face. Telling my bear to shine through my gaze, the kitten stopped his wriggling. His eyes opened wide, along with his mouth. He didn't quake or hiss but stared unblinking at my bear before snuggling against my chest.

"How'd you do that?" Theo asked as one kitten leaped onto his shoulder and swatted his hair.

I shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess."

After I nabbed a second kitten, the other two glanced at one another and curled up on Theo's lap. Maybe they sensed their time lording it over the poor guy was over. Scrambling to my feet and trying to ignore Theo's intoxicating aroma, I tucked one kitten under my arm and grabbed a cat carrier and then a second.

"You'll have to share guys, so be nice." I shoved the two babies in one and fastened it. Whew. Two down and two to go.

"You're going to pay for those, right?" The sales clerk was on high alert, and I would

have done the same. He didn't want to be cleaning out shit after a customer used the carriers as a daycare center.

"Now your turn." I waved my hand, and the two remaining kittens marched in formation into the carrier.

"Wow! I'm impressed. You need to stick around." Theo examined his scratches.

I plan to. I'm not going anywhere.

"I'm keeping them." Theo bobbed his head as if he was trying to convince himself taking on four rambunctious kittens wasn't an act of madness.

"Okay." That was his decision, even though four kittens was a lot, especially if he lived in a small apartment and didn't have much money. But I was a big softie regarding baby animals. I was such a sucker, I probably wouldn't have been able to give them up either.

"Do you have food, beds, or toys at home?" I studied his expression. if he reacted with horror and fumbled with his wallet or phone, it would signal he was short on cash, and I'd take two or three of the babies.

What? Those scratchy little felines are going to share our home?My bear wasn't impressed.

That was rich because he lived inside me, and when he took his fur, we were in the great outdoors. He didn't lounge on the sofa or sleep in my bed.

Just wait. Theo was our mate, and if he fell for me, we'd be in each other's lives along with the kittens.

“Nope.”

His gaze didn't waver which I took that as a good sign.

“We can get the basics now.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He got off the floor. “Tell me what to do and where to go.”

That would be straight to my mouth and my cock, my ass too, but he was talking about kitten paraphernalia.

I'd love to.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

I had no idea how expensive pets were. I'd heard people at work saying their dog cost more than a child and assumed they were exaggerating or possibly over-the-top spoiling them. With Peter, one of the people in HR, he took his dogs to daycare every day, so for him, it probably was true. I had no idea such a thing existed before he mentioned needing to find a new one one day as we waited for our coffee to brew.

But kittens? I guess I expected they would need less. A bowl, some litter, and food, right? Wrong. So very wrong. Carlton helped me pick out some of the things, and the salespeople were very helpful in assisting me with getting rid of any extra cash I had lying around. When I had everything rung up and paid for, we had two full carts and a receipt that was longer than I was tall. It was all worth it though, knowing the little ones would be safe and no longer treated like somebody's refuse.

"I'll help you get it in the car." Carlton was nice.

It was more than nice. He had an empathy for these little ones. It made sense given he worked for a rescue. Still, it had me really liking the guy. Which was another whole issue.

I really, really liked Carlton. There were a couple of times I became so distracted by his lips that I nearly leaned in—just for a taste. Never mind the thoughts running through my mind as I watched him bend over to grab the bag of cat litter or reach up high to snag the catnip mice. Yeah, it was safe to say that I was obsessed with him, and that wasn't good. He was a guy here to do a job, not get hit on by the person he was helping.

"Thanks, I could use it." Managing two carts was going to be nearly impossible, even

if one of them was mostly kitten transportation. “It’s not the best parking lot.”

“I heard.” He flinched slightly, and I guessed he was talking about the fender bender that happened while we were on the phone.

We walked out to my car, Carlton pushing the cart with the kittens in it and talking to them the entire way. He was so good with them. And yes, it was his job, but also, it was innate. You could learn how to work with animals, but some people were great with them naturally, and I would put money on Carlton being one of those.

He was probably a kitten in another lifetime. Or a bear. Maybe he was a big old cuddly bear.

“This is me.” I clicked the fob, and the trunk unlocked. “We can probably get the litter, the litter box, the cat condo, and the feeding system in here pretty easily. The rest we can put in the back seat. I’ll keep the kittens up front with me.”

I started the car with the remote so the temperature would be good for them and got them settled in, taking the box out of the car to put in the garbage can that was near the cart returns.

Carlton had everything already in the trunk when I finished up.

“I have something to tell you.” That never sounded good... ever.

“Okay?” If he said something like he was married, I was going to cry. But then again, why would that be something he had to tell me? It wasn’t like he knew about my one-sided crush. To him I was just a guy who found a box of kittens he needed to help, right?”

“When you sent me those messages and pictures, I couldn’t not help you. I know a lot

about cats, and I don't know... but in any case, I'm not the rescue."

"Then why did you get my messages?"

"Because you dialed wrong." He shoved his hands in his front pockets. "Everything else is accurate. But I don't work there. I work in an office building, and my phone was going off during a presentation."

"Sorry." I wasn't even mad at him. Should I be? Probably. But it wasn't as if he told me he was from the rescue, he simply hadn't told me he wasn't until now. "I was in panic mode."

"Understandably. It had to be heartbreaking to see them at the dumpster like that and having all the what-ifs run through your head."

"It sucked. But you know what else sucks...?" Besides me, if you ask nicely. "Not knowing what to do, and I don't. Not really. I bought that book, but..."

"Would you like some help? I can come set everything up with you."

I had to stop myself from hugging him.

"That would be everything." I took out my phone and sent him my address.

Was this the way most serial killer specials start—a "nice guy" offers to help, and suddenly he's dinner? Yeah, pretty much. But Carlton was a nice guy, and I had zero warning bells going off. Unless my stirring cock was a new warning system. In that case, I had a really big one.

I drove to my place and got the kittens inside, and was starting to unload the trunk when Carlton pulled up. But he was the passenger and he thanked the driver.

“Was that a friend or a rideshare?” I asked.

“The latter. I don’t have my car today and it felt awkward jumping into yours.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“You could have.” I wished he had.

“I’m here now.” He grinned and my heart fluttered.

The two of us worked together to get everything inside.

“Good, you have wood floors. We don’t need to worry about keeping the kittens locked up too much.” He went on to explain about training them to use the box since their mom wasn’t around. He said it was pretty instinctual and that one of the litters we bought attracted them to it and a bunch of other things I wasn’t hearing. My eyes were glued to his lips, and my mind was playing out daydreams that were less than appropriate for the situation.

Once the feeding station, the litter, and their “cat” bed which was really a dog bed were all worked out, we dove into the fun stuff. Carlton set up a couple of window seats I’d picked up, while I made some cardboard houses that were designed to give them a place to scratch and explore. I thought it was silly, but not only did the salesperson say all cats adored them, but so did more than a couple of random people buying things for their own pets.

I didn’t even have them set up, and the kittens were already exploring them. They were a win for sure.

“You do know that your beautiful basket with cat-ear handles is only going to be filled with toys briefly, right? Those little mice and plastic rings are going to be under every piece of furniture you have once they discover them.” His rich laugh filled me

with warmth.

“But cat ears.” It was adorable and one of many frivolous things I’d purchased. “I think the only thing I have left is the cat condo. If you need to leave, I’ll understand.” I’d hate it, but I’d get it.

“I have nowhere I’d rather be.” He bent down and picked up the furball on his foot. “Where else can I get this kind of cuteness begging for me to snuggle them?”

“Nowhere. They are by far the cutest fluff balls I have ever seen. And thanks. I really appreciate all the help.”

The condo was by far the biggest of the projects. There had been a ton of cat condos at the place. They had short ones that were more a box with a cushion on them than anything else. They had tall ones that had display units that were toppling over with every person that walked by. They had some mid-sized ones that included scratching posts and hanging things for cats to bat around. They were by far the wisest choice of them all. Did I pick the wisest though? Of course I didn’t.

I had to go and find the one that was designed to be a tree house, complete with flowers and mushrooms as the first level. Was it tiny? Nope. It was going to eat up a huge chunk of my living room.

It was perfection. Or it would be after it was put together. Right now it was all flat packed, and my guess was that it was at least a bazillion pieces. Possibly more.

“I can’t wait to see this all assembled,” he said.

Unlike the other pieces, this one didn’t have a store sample, only a display.

“Me too.”

We worked in tandem and managed to get it put together pretty quickly, given how many steps there were. The directions were remarkably good, and I had the best assistant on the planet.

I remembered seeing a sitcom joking about how the true test of a relationship was building IKEA furniture together. This wasn't IKEA, and we weren't in a relationship. Nevertheless, it was nice to see we managed to get it done without being grumpy with each other.

Only now I was about to get grumpy because there was no longer a reason for Carlton to stick around. He had far surpassed knight on a white horse duty. It was time for him to go.

And I didn't like it.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“Peace reigns.”

Theo and I were on the floor beside the bed we’d bought for the kittens. They’d finally worn themselves out and were sound asleep.

“You were right.” Theo nodded at the four little ones snuggled together. “They didn’t need more than one bed.”

At least for now.

They’re cute. My bear was becoming a big softie.

My belly rumbled, and Theo laughed, saying he’d been telling his tummy to be quiet but my belly was playing a symphony that echoed around the room.

Huh? My beast didn’t understand, but I promised I’d explain later. I didn’t want him filling my head with questions or pleas to mate when I was getting to know Theo.

“What do you like?” I scrolled through a food delivery app.

“A lot of things.”

A quick glance at him revealed a bright spot of pink on each cheek. “That hungry, huh?” I crossed my legs as my cock stirred.

“Ravenous.” His gaze lingered on my crotch before he looked away. “Oh, you’re talking about food.” His voice rose an octave. “Me too. Starving.”

We agreed on tacos, and Theo busied himself in the kitchen making drinks, allowing me to study his ass.

“Anything I can do?” Apart from rip his clothes off and suck his dick before he thrust said dick in my hole.

Theo insisted on paying me for the food. “It’s a thank-you for saving my butt.”

There were other things I wanted to do to his ass rather than saving it, but I only thanked him for the meal. We chatted about work and hobbies while we ate. Unlike me, Theo worked from home a lot of the time, which was a bonus with four rambunctious kittens. Although maybe not. They might be too much of a distraction.

“I have a confession.”

Oh goodie. He was attracted to me, and while he didn’t understand the pull of a mate, he sensed we had a little something-something.

Theo pushed the remains of a fish taco around his plate. “Maybe I... I won’t be... I can’t keep the kittens.” He spoke so quietly another human would have strained to hear him.

What? No! We have to look after them, my bear insisted.

We can’t. I’ll be at work all day, and you have to come with me.

My belly twisted in a knot and then in a bow as I took in that Theo didn’t want these cute babies in his life. I flipped the spoon I was holding and studied my reflection on the back.

“Can I be honest?”

“S-Sure.” But his faltering voice was a sign he wanted to hear what I had to say.

“You know what will happen to them if you don’t? The no-kill shelters are overrun with unwanted puppies and kittens, and the others?—”

Theo reached out and put a hand over my mouth as my bear murmured, Nice. My bear didn’t understand the reference to “the others” and was referring to Theo’s and my skin-to-skin contact.

It took all my strength not to lick his palm or take a finger in my mouth and suck it. And my imagination went one step further and pictured Theo shoving his fingers in my ass. I shivered, and he removed his hand.

“Sorry, that was inappropriate. I didn’t want you to say the word.” Theo picked up our plates and strode into the kitchen

What word? my bear asked. Mate? He doesn’t want to mate?

Even though I didn’t want the evening to end, my bear’s constant questions had me worried he might take his fur without permission and mark Theo. I told him to quit it and I’d fill him in later.

I regretted snapping at him, and he sulked and curled up inside me, grumbling that I was a big meanie and I never let him have any fun. We’d have to hunt later tonight to calm him and as an apology.

“I do like them, the kittens. They’re adorable. I just don’t trust myself to look after them properly.” He sat opposite me and put a bowl of strawberries on the table.

“They need food and water and lots of love.” And I reminded him they had to be vaccinated. Even though he had contacted a vet, I recommended one a friend used.

“And our city requires all pets to be chipped.”

“I always wanted to be a dad but never imagined that I’d father four furry little beasts.” The word “beasts” caught my bear’s attention, though he didn’t say anything.

“You’ll have to name them.” The kitten with white patches on his paws stirred. “Socks would be the perfect name for that little guy.”

We’d determined two of the kittens were male and two female, but Theo wanted gender-neutral names.

“Can we do this tomorrow? My brain won’t brain after the day I’ve had.”

“Maybe the kittens will rise up overnight and tie you up, demanding you give them a name.”

Theo’s mouth gaped. I almost reached over and closed it but stopped the urge to have my skin on his again.

“Oh my gods, no!”

I regretted trying to be funny as I gazed at poor Theo’s horrified expression, and I got up and ran around the table, taking him in my arms. “I’m so sorry. I was trying and failed to make a joke. They’re going to love you. You’re the guy that feeds them and empties their litter tray.”

Talking about kitten poop grossed out my bear which always made me giggle. He was an animal who pooped in the woods or anywhere really.

“And you’re the one who’ll give them cuddles.” I hung onto Theo a little longer than I should have, and when I pulled away, his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“Those little guys already have me wrapped around their tiny paws.” He pushed hair off his brow. “I don’t know what I was thinking saying I didn’t want to keep them. If they want to terrorize me, that’s fine.”

“They probably will, but that’s because they’re kittens and they love playing. Wear long pants because your ankles are fair game.”

Theo giggled. “Got it. Any other body parts I should protect?”

“From the kittens?” I blurted out. There were a couple of other places that I was tempted to stroke, lick, or finger. Maybe all three at once.

Theo closed one eye. “Yeah. Isn’t that who we’re talking about?”

“Mmmm.” I didn’t trust myself to speak, especially as my cock was swelling.

“Thank you so much for everything you did today. You saved my ass.”

Damn, Theo had to stop talking about his beautiful behind.

“No problem.”

“May I hug you?” he asked, his cheeks pinkening.

I’d had him in my arms minutes earlier, comforting him, but I wasn’t going to say no. He outstretched his arms, and I stepped into them, inhaling his unique aroma that told my bear and me he was our mate. My mouth was a hair’s breadth from his skin, and it would have been so easy for my beast to sink his teeth into Theo.

I can.

No, we can't.

I pulled away, not trusting my beast, but as I did, I turned my head to the side and my cheek collided with Theo's lips. His warm, plump, supple lips. Gods, they were glorious, and I closed my eyes, imagining our mouths pressed against one another every morning, noon, and night, tongues dancing and dueling and saliva mingling.

"Oh gods, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." Theo dabbed at my cheek with a table napkin.

But I grabbed his hand that was frantically trying to remove his saliva from my face. "There's no need to apologize." Our eyes locked on each other, and it might have been seconds or minutes that we didn't speak but stared. "I liked it."

Theo smirked, and one brow shot up. "Is that so?"

He dropped the napkin and traced around my mouth with one finger. Now I didn't need to imagine anything and parted my lips and licked his finger. His tongue shot out. I removed his finger from my mouth. Theo flicked my bottom lip, and I captured his tongue with my teeth. He gasped, and I worried I'd hurt him and released him.

"More, please." He slammed his mouth on mine, and I parted my lips, eager to have a part of him inside me. I suckled the tip of his tongue, and he moaned, pressing his crotch against mine. As an alpha, I'd expected him to have a big dick, but the ridge in his pants, grinding on my arousal confirmed it was bigger than I'd imagined.

Theo's hand slid over my hip as his tiny gasps and intoxicating minty breath had me coming so close to mating him, I don't know how I pulled away.

"That was nice." I grinned, hoping my kissing skills were up to par.

“Nice? Nice?” He chortled. “That was freaking wild. And I hope to do it again soon.”

“You will.” I sauntered toward the door, swaying my ass and hoping he was watching.

A sharp intake of breath told me he was.

But was he pleased or disappointed?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

I felt like time was standing still as I waited for our date.

I'd only seen him the night before. It wasn't like I had to wait an eternity to see him again. But that kiss, oh gods, it nearly knocked me to my knees. And every time I started thinking about it, my pants got a little bit tighter, which was unfortunate given I was at work. But all the deadlines in the world couldn't stop me from thinking about him.

I'd snuck away during lunch for a quick check on the kittens. Part of me wished I wasn't finishing up a big project and could be working remotely again more regularly. The practical side of me knew that me being at my place was going to be a thousand times more distracting than work was. At least here I wasn't having everything remind me of Carlton.

The kittens were, of course, perfectly fine. All four were sound asleep in the sun that came in through the front window. They woke up enough for some snuggles and to beg for food. I was glad I went to see them even if I knew in my head they were fine home alone. It was my heart that didn't want to listen.

I'd feel better once I was able to get them to the vet and get them good and checked out. But so far, they were doing great, adjusting beautifully to their new lives. I might not have been the world's best cat dad, but I loved the little furballs, and my place was a lot more comfortable than a dumpster.

Of course, once I was back at my place, what did I think about? Carlton. I saw him in everything, from the place he sat on the couch to the water dish he filled for them. I had it bad, and try as I could, my every thought was still on the way his lips made me

feel as I climbed into the elevator after my break.

“Steak and ice cream,” I mumbled to myself. “Cotton candy and pickles. Cheese and maple syrup.”

“What are you doing?” the person beside me in the elevator asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just trying to think of really unsavory combinations.”

She looked at me as if I had six heads and then offered, “Milk and lemon slices.”

“Perfect.” I was glad she thought I was doing a puzzle or brainstorming or whatever it was she thought I was up to and not that the older woman was helping me get rid of a pesky erection.

“Glad to be of help,” she said as the elevator opened, and she walked right out.

Did any of that work? Of course not. As I reached my desk, I saw the post-it that I had scribbled random cat information on and boom—there was Carlton right back at the forefront of my mind. He really did find a way to worm his way into my heart. And I liked him there.

But also, it didn’t make sense. Was it because he came to my rescue when I needed him? It would make sense that feelings would be stronger since he aided me in an emotionally heavy time, right? But that didn’t make sense either.

I couldn’t even begin to figure out my feelings about the man. Logically they couldn’t be real. It was too soon. But also, they felt real. Very real. And then there was the little dilemma where every time my mind had a chance to wander, it wandered straight to him, to his lips, his touch, his smile.

I managed to get pretty much no work done in the remaining time I had, but I didn't care. It could wait until another time. It was date night, and the second I was able to leave, I did.

Once back home, I took care of the kittens and then popped into the shower. This was date night, and I wanted to look and smell my best. If I'd had the time, I'd have stopped for a haircut on the way. I wanted this to be perfect.

Carlton was coming to pick me up. He said it was to check on the kittens, but I had a feeling he was just gentlemanly like that. I liked it.

And of course, by the time he arrived, I was full of cat hair and had to change again. I had a feeling that was going to be part of my life. And I didn't even mind.

"I'll be right back," I promised him and ran in to switch shirts. And when I came back out, I looked just as I had only a few minutes earlier.

"Did you get the roller wand at the pet store?" he asked. It took me a few seconds to figure out what he meant, and when I did, I ran and got it.

"I think I'm going to need to get stock in this company." I rolled it over where the kittens had been snuggling him. "There. Cat hair-free."

"Did you get everywhere?" He sounded more teasing than serious.

"I think so." I looked him up and down. "Where do you think I missed?"

"Right here." He pointed to his lips, and I leaned in for a kiss.

"We better go before we don't," I sassed, breathless and needy. I didn't sound too convincing. And if he'd suggested "we don't," I'd have been all for it.

“Yeah.” He took my hands. “Let’s go eat. We are probably going to need our energy.”

He drove us to a little family-owned restaurant not too far from my place. It was quaint and had the kind of food your grandparents might have served up for Sunday dinner. I had roast beef, and Carlton ordered meatloaf.

The food was delicious. It really was, but none of it was about the food. It was about the two of us spending time together, getting to know each other, and of course, having a kitten update.

“How was work today?” It felt like a boring question to ask, and maybe it was boring. But also, I knew that I had interrupted one of his big meetings when I was accidentally messaging him instead of the rescue, and that made it feel less like a first-date-question-when-you-don’t-know-what-to-ask and more of a natural conversation topic.

“It was good.” He closed his eyes. “Yeah, that’s not true. It was great. I spent most of it thinking about you. Unless you meant productivity wise. In that case it sucked.”

I scooched my chair over a little, wanting to be closer to him, and placed my hand on his.

“I know the feeling, although I did have the distraction in the middle of the day to check on the kittens.” The break had done me well. Who couldn’t use some cuteness overload in the middle of the day?

“And let me guess... they were sleeping.”

“How’d you know?”

“Well, according to cat statistics, they sleep over twenty hours a day. The odds were on my side.” He turned his body slightly, facing me a little more.

“They like that spot where the sun comes in and hits the carpet. They were so cute, I couldn’t even... I almost felt bad waking them up. But then they acted like I was the best thing in the world, and the guilt kind of fell away.” It was one of those moments I wished I’d been filming so I could watch them realize I was home again and again.

“Well, you know, to them, you are the best thing in the world.” He turned his hand over and intertwined our fingers. “Most people wouldn’t have done what you did. They would have dropped them off at the first person who would take them, whether or not they were going to keep them safe.”

I was sure he was right, though I hated to think of people being that uncaring. It was a very real possibility that people had seen or heard them at the dumpster and chose to ignore it. Those were the kind of people that I couldn’t relate to, nor did I have any desire to do so.

To me, if you saw a creature in need of your help, you helped them. That was that. There was no decision to be made.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “Is this weird?” I asked

“Is what weird? Talking about kittens?”

“No, I mean who doesn’t want to talk about kittens? I meant feeling as comfortable with you as I do.”

“No, that’s not weird.” He kissed the top of my head. “That’s not weird at all.”

It felt like he was going to say more, but the waitress came and interrupted, asking us

if we were through with our meals and if we wanted any dessert.

Carlton looked to me to see what I was thinking. I wanted dessert, alright, but not the kind we could get here.

“I think we have dessert at home,” I said.

“Just the check, please.”

We walked outside, hand in hand. “Thank you for a wonderful dinner.”

“Thank you for the wonderful company.” He squeezed my hand. “Let’s get you home.”

“Just to clarify, when I said ‘dessert,’ I meant you.”

“Best. Dessert. Ever.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

We strolled out of the restaurant, fingers brushing against one another until Theo clasped my hand. A jolt of something like electricity surged through my veins, and my bear woke up, asking what had happened as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

I want him to meet you.

Me too. Now he was wide awake.

But how to do this? It was dark, though in the city there were always bright lights illuminating the streets and sidewalks, but there were places where shadows shook their fists at the light and chased it away. Alleyways, deserted parks, dark corners, tunnels, and passageways.

But Theo was human, and he'd be wary of me leading him into the darkness. While he was an alpha, he didn't come across as someone who could beat up an assailant.

Huh? I'm not going to hurt him. My bear was indignant that I could think that.

My mind was wandering, and I wasn't thinking straight. He would be reluctant to follow me, a guy he hardly knew, into the farthest corner of the park at night. And if he did, I'd wonder at his lack of self-preservation skills and give him a talking to about stranger danger.

"It's a beautiful evening. Wanna go for a walk?" If he accepted, I still hadn't figured out how to do this. Doing a bear reveal in a building wasn't ideal, because even though my beast was well behaved, I couldn't predict the havoc he might create, especially if Theo freaked out.

“I have a better idea.” He leaned close, his warm breath on my ear sending goosebumps parading over my skin. “Let’s go back to my place.”

All thoughts of revealing my bear vanished, except when my cock stiffened, my brain spasmed and I blurted out, “I was going to show you my beast.”

Theo snorted and shoved a hand over his mouth, not that it stifled his giggle. When his shoulders stopped shaking, he poked the tip of his tongue between his lips. “That’s the plan.”

I studied him under the streetlight, his come-hither eyes burning brightly as slick streamed from my hole. Gods, if I didn’t get my clothes off soon, there’d be a wet patch on my pants.

Theo shoved me against a shop front, its interior in darkness. His breathing was coming in spurts and starts, and he grimaced before mumbling an apology. “I’m sorry. I’m not that kind of alpha.” There was a catch in his voice, almost a sob.

“No need to apologize, and I liked your passion.” I cupped his cheek. “It matches my own.”

He trailed kisses over my jaw, down my throat, and yanked my shirt back to nibble my shoulder. “Maybe you should show me your beast now, instead of waiting til we get to my place.”

He wants to see me!

No, he doesn’t. Go to sleep. I’d have to apologize to my bear later for being so abrupt.

Unzipping my pants, I pulled out my cock, confident the shadows and Theo’s body

were blocking me from any passersby. I took his hand and wrapped it about my length. He hissed, his mouth once again at my throat, and I almost stammered, “Bite me.” But I couldn’t trick this human into mating me.

Theo tugged at my cock, and I embraced the rough brick scratching my back that heightened my arousal and the tension between us. Gods, if he didn’t stop, I’d come all over him. But I didn’t want him to. Desire infected my mind and tossed away reason.

He pumped my length and whispered, “I wish I could shove my fingers in your ass, right here, right now.” He bared his teeth, so close to my jaw, I wanted him to bite me and make me his. “Can we do that?”

He didn’t wait for me to agree—I couldn’t put two words together because lust choked me—but slid his hand inside my pants and briefs, first squeezing my ass and coating his hand in slick.

“Finger-fuck me,” I begged, parting my legs and leaning forward, my head on his shoulder to give him access.

“Like this?” His teeth snapped as he eased a finger, or was it two, in my hole.

I bit his shirt, hoping the mouthful of fabric would muffle my groans while his finger slid in and out of me. My body trembled and began to sag, but Theo held me up and ground his crotch against me.

“Is this what you like?” His ragged voice had my body spasming, and I moaned. “Or perhaps more fingers.” He inserted another digit and finger-fucked me hard. I squeezed around him and released my grip while my hand crept to the bulge in his pants. But my trembling fingers couldn’t manage the zip, and Theo bucked his hips against me.

My eyes flicked open at a strangled sound behind Theo. Two men, their arms around one another, stared at us. One mumbled, “That’s hot. Fucking on the street. Maybe we should try that,” before taking off.

I didn’t give a fuck that we’d been caught out ‘cause it was hot and having strangers watching us made it even hotter.

“Want my dick in you?” Theo choked out.

“Here?”

“Nah, much as I’d love to flip you around and plow into you, I also want privacy so we can get naked. I need you to part your ass cheeks so I can see that gorgeous hole.”

As he spoke I bucked my hips so his fingers slid deeper into my hole, but I desperately wanted his length filling me. When he withdrew his hand from pumping my cock, I whimpered, and as his fingers slid out of me, tears threatened to spill. I’d never felt so alone, even though he was right here.

“Let’s go.” He draped an arm around my shoulder and hustled me along the sidewalk. I nuzzled the delicate skin on his throat and tried to climb him, making walking almost impossible.

After I parked the car, Theo took my hand and dragged me to his building, and when we crashed into the elevator, my mouth on his, I pulled him close, our bodies molded together. I would have dropped my pants and begged him to thrust into me, but the elevator dinged, and somehow we tumbled into his apartment. Thank gods he used a fingerprint door lock, no keys to fumble.

The kittens must have been asleep, and our clothes disappeared as if by magic, though my socks stayed on. Theo stalked across the room, reminding me of a wild

animal.

“You’re right.” His narrowed eyes took in my stiff cock. “It is a beast. A big beautiful one.”

I turned around and swaggered toward the bedroom, but he grabbed me and tossed me over the back of the sofa. He said, his voice now gravely, “Tell me if I’m too rough. There’s something about you that I want to possess, to bond with, to capture and claim.”

It was the mating instinct, not that he understood it, and this wasn’t the time to bring it up. I needed his length in my ass.

“Do it,” I grunted.

“Spread your cheeks like I asked.”

Leaning forward, hoping he was getting an eyeful of my hole, I parted my cheeks and wriggled my butt. His cock nudged my entrance, his hand digging into the soft flesh on my hips. And then he thrust into me, not the tip or inch by inch, but he plunged into my depths. I gasped as he filled me and gulped mouthfuls of oxygen while I adjusted to his girth.

While I couldn’t see his face, I recognized him talking through gritted teeth. “You’re so tight.”

My breath evened out, and I pushed back, his cock going even deeper in my channel. Glancing over my shoulder, I taunted him. “Show me what you can do, big boy.” He was huge, and he was in me, and I wanted to be fucked hard.

Theo let go of my hips and grabbed the back of the couch. I tensed, waiting for him to

pull out and ram his dick into me again. But he lapped the sweat from my skin and eased out. My legs trembled in anticipation and sweat trickled over my chest. Theo slid into me, one inch at a time, stretching me, and I welcomed him, crying out his name.

One hand moved to my ass and tapped it.

“You call that a smack?” I taunted.

His hand hit my bare skin, the flesh-on-flesh slap echoing around the room, and I grunted, “That’s more like it.” Despite the stinging, I relished the pain and pleasure combination and dug my fingers into the sofa fabric. “More, please.”

His mouth was at my ear, his tongue probing the nooks and crannies. “I can predict the future, and there will be more slaps and a whole lot more fucking.” He paused for breath, the warm air billowing over my ear. “But tonight, I want to fill and stretch you. Is that okay?”

I thrust my hips back, wallowing in the waves of pleasure washing over me as his cock rammed deep into my channel.

Theo grunted and rested his chin on my shoulder. “I love your hole.” He hissed as I gripped around him, and he paused, sliding his lips down my spine. I stilled my movements, hoping I hadn’t pushed him over the edge, as I wanted our fucking to continue.

Theo slid one hand to cradle my balls while his cock filled me. I shivered, the intensity of desire coursing through me now threatening to result in my own orgasm.

“Slowly, Theo,” I panted. “I don’t want to come too soon.”

“We can’t have that.” He withdrew, inch by long inch, and those same inches slid back in, one at a time until he lodged inside me again. Slick slithered from my hole and dribbled down my leg, coating both me and Theo in slippery stickiness. He coated his hand in slick and trailed a wet finger down my spine as he eased his length in and out of my channel.

I rested my chest on the back of the couch and pushed my ass higher, enjoying the pressure from his fingers squeezing my flesh. “You still want me to go slow?” he said before licking along my spine. I trembled, my mind and body conflicted between coming or prolonging the exquisite pleasure that was his cock, his fingers dancing over my skin or his warm, wet tongue making my body tingle.

“Faster.”

He slammed into me, and there was no more talk. Instead, we grunted, moaned, and whimpered when his length plunged into my depths.

We cried out together as he shoved a hand between me and the couch and clasped my cock, cum spurting over the fabric while he came deep inside me. His knot expanded, and we slid to the floor, a tangle of limbs, and held one another.

I never wanted to let him go.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

Waking up in Carlton's arms was everything. He held me close, and there was a comforting scent enveloping us. I'd have gladly stayed snuggled together like that all day. The little fur babies had other ideas, demanding my attention... immediately. I was clearly put on this earth to do their bidding. Good thing I was gladly willing to do so.

Carefully, I picked up Carlton's arm, trying to slide out from underneath it without waking him. I failed. His arm tightened around me, pulling me close. "Just five more minutes," he said sleepily.

"How about I'll be back in five minutes."

He grumbled.

"I need to feed the babies, or I wouldn't be moving an inch." Or maybe lots of inches, but they would be while I was sitting on him—fine, riding him. Same difference.

"I can do it," he insisted and started to roll the other way so he could get out of bed.

"I'm already up." I climbed out of bed before he could. "You can do it next time."

I'd just broken the cardinal sin of first-time sex; don't turn it into a bigger deal than it was. Promising a next time was definitely doing that.

"Yeah. I'll do it next time."

This had to be like the garlic thing where as long as you both eat it, it cancels each

other out. Only in this case, we both promised more than we should. Gods, I hoped we didn't cancel each other out and instead made it true. I wanted a next time, and another next time, and another after that.

After a quick stop at the bathroom and feeding and giving lots of pets to the kittens, I was ready to go back to bed. The kittens settled quickly, wanting a nap—shocker.

I climbed back in bed, this time with my arm around Carlton's sleeping form. I fell back asleep. I wasn't usually one for recapturing sleep like this, but it was just too warm and comfortable to resist.

When I woke up again, it was nearly 10 o'clock, and a good chunk of the morning had already passed. I didn't mind. Spending it with him in my arms was the best way I could think to spend any day.

I looked over to see that he had propped himself up slightly and was watching me, a smile on his face.

"How long have you been doing that?" I asked, not that I minded. He was looking at me as if I were the most precious person on this planet.

"Not long. I had to sneak out to use the bathroom, and when I came back, you just looked so peaceful there." He brushed some hair from my brow. "Do you have any plans today?"

"Yeah." I turned my head quickly to kiss his hand. "I was hoping to spend it with you." I didn't see any reason to be coy when we just spent the night together.

And what a night it had been. I never knew it could be so good. But of course it was. This was Carlton. How could it have been anything but?

“I can make you breakfast,” I offered, with more confidence than I felt.

I wasn’t exactly sure what ingredients I had around the place, but my guess was I could scrape together something passable as breakfast for two. And if not, we could always run to the bagel place down the road.

“I could help,” he volunteered.

“Yeah, I could use some help.” I pulled my bottom lip in with my teeth. “But I think the help I need is more in the shower.”

“I’m up for scrubbing your back and other things.” He tapped my nose.

I reached down and grabbed his cock. “I could help with this while we are there.” Or now. I wasn’t picky.

“Oh, I could use that kind of help.” He gave me a kiss.

We took a shower together, got ourselves all dirty before getting cleaned up again, and then went to the kitchen to figure out what to make.

I had eggs, American cheese food product—the food slices wrapped in plastic that they weren’t allowed to label as cheese—and some rather sketchy broccoli. Still, I was confident I could whip up something decent out of it. Fake cheese had a way of making everything feel better.

“Oh, and I have a tube of biscuits.” I saw them in the back behind the mayo. I didn’t even remember buying them, and when I pulled them out and noticed the expiration date was a year earlier, I remembered why.

“I was just kidding about the biscuits.”

He full-on belly laughed.

“Let’s go get bagels. It’s walking distance,” I suggested.

We ended up walking for the bagels. It was a beautiful day, and it was a nice way to get the full feel of the neighborhood, even if it was a bit of a hike.

As we turned the corner, we came to the end of the line. The bagel place was crowded to the point of a line down the block. I didn’t mind waiting. It was the best bagel place in the area, and when a line was this long, you knew it was worth it.

“I’m sorry that the line is taking so long.” I felt bad that the poor man still hadn’t eaten. At least the end was near. We were only a few people from the front register... at last.

They were somehow still fully stocked of all varieties except jalapeno, and that wasn’t a flavor I was interested in. Hopefully it wasn’t what Carlton had his mind set on.

“What do you think you’re gonna get?” I asked him. I was torn between a salt bagel that reminded me of my childhood and a blueberry bagel because they looked delicious and I’d never had one before.

“I’m thinking about the cinnamon apple one.”

As he finished his sentence, an older woman in front of us turned around. “They’re not good for breakfast. They’re more of a dessert.”

She glanced at our joined hands. “You guys are adorable.”

I wasn’t sure why a complete stranger felt it was a good idea to comment on our

relationship, but in that moment, I found it difficult to be upset by it. I liked the validation.

“Thank you,” Carlton replied, as if this was a normal everyday conversation instead of being weird.

“Something’s missing, though,” she continued. The woman seemed to be staring behind me or possibly to the top of my shoulder. So odd, especially after being so complimentary only a few minutes earlier.

“Not for long,” Carlton said, and she seemed to be satisfied. I didn’t know for sure, because her turn at the counter had her leaving us.

We were next, and I ended up getting both bagels, leaving one for lunch. Carlton ended up with a sesame based on the woman’s suggestion not to have the one he originally wanted.

I suggested he get both, but he assured me that eating the other one tonight was the equivalent of having one a week old. The person taking our order agreed with him, saying he’d rather have no bagel than one that was stale. I didn’t argue with either of them. I obviously didn’t take my bagels as seriously as the two of them did.

“What was that about?” I asked him when we were back at our table.

“What was what about?” he replied.

“What she said back there about something being missing...” It felt important.

“She was just making small talk.” Which didn’t answer my question, but maybe that was all there was to it.

I had a tendency to overthink, and this was probably one of those situations. And really, what a stranger said to Carlton didn't matter. She was one stranger making one weird comment. That was all.

"Did you make a good decision with your bagel?" I asked, noticing the sesame seed one he had chosen had gone untried.

"Don't think I did." He let out a long breath and picked it up, taking a small bite. "I take it back. I made an amazing decision. How about you?"

I looked down at the blueberry bagel. "It looks good, that's for sure, and it smells delicious." I took a small bite. "Yep, good decision. Want a bite?"

I held it out for him, and when he nibbled on it, I couldn't help being jealous of the bagel.

"I'll have to remember that one for next time." And there it was, that promise of another date.

Things were going great between us, almost too much so. I couldn't help but wonder what I was missing. Maybe Carlton was covered in red flags and I was too busy checking out his ass to notice them. Or maybe he liked me and enjoyed my company, but he wasn't looking for anything too serious. Or maybe all of this was exactly how it looked, two men who liked each other a lot and were willing to see where it went.

I was hoping it was the latter.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“Wanna go for a hike?”

I handed Theo a coffee, but I quickly learned he wasn't a morning person. He had one eye open, and the coffee slopped out of the mug as his hand jiggled. My shifter reflexes saved the bedding by whipping the mug over the tiled floor.

“Wow! I must be half asleep 'cause what you just did looked a whole lot like magic.”

I raced back from the kitchen with a rag and wiped up the mess. Thank gods he didn't have carpet.

Carpet, ewww! My beast had so many idiosyncrasies. Him hating dust mites and poop were two of them. Not so odd in a human, but what bears paid any attention to dust mites? Their fur was probably covered in them.

Not mine, he announced.

“Great reflexes is all.” I gave Theo the mug again, not letting it go until he'd propped the pillow behind him.

He took a sip and sighed. “Great coffee. Thanks. But what did you say earlier?”

“It's the weekend and a beautiful day. Perfect for getting out of the city and maybe taking a picnic too.”

Theo made a face. “Mosquitoes, creepy crawlies, sweat, blisters, sunburn, and maybe a rash on my thighs. Doesn't sound like much fun.”

I could hardly show him in his apartment or mine. My beast was too big to lumber around the living room. I pictured the destruction as he broke a lamp and stomped on the sofa.

“And what about the kittens? They might wreak havoc while we’re gone.” He rubbed the sleep from one eye.

“We can take them with us.”

I was so proud at coming up with a solution, but as the seconds ticked by, I considered four kittens in the wild as I revealed my bear. It could be a disaster in the making. I pictured my bear scrambling through the woods, his paw jammed inside a hollow log as he tried reaching the kittens who were quaking and hiding from the big scary beast.

After putting the mug on the nightstand, Theo had a burst of energy. He leaped up and dragged out a tee and shorts and raced into the bathroom. When he emerged with damp hair, he was brandishing bug spray and sunscreen.

“Why the change of heart?” I’d been hoping he’d poo-poo my suggestion of taking the kittens and we’d do the reveal another day.

“I want to see our babies in the woods sniffing a flower or chasing a butterfly.” He held up his phone. “I’ll put their pics on social media, and they’ll get so many likes.” He’d set up an account for them, and they already had a lot of fans.

Theo peered at the bedroom door as two paws were shoved underneath. “See, they hear they’re going on an outing and can’t wait.”

It was more like they were hungry or wanted cuddles, but I just smiled and opened the door. Four little hurricanes hurled themselves into the room and proceeded to play

with the duvet until Theo and I scooped them up and fed them.

Getting out of the apartment with four kittens was a huge undertaking, and each time we put a bag or toys or food near the front door, thinking we were ready, we'd race off to get something else. Was this how it would be if Theo and I ever had a baby?

"I'm so glad you convinced me to come."

"Me too." Theo didn't appear to pick up my less-than-enthusiastic response as he wound down the window and stuck his head out.

The kittens were asleep in their carriers, and we'd stopped at Puppy Love and bought four cat leashes. Theo protested, saying between the two of us we could corral our fur babies, but I insisted it was for their protection in case they darted into the undergrowth. That was true, but also I couldn't point out that I might not be me and couldn't help.

You would be me! My bear was looking forward to taking his fur, revealing himself to our mate and romping with the kittens. I puzzled over him thinking the five of them would be romping. More likely scratching, hiding, hissing, and swatting.

We'd bought food from a deli close to Puppy Love, and after we parked, Theo took charge of the cat carriers while I carried the picnic basket, blankets, and cushions. I chose a secluded section of the park, one I was familiar with, as it was where my bear often took his fur.

I positioned the blanket in a clearing and anchored it at each corner with a rock, the rocks serving the dual purpose of securing the kittens' leashes so they could wander only a few yards beyond the blanket. With water bowls and snacks aplenty, Theo and I sat down to eat and enjoy being outdoors.

“Yum. This is good.” Theo leaned on a cushion after swallowing a mouthful of his Reuben sandwich while keeping an eye on the kittens. Socks was sniffing a leaf while the other three were more cautious.

“I’ve got something to show you later.” Never having shown my shifter side to any human, I was starting out with little hints.

Theo giggled. “I knew you wanted to come here for outdoor sex.” He outstretched his leg and rubbed his foot on my crotch. “But fucking in front of the kittens would be weird. They might be traumatized for life.”

“That wasn’t my intention. It’s something bigger.”

Again Theo laughed, and he fell back on the blanket. “Trust me. Nothing could be much bigger...” he lowered his voice, “than your cock.”

I sighed because we were going around in circles, not getting any closer to me taking off my clothes and showing who I really was. We couldn’t move forward in our relationship until he understood both my human and shifter sides.

Do it, my beast urged.

“Theo, I care about you deeply.” I stood and faced him.

“Oh gods, is this what I think it is?” He sat up, his eyes welling with tears. “We’ve known one another for such a short time, but I feel it in here.” He patted his chest. “That you’re my one and only.”

Yikes, did he think I was going to propose? But I ignored that and ran with him mentioning we were each other’s happy ever after. “We are, and I’m so over-the-top happy that you feel it too.”

“I love you, Carlton.”

For humans, this would be the perfect moment for us to hug and say we’d be together forever. And I suspected, Theo was waiting for me to fall into his embrace. But I took the opportunity to rip off my shirt. Theo’s dazzling smile faded as he glanced around as if checking no one else was nearby. The kittens had tired themselves out making war with leaves and twigs and were asleep as I removed the rest of my clothes.

“As a human, you would have read fairy tales as a kid.”

Theo worried his bottom lip with his teeth as he repeated, “Fairy tales? Are you saying what we have is make-believe and my love is not real?”

“No. No. I adore you, Theo.”

“And what’s with the human thing?” His nervous laugh didn’t reassure me he was ready for my bear.

“I’m not. Human, that is.”

He hugged a cushion, a sign he was protecting himself from what I was saying. There was no way to break it to him gently, so I gave my beast permission to take his fur.

He unleashed himself and stood on his hind legs, towering above Theo and the kittens. The look of horror on my mate’s face and him shuffling back over the grass had dread rising up my throat. I’d fucked up, and now the kittens had woken up and were hissing at my beast. Those feisty little guys weren’t scared, and I loved them even more.

Taking my skin, I fell on all fours. Theo’s cheeks blanched of color, and he took hold of the kittens’ leashes and pulled them close.

“What are you?”

I pulled on my shorts, not wanting my cock to distract us. “I’m a shifter.”

I launched into a long explanation about our history and how we lived alongside humans but kept our shifter side in the shadows, fearing what would happen if humans discovered us.

The kittens were wary of me, huddling on Theo’s lap, but gradually, one by one, they crept closer and sniffed me.

“Can we be together? As a couple?” Theo shivered, and goosebumps erupted on his arms and legs.

“Yes. But I couldn’t keep it a secret because shifters don’t marry, they mate and mark one another. And it’s for life. There are no take-backsies.”

He plucked a blade of grass and rubbed it between two fingers. “No divorce?”

I shook my head.

“So we’d be together until one of us goes to the goddess?”

“That’s right.”

“What about children?”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“What about children?” I hadn’t meant to just blurt it out like that. We were hardly in a position to go straight to getting pregnant and what that would mean for our future. But that didn’t seem to stop me.

We were talking about mates, and that was enough to take in. It was a word I’d heard before, obviously, but not in this context. He knew from the moment he smelled me that I was his. And really, if I looked back objectively, I knew he was mine almost instantly too. I didn’t actively smell him or anything like that, but I knew. Deep down, I knew.

And then there was the small fact that he was sometimes a bear. Not the big, cuddly, hairy, gay man kind of bear. Nope. He was a full-on, walk through the woods, steal people’s bird feeders, and sleep all winter kind of bear.

And really, I wasn’t sure if his variety of bear was the kind that liked nuts and seeds, or if they ate meat. Did some bears eat meat? I really needed to brush up on my bear knowledge.

But in any case, he was a furry bear, and I was just me—all human all the time. And that, in itself, was a whole lot to take in. And now, I was just asking about children as if that was a normal, everyday conversation for someone you met less than a week ago.

“Do you mean children between the two of us?”

I nodded, not trusting myself not to babble on about how I didn’t need to have children, and it was okay if he didn’t want them... and all sorts of other excuses I’d

given to other dates in the past when it was all hypothetical. Only now, it didn't feel hypothetical, and I wasn't sure not having kids was a choice I'd want to make. Which was a legitimate thing to feel, but also not something Carlton had given me any reason to worry about.

“Well, the good news is shifters make babies the same way as humans. Two people who love each other very much...”

And now my cheeks were on fire. I wasn't even sure why. I wasn't one to get embarrassed by sex, but in this context, I suddenly was.

“Did you want me to give you a diagram, or maybe show you firsthand?”

Oh gods. I buried my head in my hands. There was nothing less sexy than a birds-and-the-bees diagram. But also, showing me sounded pretty darn good. “Why are you...?” I shook my head. “I do know how to make a baby. I meant, can we have children? Like, does it work with me being human and all. Is that a thing that can happen?”

I'd hate to be the reason Carlton didn't have a family. I could tell just by the way he was with the kittens that he was going to be an amazing father, and if he was with me, maybe he couldn't have that. I wasn't sure I'd be okay with my humanness getting in the way of that for him.

“Yes, I can have cubs with you.” He took both my hands in his. “And I'd like to grow a family with you.

“Cubs? Like they'd come out furry?” There would be no way to hide that from our neighbors.

Carlton shook his head, a playful smile on his face. “Can you even imagine having to

tell a toddler not to let humans see them shift?”

“Toddlers are notoriously shitty at listening.” It was true. “Does that mean they don’t shift that young?”

There was so much I needed to learn about my mate. Mate. Now that I had the word for who he was for me, it felt right and natural.

“Nope, not until their teens.”

That was a relief.

“And if we had children together, they might or might not be bears. We wouldn’t find out until they hit puberty.”

“Are you okay with a child who isn’t a bear?” Way for me to find yet another thing to worry about.

“Any cub I had with you is a cub that belongs in our family.”

His sweetness was just on overload.

The conversation in the bagel place with the nosy old woman came back to me. “So... mating... that’s what that lady in the coffee shop was talking about when she said something was missing?” In this context, that entire interaction was so much clearer.

“Yeah, I felt bad not telling you then, but it wasn’t really the place to talk about bear stuff. There were too many people there, and I couldn’t exactly do a show-and-tell with my beast.”

“Because you’d be arrested for getting naked or because they’d throw you in a zoo?”

“All of the above.”

“How did she know?”

“She sensed our mating bond and then reminded me that maybe I should do something about mate marking you.” He half shrugged.

“Mate marking?”

He’d mentioned it before in his super-abbreviated shifters 101 talk.

“Will it hurt?” It wasn’t a deal breaker if it did. I wanted to know what I was getting into, though.

“Honestly, I can’t say with any certainty. I’ve never been marked before. But if it does, I can’t imagine it would be for long.”

I loved how completely honest he was with me about it. He could’ve been like the parent ahead of me at the dentist during my last cleaning. They kept telling their kid that the filling wouldn’t hurt. And maybe technically it didn’t, but the shot of novocain sure did, and I heard the second they administered it. I’d rather know.

“I’ve been friends with people who got mated, and they told me it was beautiful and the best thing that ever happened to them,” he explained. “Not one mentioned that it caused pain. I suspected that would come up, but I never asked to know for sure.”

The more I thought about it, the sillier the question felt. Why would people get mated if it hurt? I mean, sure, there’s the whole ‘forever is better than marriage’ part to it. But asking someone to go through pain for that seemed almost counterproductive.

Right?

“Even if it was the worst pain in the world, I’d still want to do it,” I said.

“Even papercut-in-salt-water pain?”

“Absolutely. I was thinking maybe we could go home, and you could mark me?” I watched his face carefully. My mate should be one of those professional poker players. I couldn’t get a tell from him to save my life. “Oh, was I being insensitive? Does your bear need to be out here?”

He shook his head. “No, I just thought... Never mind. Let’s get these little guys gathered up and go.”

“I’d love nothing more.

Once home, I opened the door, let the kittens down, and walked inside.

“I probably should have clarified before—there’s a reason why I wanted us to mate here,” I said.

Both of his eyes were fixed on mine.

“See this spot right here?” I walked over to the couch and tapped one cushion. “This is where you sat the first time you came over. And you see this?” I walked over to a picture frame that he had asked me about. “This was when you showed an interest in my family.” And on like that I went, showing him all the ways, perhaps minutely, that this place reminded me of him and why I wasn’t going to give up that part of it.

I stopped babbling and looked up at him, a softness to his face. “What?”

“I’d been concerned that being human, you might not feel as I do, that you liked me well enough, but maybe you didn’t and might not ever feel the pull between us as strongly as I do.” He cupped my cheek. “And now... all of this... with you looking around your space and seeing me... I see fully that you...”

I sealed my lips to his, effectively ending the conversation. It was a nice one, not a topic I wanted to ignore, but if he didn’t have his hands on me in the next ten seconds, I was going to full-on bust.

We stayed there, kissing each other in a way that we communicated all of our feelings without a single word. Kissing turned into hands wandering, turned into Carlton carrying me to my bed and making sweet love to me. And as his orgasm shot through him and I was in the throes of my own, there was a sharp instantly fleeting pain where his partially shifted claw marked me as his.

I could feel the mating snap into place. The feeling was more than joy, though there was that. It was more a sense of completeness.

“I love you, Carlton.”

He collapsed on me, my knot connecting the two of us together physically.

“I love you, Theo. I love you.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

A jangling that reminded me of a jackhammer jolted me out of sleep, though my bear acted as an alarm clock if I slept too late. Theo, who wasn't a morning person, grumbled about it being the middle of the night and flung an arm over my hip.

My mate had the luxury of working from home when he wasn't on a huge project. He complained when I removed his arm and slid out of bed.

"Why do people have to go to work?" he grouched as he sat up, his unfocused eyes staring at a spot on the wall.

"You should start a petition, gather signatures and organize a protest arguing for the right not to work."

Theo tossed a pillow at me, which he did every morning when I made a smartass comment. "Ha freaking ha." He stumbled toward the bedroom door while I shut myself in the bathroom. Once the kittens were allowed into the bedroom, those little stealthy so-and-sos had been known to sneak into the bathroom while I was showering and unravel the toilet paper.

We'd fallen into a routine that worked for us, and even though Theo insisted humans shouldn't be expected to get out of bed before ten, he fed the kittens and emptied their litter tray—because my bear refused to be close to kitten poop—while I got ready for work.

Theo didn't eat until mid morning, but he'd make coffee while I got dressed, and I'd throw down a bowl of cereal before dashing out the door.

As well as meeting my mate and becoming a dad to kittens, that day was also significant because we'd been awarded the contract based on the presentation. I no longer started at nine and finished at five, but got to the office around seven and often left after nine.

But Theo would bring the kittens to a small park up the street from my office, and I'd spend thirty minutes with them at lunch time. He'd either make lunch or buy something from the same deli we bought our picnic from on the day he met my bear.

"How much longer will you be working like this?" he asked every few weeks. He never expected an answer because this was a years-long project. But long hours ensured I got my weekends off and we'd spend twenty-four hours at home, locking the world out, and the second day we'd drive out of the city and I'd give my bear his fur.

The kittens and my bear were great pals, though our babies were always on long leashes when we were in the woods. After my bear hunted, he'd lie on the grass and the kittens would crawl over his big belly and sleep. Theo would snuggle into my bear's side, and we'd nap as a family.

"Carlton, we're fools." Theo was frowning at his phone while I grabbed my messenger bag and slung it across my chest, ready to race out the door.

"Because we have four kittens in a small space? True. Because they destroy every toy we buy them and do the same to the furniture? Also true."

"No." He held up the phone, and I studied his wallpaper which was me and the kitten kids. "Cute."

"No, the date, silly."

For a moment I wondered if it was a weekend and I'd gotten ready for work a day or two early. But I was pretty sure today was Monday, the worst day of the week, when no one wanted to drag themselves into the office and they were longing for Sunday.

I froze. Was it Theo's birthday? Nope. That wasn't for months. My birthday? I wasn't so busy that I'd forget that, and surely my folks would call.

"What's so special about today?" I ventured, worried it was our three- or four-month anniversary and I should have bought flowers or made a reservation in a nice restaurant.

"It's a public holiday."

The word "holiday" repeated in my head. But it took seconds or minutes for my brain to switch from work mode to holiday.

"I get to stay home."

My mate grinned. "I'll make more coffee and toast." He pointed to the bedroom. "Go back to bed."

My messenger bag hit the floor and I toed off my shoes. But rather than leaving them there, I put them on a rack in the cupboard because the kittens would destroy them. I tossed my shirt and pants on an armchair in the corner of the bedroom and dived into bed.

There were two small lumps under the covers, ones that wiggled and jiggled, and I hauled Socks and Midnight out, and they meowed as if I'd ruined their day. The other two, Patches and Fluffy, were chasing a ball around the room while the pair on the bed lay on my chest.

Theo put them on the floor before bringing in the coffee. Hot liquid and bouncy, curious kittens weren't suitable companions. My mate had a pile of toast on a tray, some slathered with PBJ and other slices were covered in lime marmalade.

"All for me?"

Theo held up his coffee mug. "Too early for me, love."

This was luxury, having an extra day to be with my mate and family to do nothing.

"What do you want to do today?" Theo's face was half hidden behind his enormous coffee mug.

My preference was to stay in bed, watch TV, nap, and maybe have sex. But I'd do whatever my mate wanted, because he spent long hours alone with just the kittens for company while I was at the office.

"Not move from the bed other than to get food and go to the bathroom?"

I stroked his cheek, overcome with love for this man who loved shopping and going to museums but who'd ignore his own wishes to do what I wanted.

"Theo, you can be honest. If you'd like to spend the day wandering around an art gallery, we can do that."

He draped my arm over his shoulder and lay down beside me. "How about we compromise? We stay here all day lazing about, and this evening we go out for a meal."

"Good thinking."

A thump alerted us the kittens were up to something, and Theo took the tray while I leaned over the bed. A book that had dropped out of my hand as I slept last night was open, and two of the kittens had the pages in their clutches. My bear took over and growled softly, not enough to scare them, because they weren't easily frightened, but they paused. They glanced at me and then one another, and I picked them up before they destroyed my book.

"It's time." Theo picked up the TV remote.

I rolled my eyes but told him to turn on the TV. He flicked through the channels to a kids' one, and the kittens bounded onto the bed and stared at the screen.

"I wonder how many cartoons is too many," Theo asked before putting on noise-canceling headphones.

I shrugged before putting on my own. If the kittens' reading, writing, and mouse-catching ability was hampered by too much screen time, we'd deal with it. I imagined a kitty teacher with glasses perched at the end of her nose, wagging her paw at me for allowing the kittens to watch TV every day, and I giggled.

When evening rolled around, we put the kittens on their leashes and walked to a nearby restaurant where we could sit outside with our furry children. The kittens were never naughty at the restaurant, knowing the staff would sneak them treats.

"Your fur babies are so well behaved." A woman paused, a cat in a carrier on her back. "How do you do that?" Her cat swiped her head as she was talking and glared at our four "angels."

We told her not to be fooled by their angelic expressions, and she laughed. Her cat hissed at the kittens as the woman walked away.

Theo waited until the woman was out of earshot before muffling his laughter with a napkin. “That cat! I bet he rules the house.”

I joined him in laughing but had to reel the kittens in as they attempted to follow the woman and her snarky cat.

“What were you planning on doing?” I asked them as they wove around my feet. “Four against one sounds like you’d win any battle, but that cat was kinda mean.”

A waiter came out with fishy treats for our little ones, and they forgot whatever they had planned for the cat.

As we strolled home, the kittens pranced in front of us, and people took photos of them. They’d be on social media by the time we got home.

“It’s too early to sleep.” Theo checked his phone after we’d settled our babies in bed.

“First one to be naked gets a blow job.” My shirt was already off.

“No fair.” My mate pouted. “I can’t compete with a shifter.

“I’ll give you a head start. One, two, three...”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

Meeting the family of someone I was dating was no big deal. I just went in, charmed the pants off them, showed them I wasn't a serial killer... done. All was right with the world.

Except any other time I had to meet "the family," it was a random lunch with the parents of someone I kinda liked because they happened to be in town, not someone I was madly in love with. This was different, this meeting mattered. It wasn't just because it was time to take the next step or because their parents were bored while on a trip or because the person I was sort of dating wanted to give their parents a bit of joy. No, this was the real deal. It was different in so many ways.

Not only was I meeting my mate's family, but we'd already made the commitment—the lifetime commitment. This wasn't a "let's see if we all get along" kind of situation. Carlton and I were forever. It made this entire thing far more intense. If they hated me... too bad, so sad, I was already family. Only the too bad would really fall back on me, not them. I was the one seeking acceptance in their world, not the other way around.

"What do you think?" I slowly turned around in my jeans and buttoned shirt. My fashion decision for the evening was to toe the line between casual and conservative. I wasn't even sure why I deemed it necessary, but I did. Maybe it was ingrained in me that this was how you showed respect to your significant other's parents or any important people, really.

"You look delicious, as always," he came over and unbuttoned the top button on my shirt. "And now you can breathe."

It was an accurate statement. I might be used to wearing shirts and ties, but that didn't mean I liked them.

"I was going to put a tie on with that." Not that I wanted to, but it was better to walk in with a tie and take it off than not to have one. At least that was my logic.

"We're going to the restaurant where we had our first date. It's not that big a deal."

It kind of was a big deal, but I let it go. I was glad to see that to him, his parents would of course find me perfectly acceptable, better than maybe to me. I was always gonna worry a little bit. It was my way.

"It's time to go, my love." He kissed my cheek. "They're probably already there."

I glanced at the clock. "It's still almost an hour early."

"My parents are probably already there."

We drove the short distance to the restaurant. I was surprised when I got there to see that there was a sign up saying it was closed for a private function. "I'm so sorry, I should've called ahead. I thought about making a reservation, but the night we were here there didn't seem to have any need, and I just hadn't thought of it."

Please let his parents be like him and flexible. I couldn't think of anything less fun than sitting with his folks at a restaurant they didn't want to be at. Not tonight, anyway.

"There's no need to be sorry." He tipped my chin up with his finger. "The private event is ours." I looked at him as if he had been speaking some weird language from another planet.

“Excuse me. Did you just say this private function is ours? For your parents— you booked the entire restaurant?” That was over the top times one million.

“That’s the thing. It’s not only my parents who will be there.” At least he had the wherewithal to look ashamed for me being so completely in the dark on this one.

“It’s not just your parents. Who is it then?”

“Maybe my entire birth den. I’m not sure who all will be here.”

I took a deep breath and counted to fifteen. Ten was not enough.

“Are you saying that everybody who ever mattered to you growing up is going to be in this room to meet me?”

He nodded again.

“And you didn’t think this was possibly relevant information?”

“It is very much important for you to know,” he agreed, and I gave him some serious side-eye. “Absolutely it is. And when you were walking over here from the car and I went back to get my phone, that’s when I found out.”

“They didn’t tell you either?” We were going to have to set some boundaries with his family if they planned for this kind of thing to be the norm.

“Nope. I didn’t know. They mean well.”

“I guess it’s less stress than if they had us arrange it?” Bright side?

“Agreed.”

“Ground rules: stick to me like glue.”

My mate put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. “I think I can handle that. And if you need to leave, just say something... just say ‘I want to go home.’ There’s no need to cover it up. We didn’t invite these people. They can just have their party without us.”

He meant it too. Another sign that we were a good match. I’d heard enough horror stories at work over the years to know that some partners picked their birth family first, every time. I was a lucky one. Carlton was on my side 100 percent of the time.

We went inside, and the first people I met were his parents. They greeted me with ginormous hugs and welcomes to the family. It was over the top and felt almost performative for a few seconds, but then I saw it for what it was. His parents were thrilled that he found his mate. That was what they cared about. They didn’t need my job to be good enough or my clothing just right or any of that typical nonsense. I was their son’s mate and to them that instantly made me worthy. And this hug? It had been exactly what I needed.

From there, I met cousins and neighbors, aunts and uncles, and even his grandparents.

“You holding up?” he whispered low in my ear.

“I better not get a test after about who is who.” I wasn’t actually kidding. I would full-on fail that exam so quickly. “I don’t think I could even point out all the people that I met.” Or were they people? Bears? Bears that I met.

“The test is Friday and will count as two, given the magnitude of importance,” he deadpanned, and for a nanosecond I wondered if he was serious.

“I guess I’d better eat my final meal before I study to death.” I grabbed his hand, and

we went to our table.

We ate, talked, and even danced a little. A good time was had by all. And in a lot of ways, it felt like what a wedding used to be before they all got over the top with \$7,000 outfits and \$200 dinner plates. Tonight was about family and friends getting together to celebrate the joining of their loved ones. Through that lens, it was perfection.

When it was time to leave later that night, we weren't going because we wanted to be done with together time. No, we left because the waitstaff wanted to leave. Not if they had any chance of getting home to their families before a new day began.

"I really liked your family," I said as I buckled into the car. "They accepted me, not one of them having an outward problem with my humanness."

"My family isn't specieist."

"That's good." It had been something I worried about. I was glad to see that the worry had been a waste. "I really did like them. I'm not just saying that to make you feel more comfortable or whatever."

"Well, that works, because they really liked you too." He turned on the ignition and started to pull out of our parking spot. "I really would have told you earlier if I thought for a second that they were going to do that."

"I know, and now that it is over with, I'm glad I didn't know. I'd have been dreading it, letting it get into my head and mess with me. And it would have been for nothing, because at the end of the day, they're my family too," I said, settling into the idea of having so many people in my life who I still didn't know. I'd figure it out.

He smiled. "Alpha mine, that was exactly the perfect thing to say."

They weren't going to be a part of our daily life. They didn't even live close by. That didn't change the fact that after tonight, I felt like one of them, and I suspected that this feeling would only grow over the years, and I was glad.

“Don’t wait up. Love you.”

I ended the call. Theo hadn’t picked up. He was probably pissed as I’d promised we’d go out to dinner. But the team and I had to order in—crappy pizza—and we’d be working late into the night, sleeves rolled up and needing a shower. The large conference room where we congregated with bottles of water, cans of soda, and mugs of coffee reeked of unwashed bodies.

I hate this place,my beast complained.

He wasn’t the only one.

My working hours were driving a wedge between me and my mate. I reasoned with him that working from home allowed him to take breaks and sneak in an hour of work while I watched TV in the evening. Not that I was in the apartment much except to sleep, and watching TV was a forgotten pastime.

When we finally staggered out the door, my head fell forward on my chest as the elevator made its way to the lobby and finally the parking garage. But as my colleagues strode toward their vehicles, I pushed the button and returned to the lobby. I was too exhausted to drive, even though I’d drunk a coffee an hour earlier.

Squinting at the phone, I ordered a rideshare and slumped against the outside of the building until my phone beeped, telling me the car had arrived. I was tempted to lie down on the back seat, but the driver might’ve been pissed if he had to wake me, or worse, drag me out.

As it was so late and there was little traffic, the car sped through the empty streets and deposited me outside the apartment block. I left the car door open, and the driver yelled, “Hey.” I apologized and closed it as he grumbled about customers having too much to drink.

I couldn’t be assed to correct him, and when I tiptoed into the apartment, one living room lamp was on. Midnight stirred and gave me a look before turning over and ignoring me. He’d chosen a side, and it wasn’t mine.

Thinking Theo and I were on opposite sides of a situation was silly and childish, but there was a chasm between us, and it was getting wider. Tossing off my shoes, I fumbled for my tie before recalling it was over a chair in the conference room.

I flicked off the lamp, and as much as I wanted to tumble into bed, I needed a shower. If I was honest, I wasn’t looking forward to sliding between the sheets and the tension wafting off Theo. Even if he was asleep, which my bear told me he was, him turned away from me suggested he was annoyed. Angry, even.

When we first mated, Theo would stay up and wait for me and we’d talk while I ate leftovers or warmed up the dinner he’d made. And we’d sleep in one another’s arms. And in the morning, we’d go through our morning routine, yawning, complaining about the new day and not enough sleep, and kissing one another multiple times before I swept out the door. Often while waiting for the elevator, I’d dash back inside and we’d kiss again and say how much we’d miss one another during the day.

But lately, Theo would stay in bed, telling me to have a good day, or he’d feed the cats and return to the bedroom, leaving me to shovel cereal in my mouth before going to work.

We were mates and that bond couldn’t be broken. I hadn’t lied when I’d explained to Theo about shifters. But mates could grow apart, even when living in the same home.

Like humans, they had to work at their relationship.

I crawled into bed. Theo was awake, I was certain. His body was so stiff and his breathing wasn't slow and even. But I was so exhausted, I didn't say anything. I didn't have a solution, so what was the point of discussing it in the middle of the night?

Weirdly, ever since we won the contract—the big prize making us the number one construction firm in the city—I'd gotten little satisfaction from my work. I had a hard time focusing, often had to rewrite documents, got distracted during meetings and stared out the window, and it was harder to get my team enthusiastic about the new project when my mind was elsewhere. With Theo was where it was.

The alarm rang as soon as I closed my eyes—or that was how it felt—and I dragged myself out of bed. When I came out of the bathroom, Theo was not in bed, and I trudged into the living room. He glanced at me, mumbling good morning while the cats tumbled around his feet, almost tripping him over.

“Wow, our babies are growing fast.”

My beast drew a sharp breath inside me—I didn't know he could do that—and told me to shut up.

Theo swung around, his jaw clenched. “Of course they're growing, but you're never here.” His voice was decibels higher than usual. “They miss you.”

The fur babies appeared pretty content unraveling a ball of wool. I was pretty sure my mate was talking about himself. I stood behind him and placed a hand on each shoulder, but he tensed and I removed them. A pit of despair formed in my belly, and I imagined coming home one night and being locked out.

No! We can't leave!

We're not going anywhere, I assured my beast, but it was an empty promise because Theo was his own man.

"I'm sorry. This isn't what you signed up for."

Theo turned on his heel, his face reminding me of an angry storm cloud, dark and ready to burst.

"I understand there's give and take in every relationship. There are times when one of us has to travel for work or spend longer hours at the office, but even when you are here, your mind is elsewhere."

My mate's beautiful big eyes glistened with tears, and the trembling of his lower lip chipped a piece off my heart. I hesitated to hug him, but my beast urged me to. Better to be rejected than not try was his advice. But he was a beast, what did he understand about affairs of the heart?

It was the single tear trickling over Theo's cheek that almost broke me, and I outstretched my arms. He didn't hesitate and he fell into them, his sobbing echoing on my chest. My tears mingled with his, and I reflected on how I could have lost the most important person in my world. I still might. One hug didn't resolve anything.

Theo wiped the tears from his face with the back of his hand. "I love you, Carlton. But you have to go to work."

That was weird, my mate who resented me being at the office telling me to get out and go there. I was conflicted, thinking I should call in sick and thrash this out with Theo, not let it fester any longer.

“Go. If you’re able to get away earlier tonight, we can order in and discuss what our future looks like.” He gripped my hand, his fingers entwined with mine, just like our lives, and I was reluctant to let him go.

“It’s okay.” He sniffed and attempted a smile. “We’ll be here when you get back. All five of us.”

The kittens attacked my shoes. Were they playing or telling me I’d better do what Theo asked or else?

“Promise. I’ll leave by seven.” I whipped out the phone and texted the team.

Early night tonight. Done by seven.

I received thumbs-up emojis along with fireworks and party poppers. There was also one eggplant. That had to be a mistake. Theo giggled when I showed him, his laughter reminiscent of a wind chime, something I hadn’t heard in a while.

“I gotta go, but I’ll send you eggplant and peach emojis during the day.”

He cracked up and placed a hand over my heart. “Just come home. That’s all I ask. And drive carefully.”

As soon as he said that, I recalled I left the car at work last night. But sitting in a rideshare allowed me to send the first of my eggplant and peach emoji combination.

Stop. But if you weren’t going to the office, I’d ask for the real thing.

Being at work won’t stop me. While I hated people who went to the bathroom and used their phones—gross. Think of the germs on the phone—I’d lock my door, close the blinds, and snap a pic or two. Nobody would know.

I was one of the first people in the office, and I raced to my office, not even stopping for coffee. Slamming the door, I got dick pic one done and sent. By lunch time, I'd sent ten and had almost gotten caught, having to sit at my desk with my pants around my knees. Thank gods I had a big old wooden desk and no one could see my lower half.

Theo had to be happy with the stream of pics, and being at home, he sent a video of him jerking off. Damn!

Now I want one of your hole!he texted.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

Carlton was a walking pile of nerves and guilt. I hadn't realized how much this was impacting him. I thought he was busy and tired, sure. But this went so much deeper than that. He couldn't continue working like this. It was going to put him in an early grave, and frankly, I liked the guy and wanted him to stick around.

The only problem was that I didn't know what to do about it. Sure, I was picking up the pieces around the house and that was helpful, but it didn't seem like enough. If this was a forever situation, I'd probably suggest that he go looking for a new job, even one within the company. It simply wasn't sustainable.

But this was a big project, which meant that in theory it would have an ending point. And we could work through anything short term. Or so I kept telling myself. It was getting more difficult by the day to see him getting more and more worn out and frankly miserable.

That and I missed him.

I put the two cat carriers on the bed. My furry companions had a follow-up appointment from when we got them fixed. I was pretty sure that entailed a vaccine or two, as well. They were not going to be impressed by more needles, but it was needed.

Ideally, I'd have asked Carlton to take the day off so he could help. When we took them the first time, having two sets of hands made a ginormous difference. He had a big meeting this morning though, and I didn't want to pester him about it. I'd been doing that more and more often lately; letting him know about things after they happened. Why would I pester him about an electrical switch that needed repairs,

when I could let him know after it was done that all was good?

Because he was my mate and not some random person, that was why. And that was another thing that made all of this more difficult than it needed to be. In my quest to protect him, I was putting a wall between us, and it needed to end. And it would... when this project was over.

Our fur babies loved to sleep and eat. Those were their two favorite things to do. Ninety percent of the time that was all they did. But of course, now that I wanted to get them into the carriers, they were running around like it was their job.

It wasn't even that they were scared, either. One of them had pounced on the ring from around the milk gallon when I dropped it, and everything went to chaos from there. I had to laugh at all the money I spent spoiling them to have a single piece of garbage be their new prized possession.

"Come on, guys. We're going for a nice ride." They would have no reason to believe me about the nice part, even if they did understand me. The last time I took them anywhere, they came home having been fixed. It was hardly a great track record on my part.

I thought back to the time we brought them on our picnic, when Carlton showed me his beast for the first time. It was by far one of the best days of my life. Maybe I needed to set us up with another picnic. It might be a nice way to give my mate a break from all his daily stress.

After five minutes of playing their game of "dodge the human as we chase a chunk of plastic," I finally resorted to pulling out the treats. It worked... ish... and fifteen minutes later I was out the door and on my way.

The vet was far easier to handle than getting them there. They were super nice at the

office, and everyone oohed and awwwed over our sweet babies. The vet even gave us discounts for our visits because, “Superheroes deserve rewards.” I hardly called being at the dumpster at the right time heroic, but I gladly took the discount. Pets were expensive.

Once we arrived home, I let them out, and they went straight to the patch of sun they loved this time of day and curled up in one huge ball together. Why couldn’t they have been doing that when I was getting ready to leave? It was a good thing they were so adorable because I couldn’t even be mad at it.

“I see how it is. Sleep when I’m not trying to grab you.” They ignored my teasing.

I’d taken the entire day off of work. Things around the house needed tending to, and if I could get them done while Carlton was at work, he wouldn’t feel like he needed to help. At least that was my logic.

Pouring a cup of now-cold coffee, I made a mental plan on how to tackle everything. I started by putting in a load of laundry and then worked room by room until the entire place was back to normal. It took a lot longer than I thought it would, and I realized I was going to need to pivot on my dinner choices if it was going to be done before bedtime.

I grabbed a quick shower and ran to the grocery store for some shrimp. Carlton loved my shrimp pasta, and it was a quick meal I could throw together when he got home instead of the beef I’d originally planned. Maybe it was time to invest in a slow cooker.

My phone buzzed in my pocket while I was in the checkout lane, and I waited until I was outside to look at it. My mate had been fond of sending me pictures I wasn’t willing to share with anyone else.

Good news. The power is out at work. I'm on my way home.

How sad was it that having a power outage was considered a positive?

Yay! I love u! I punctuated it with a smiley face and raced home.

I put the hot water on for the pasta, letting it come up to temperature as I put the rest of the few groceries I'd picked up away. Garlic bread was in the oven, the table set, and the shrimp only five minutes from being done when he walked in.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" He crossed the room and kissed my cheek. "Something smells delicious." He eyed the shrimp. "You are the best."

"I have my moments. If you want to take a quick shower or change, there is about ten minutes to play with." I twisted the burner down a touch.

"Play? That sounds delightful." He grabbed my ass. "But maybe we could save that until after dinner."

His words were playful, but his eyes? They showed a heaviness.

I had dinner on the table when he came back in, hair damp, my favorite pair of his pajama pants low on his hips and wearing a fitted tee.

"Looks delicious."

"I was just thinking the same," I said with a wink, and we started to eat.

"You did my laundry."

I nodded.

“You didn’t need to do that.” He grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss.
“Thank you.”

“I had the day off anyway. It was the follow-up visit to the vet, and I had some things to do around here. I don’t mind.”

He set down his fork.

“I mind. I hate that so much is falling on you, that I have the best day ever because someone hit a transformer with their truck and I had to leave work early, that this is the first time I’ve seen you at a reasonable hour in two weeks. I hate it all.”

“I do too,” I confessed. “But it’s only for a project. We can do this.”

“But then it will be the next project and the next. I understand if you...”

“Don’t you even think about saying it. I love you, Carlton. We will figure this out.” I wanted him to feel supported and not pressured. Careers were important, and I wouldn’t want anyone to tell me how to deal with mine. “Do you like your job?”

“I worked hard to get where I am.” Which wasn’t an answer to my question.

“But do you like your job?”

“I used to think I did.”

“And now?”

“Now it’s... it... I don’t like the way it sucks up my entire life and keeps me from you. Yes, it’s worse than normal, but the reality is that I will always work more than full-time. Being single, it kept the loneliness at bay. But now? Now I wonder if

maybe I should've made other choices along the way.”

I pushed my chair out, stood up, and led him by the hand to the couch where we could sit and have this conversation without the table in the way. We were soon joined by four furry loves, and we hashed everything out. If Carlton had told me he loved his work, it would've gone a very different direction, but he didn't. And when all was said and done, he was going to put his foot down about working late nights and begin looking for a new position.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“There’s a new exhibit at the museum downtown.” Theo was scrolling through the What’s on this weekend app. “It’s got a great write-up.”

We’d agreed that we needed to get out of the rut that was spending every Saturday in bed and Sundays in the woods where my beast shifted.

“Maybe.” I didn’t bother to remove the pillow from my head because I didn’t have the energy. Getting up, showering, and looking at old things—or was it modern quirky objects this month?—didn’t excite me, and I hoped I could convince my mate to revert to the old schedule just this once.

But Theo tossed the pillow to the bottom of the bed, and I fumbled for the covers. There was too much light, even though I had my eyes closed.

“Hello. It’s after ten. We’ve spent most of the morning in bed.”

“The perfect place to be.” I was hoping Theo would give up and make coffee, leaving me to snooze, but he ripped the covers off me.

“Talk about cruel and unusual punishment.” I rolled onto my belly and lay face down, trying to block out all light.

Theo sighed. He’s giving up. I can go back to sleep. But fingers attacked my underarms and sides. Damn, he was sneaky ‘cause he knew how ticklish I was.

“Fine. You win. I give in to your demands.” I flung myself out of bed and stood upright for a second or two before the room spun around and I staggered backward. I

scrunched my eyes closed, and with my arms flailing, I grabbed the bedding instead of the mattress and sagged onto the floor.

“Carlton?” Theo’s warm breath billowed onto my ear. “If you really don’t want to go, just say that. Don’t pretend.” The mattress squeaked, suggesting he was now lying down.

“Not a joke, love.” I tried to lift my arm but didn’t have the energy. “Can you help me up? I don’t feel so good.”

My mate was at my side, a hand on either side of my face. “I knew you’d get sick from overwork. No way am I letting you go to the office Monday.” He hauled me into bed. “I’m getting a thermometer from the bathroom. Don’t move.”

What’s wrong with you? You seem different.

Having my beast say I wasn’t quite right was disconcerting, and as well as an icky belly and a head that was spinning like a toy I had as a kid, I was now worried something was really wrong with me. Firstly, shifters didn’t suffer the illnesses that felled humans, whether they were commonplace or serious. But if my symptoms were caused by overwork... maybe shifters weren’t immune to that. What did I know and thinking hurt my head.

“Open wide.”

Gods, how many times had we said that to one another when a blow job was imminent or even a fuck. I parted my lips enough for Theo to place the thermometer under my tongue.

“Is it time yet?” I mumbled. I hated having that thing in my mouth. Cock was a much better option, but not today.

Theo studied the device. “Normal.”

According to the human scale of what was “normal,” I wasn’t and never would be, but he was referring to my temperature. No fever. I’d never had one, unless being hot and bothered when having sex with my mate caused a rise in temperature. When we were fucking it could be described as feverish.

Not the same.

How did you get to be so smart? I asked my bear.

“Stay in bed, and I’ll make chicken soup.” Theo bustled into the kitchen, accompanied by mews from our four fur babies.

I stuffed a fist in my mouth as bile rose up my throat. The thought of eating made me want to puke, but Theo and I’d had a rocky experience with me working all the time. I kept my mouth shut. When a loved one was ill, cooking for the patient was one way to feel useful. Glancing left and right, there were no potted plants I could tip the soup in without my mate’s eagle eyes noticing.

Eagle?

It’s an expression. I’ll explain later.

If Theo left me alone to shop for food or feed the kittens, I could tip it down the bathroom sink. Oops, no. It would clog the drain, and I’d have two huge problems; one, I’d need a plumber, and two, Theo would be peeved—and he’d have every right to be.

But my stomach was complaining. Not for food, but it wasn’t happy, and I had an internal hammer thumping my forehead.

Do you feel that? Surely my bear couldn't be unaffected.

Feel what?

There was my answer. What if we shifted here on the floor, maybe my symptoms would disappear?

Your mate would hear a big thump.

That was true, and he'd rush in, holding a chicken, and he might shriek. And the kittens would be all over my bear wanting to play. Theo would pick up that something was up. My well-behaved beast never shifted in the apartment.

Theo was humming as he prepared the soup, but it would take ages to cook, so I settled in for a nap. Perhaps when the soup was ready, I'd be up to eating it.

"I'm so glad I made some yesterday and I just had to heat it up." My mate's voice was accompanied by a pungent aroma, and I gulped, telling what little food was in my belly to stay where it was.

My head, my tummy, everything hurt or was complaining. With one eye open, I studied the tray Theo was holding. He stood expectantly, waiting I guessed for me to sit up and thank him. I managed to haul myself into a sitting position, though the room sagged to one side as I did, and I leaned the other way to counter it.

"Your head's all floppy. That's serious." He yanked at the bedclothes and threw pillows off the bed before finding his phone. "I'm taking you to the ER."

"Love, as a shifter, I don't get sick. It's a known fact."

He hovered over me, concern etched on his face. "Can your shifter abilities fade?"

No! Tell him no, please. Now he was pounding on my head. Ouch! My poor bear was frantic, and I understood his anxiety. If me as a shifter ceased to be, he would too. Not that it could happen. I had heard rumors, but that was all they were.

No! No, you didn't!

Sorry. I was messing up left, right, and center.

Wait. Maybe your mate is right, and I'm going away.

Why do you say that? Now I was a little freaked out.

Because I'm not alone in here.

"What?" I jumped out of bed, forgetting about my dizziness, and Theo grabbed my arm and righted me. "There's something or someone growing inside me, and my bear thinks he's going to be pushed out."

I fumbled for my phone on the nightstand. I had to get in touch with the shifter council. They might advise me and offer suggestions on how to combat what was happening.

"Did you say growing inside you?" Theo slumped onto the bed.

I staggered around the bed and took his hands. "I'm not going anywhere and neither is my bear. Don't worry, love. I'll sort this out with the council."

My mate made a face. "I doubt the people who issue building permits and argue about road repairs can help."

I didn't have the energy to disagree, so I scrolled through my phone contacts until

Theo put a hand on mine.

“You might have someone inside you.” He gave a half smile, but it disappeared when I frowned. “As in a little one?”

“Little one what? Like a tumor?”

“No, Carlton.” He pressed his fists into his eyes. “A baby. Could you be pregnant?”

“Baby?” I repeated.

Baby? Am I sharing this space with a baby? I’m still the boss in here, right?

“I suppose it’s possible.”

My mate giggle-snorted. “Possible? Just possible?”

“Okay. Ummm, I’d ask my bear, but he seems as confused as me.”

Maybe.

Maybe what? I asked him.

Thesomeone that moved in here might be a baby.

I chuckled for the first time today. He described it as if the little one arrived with a suitcase and barged in.

It is. I didn’t know what to look for, but it is a baby.

“He says it is,” I told my mate.

“I don’t mean to be rude.” Theo lowered his voice. “But he was freaking a moment ago thinking he was about to be tossed out. Should we take a test to be sure?”

My beast harrumphed, but I told him to cool it. Theo was still new to shifterly ways.

“I’ll dash to the pharmacy.”

He didn’t lie. He was back lickety split, and I peed on it. And when he checked, the two lines confirmed my beast was right.

Told you.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

I was going to be a father. I couldn't think of anything better than that... aside from my mate finally getting out of his craptastic job. His pregnancy was zapping energy from him like nobody's business, and adding that on top of his workload? He was walking around half asleep, and I hated it for him.

No more late nights was working out well for us as a family, but I knew it was adding pressure to him at work. It meant that he needed to get even more done during the week, and he had already been given too much of that. Fingers crossed that one of his job leads would pan out for us.

I pulled up to his office where he was waiting, and he climbed inside and kissed my cheek. "Thanks for coming to get me."

"I never give up a chance to spend time with my mate."

He flinched.

"I didn't mean it like that. I meant... I was being silly." I felt bad that he carried so much guilt over working such long hours. He didn't need to. All of this was an adjustment to both of us, and besides that, he was doing something about it.

"I know. Can I get a Mulligan on the account of hormones racing through my body?"
He rested his hand on my knee.

"You don't need one, my love. You don't need one." I pulled away from the curb.
"But what you do need is a break from work, and I have the perfect idea."

Carlton's big meeting for the day was canceled, leaving him with a chunk of time "open." He told me he wanted to hide away and take a nap, and I told him I'd do him one better, and I planned to do just that. Not that sleeping under a desk and hoping no one saw you was a difficult thing to top.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" he asked, and I shook my head.

"Nope. But trust me, you'll love it." At least I hoped he would. If nothing else it would get him out of the office for a while, and that had to make it worth it.

"I can't believe we are going to be dads." Carlton had to be used to this conversation by now. I brought it up often enough. I couldn't help it—it would hit me out of nowhere again and again. I never thought I could be this happy.

Carlton told me that we wouldn't know for sure if our baby was a bear or not until they hit puberty. I didn't have a preference, as long as they were happy and healthy. That was all that mattered to me. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious. It was scary knowing that I might be raising someone I didn't fully understand. My mate assured me over and over that I was the exact father this baby needed. I really hoped that was right. Because I knew nothing about what it was like growing up as a bear, and I wanted our baby to have the best.

"I sometimes wonder if I'm going to wake up and have this all be a dream too, my love."

The store I was taking us to was close to his office and shared a parking lot with my favorite steak-and-cheese place. Worst-case scenario we had great sandwiches. Best-case scenario, we had a new bed.

"Lunch or shopping first?" I asked as I drove into the lot.

“Shopping?”

“Yeah, I thought we could pick out a new mattress for us.” While my bed was soft, he preferred hard, and I figured it was best for us to find one that worked for us both, especially with him being pregnant. He needed a good night’s sleep more than ever.

“Really?”

“You don’t want to? That’s fine. I just thought...”

“No, I want to. ‘Really?’ Was more of an ‘I can’t believe my mate is so unbelievably considerate that he would think of this’ and not ‘Why is he doing this?’”

“I’m glad. Which first?”

“Let’s do bed testing because I can always bring my sandwich back to the office if it takes us too long in there.”

Technically speaking, the store was a furniture outlet and not just for mattresses. I’d looked at a few of the mattress-only places and quickly found out they were either overpriced so they could have a perpetual sale, were brand specific, or had horrible reviews. This felt like the best option.

We walked inside, hand in hand, and must’ve looked like serious buyers because three sales people raced to us, the first one grinning at the others after we told him we could use some help. I regretted it instantly because he was our shadow for the next half an hour trying to upsell us on everything and not once listening to what we wanted before showing us the next option.

“Thank you so much. I think my sweetie and I will need a few minutes to confer.” I wanted him gone and was trying to be nicer than I longed to be. Pretty sure telling

him I'd had enough of his bullshit and to leave us alone wasn't going to help us any.

"Thank you," my mate murmured close to my ear before nibbling on my earlobe.

"We can leave or look ourselves. Your choice."

Had this not been the best place to go looking for a mattress, I'd have said we should leave. But it was, and they weren't exactly the type of thing you could buy online. I mean, I suppose you could, but I doubted the results would be as good as if you tried them out first.

"Let's try them out. If he continues to be a butt, we can regroup."

"Deal."

Finding the right mattress was a heck of a lot easier once he was out of our way. We already knew what kind we wanted, it was just which brand and firmness level. Less than ten minutes later our decision was made. The sales associate was more than happy to ring us up, and it was available for delivery same day. We couldn't ask for much better.

We hadn't officially decided to live together yet. I wasn't sure why. We didn't sleep apart—ever. I blamed my humanness on it. To me we were already going at warp speed. Adding moving in together, while it was something I wanted, seemed too quick of a thing to bring up, which was ridiculous given he was carrying my baby, but so be it.

"Where would you like it delivered?" the man asked, and without skipping a beat, Carlton gave him my address. It made sense. We were there more often than not thanks to our little furry matchmakers.

"Lunch?" I held out my hand, and he took it.

“Lunch.”

The steak-and-cheese place lived up to the hype, both of us enjoying the greasy goodness. I’d read somewhere that things like this were good for pregnant bellies. Carlton hadn’t had many issues yet, but they were probably around the corner. He’d already started to not want some of his normal favorites, and I was pretty sure that was a precursor to morning sickness. I hoped not, but all signs indicated yes.

“Let’s get you back to work before your boss thinks I kidnapped you.”

As much as that place sucked my mate’s lifeforce, the people were nice, and I could see why he never wanted to let them down. If there were a way for him to keep his job and not have it put him in an early grave I’d be all for it. He’d been looking at their postings to see if there was a job with fewer hours opening up. So far there hadn’t been, but it wasn’t a lost cause.

“I don’t wanna.” He stuck out his bottom lip in a faux pout.

“You can call in sick for the afternoon?”

“No. I have things to do, but all this talk of a new bed has me wanting to use it already.”

Me too, but I wasn’t thinking about a nap. My mind was in a far dirtier place, and I loved it.

“Good thing it’s coming tonight. We can try it out as soon as you get home, if they are on time.” Which was another reason I was getting antsy for time.

I needed to strip our bed, get the babies shut off in another room so they didn’t get stepped on or have a mattress dropped on their little bodies, and finish up my own

work. I was getting to be as busy as my mate. But at least mine were because of fun things. At least the mattress part.

“Fine. Bring me back to work. And don’t think I’m not on to you,” he sassed.

“On to me?”

“You just want to drop me off so you can ogle my ass as I walk inside.”

“Now I do.” I giggled, and as I dropped him off, I did exactly that. I needed to take my mate to work more often.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“What are you doing home so early?”

I hadn’t used my key, and I’d been leaning, or more like sagging, on the wall waiting for Theo to open the door.

“Took the rest of the afternoon off.” I staggered inside and collapsed on the couch.

“Gods, you’re having a rough time with all-day sickness.” My mate brought my favorite water bottle, the huge one with the big straw, and I sipped tiny drinks so the water didn’t annoy my tummy.

“Can I help you to bed?” My mate kissed my brow, and the kittens tumbled into the room. They’d probably been toilet papering the bathroom, and I didn’t care.

“Don’t think I can move.”

Theo removed my shoes and grabbed a packet of crackers. Gross as it was to eat dry crackers, they calmed my belly, along with ginger tea. But I was fed up with the tea and was convinced my pores were secreting a mild ginger aroma. I sniffed my arms so frequently, my assistant gave me side-eye.

One by one, the kittens jumped on the sofa. One sat on my head, two on my feet, and the fourth snuggled under one arm. None of them attempted to sit on my belly, as though they sensed that was a no-no.

Socks, who was balanced on my head, leaned over and studied my eyes. He was such a cool little dude, wanting my bear to shine through my gaze. It was a sure way of

getting all four kittens to sleep, though the others didn't appear to be interested right now.

Should I growl?

No. Socks might accidentally scratch my face, or worse, my eye.

I allowed my bear to be at the forefront of my gaze. Socks froze, his fur spiked. He wriggled his little kitten nose, before sniffing the air as though he could scent my bear and collapsing on my chest.

"Glad someone's content." I munched on a cracker, crumbs spilling on the couch and inside my shirt. Midnight and Fluffy inspected and then rejected the crumbs. I didn't blame them.

"I made clear broth and thought that might not upset your tummy, perhaps with a slice of toast." Theo spent his days on pregnancy blogs—interspersed with work—searching for foods that wouldn't roil my belly.

"I'd like that, love. I'll shower first."

My mate removed Socks from my chest, and he cuddled into Theo. The other three leaped onto the floor, perhaps wanting food. Or they didn't want to miss out on any excitement. There was nothing of interest happening with me.

"This is yummy." Theo served the soup and toast on a tray while I propped myself up with pillows. "But when I'm done, I'm ready for a nap."

Theo pursed his lips, a signal he wanted to broach something awkward and was waiting for the right moment.

“Out with it.” I slurped the last of the soup. As any soup devotee would know, soup had to be slurped, not sipped, to show the cook or chef how much you enjoyed it. Sadly, Theo wasn’t aware of that rule, and he cringed when I did it. He also begged me not to do it in front of our child.

“I was thinking...” He was getting closer to bringing it up, whatever it was. “Your job requires a lot of you and...”

“I’m way ahead of you, love.”

“You’re quitting?” Both Theo’s brows shot up. “Wow! I didn’t expect you to agree so easily.”

“Not quite.” His face fell, and I rushed on, not wanting him to misunderstand. “I spoke to my boss.” He and I had been discussing giving Dan, my assistant project manager, more responsibility, but we didn’t think he was ready to take on a project by himself. “And I’m going to work two days a week and job share with Dan.”

It was a great solution because I didn’t really want to look for a new job, but I couldn’t continue working the hours I had been.

“And you’re happy with that?” Theo had the look of someone who was bursting to celebrate but was waiting for me to give the okay.

“Yes.” I’d worked so hard to reach my current position, and I was happy with the company and my boss. “And I start next week.” Dan was up to speed and with me at the end of the phone and on site two days each week, there was no need for a long drawn-out goodbye. Not that I was saying farewell, but my relationship with my colleagues would change when I wasn’t with them Monday to Friday.

Theo flung his arms around my neck. “Me too.” He smirked and tapped his lips. “But

having you around three days a week, or make that five, might be a huge problem.”

What? No. I thought I’d smoothed out the difficulties, and now my mate was saying, “Hold on.”

“I might be distracted by your presence and my work will suffer.” He giggled. “You might have to sit in the naughty corner.”

“Oh no. Will I be naked? And if I continue to be naughty, will you smack me?”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Theo. “Maybe, but only after the baby is born. I’m not smacking my pregnant mate’s ass no matter how much he begs.”

“I can’t wait.” To hold our baby but also to have alone time and have Theo whack my ass.

“And as you’re going to be earning less, it might be time to give up your apartment.”

I should have done it as soon as we mated, but any free time I had, I wanted to spend with Theo. And having sex. Lots of sex.

The following Saturday, we left the kittens to do their worst at Theo’s, or at home. It was our home now. And I sorted through boxes I’d never unpacked since my last move, family photos and old receipts. We sold the furniture, other than a lamp I’d bought with my first ever paycheck, and donated the rest. Some of the plates and utensils I’d had since college.

As my all-day sickness waxed and waned, I wasn’t in the mood to clean the place, so we hired someone. I hadn’t expected to be emotional when closing the door for the last time and handing over the key, but my eyes welled with tears as I said goodbye. Silly pregnancy hormones. My gramps used to say goodbyes were often sad, but

there was often a hello around the corner.

“Where should I put this?” I held up the box containing the lamp. Theo already had living room and bedroom lamps.

“Maybe in the spare room?” He turned away and stuck his head in the fridge.

“But no one will see it there except the kittens.” And they might knock it over.

“When we have guests, they’ll use it.” Theo was ferreting about in the fridge.

“Oh no, love. That will become the nursery. We can use it when I feed the baby at night.”

My bear cleared his throat, or as close as a shifter animal could.

What? Is there something I’m missing?

Theo doesn’t like the lamp.

But it’s beautiful. And it was special. It was cheap as chips, but no one ever forgot their first paycheck.

“Theo.”

“Mmmm.” He was taking forever choosing ingredients from the fridge. Maybe he was planning on moving in there.

“Do you not like my lamp?”

“I know how special it is to you.”

He hadn't answered my question, but I supposed he sort of had by avoiding it.

"It's not suitable for a baby's room."

I studied the base which was a naked guy, his cock hard and ready. My mate was right. Not for a baby. But there was nowhere else to put it. My mate emerged from the depths of the fridge.

"You might not like this, but what if you donated it, perhaps to college students who would appreciate the dimensions of the cock. I'll take photos of you with the lamp as a memento, and in years to come, we can look back at it and laugh."

Gramps's words about goodbyes and hellos echoed in my head.

"And when our kids are adults, we'll show them the photos."

My mind zigzagged from cock and lamp to kids. "Are we planning on more than one?" I wasn't halfway through this pregnancy and was already wishing I had a time machine and could zoom ahead to the birth.

"Maybe. I'd have to discuss it with my mate." He poked the tip of his tongue between his lips. Damn him, he knew that got me hot and bothered.

"Okay. Let's do it."

"Pretty sure you have to wait until after the birth to get pregnant again." He flapped a bunch of celery at me.

"No, the lamp." There were a bunch of college kids in the next street over. "Take my pic and we'll take the lamp over tomorrow. But on one condition."

“Which is?” Theo left the salad ingredients and grabbed his phone.

I yanked down my pants. “When we look at the pics we can compare my cock” —I held the lamp close to my crotch— “to his.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

A booming crash pulled me from the most sexy dream I'd ever had. Carlton and I were on a cruise ship of all places, someplace I never saw myself being. And of course, the cats were with us, as was our baby. All five of them were sound asleep, and the two of us were sitting on the deck outside our room. Maybe it wasn't a deck, maybe it was a balcony—I didn't even know what they called them in my dream or in real life. That was how much I'd looked into going on cruises before the dream. After the dream, I was contemplating checking them out. It had been that good.

The two of us were sitting there, and I decided it was time for dessert. We looked around, and there were tons of people everywhere, of course; it was a cruise. But no one was looking directly at us. As I got down on my knees between his legs, not caring if every single person on that cruise saw what I was about to do, the crash pulled me from my slumber.

When I first woke up with a start, I hadn't realized that I was awake and that it was not still my dream. I feared that the balcony had collapsed, and I was somehow on the main part of the ship in a pile of rubble. Once I was out of bed and into the other room, I saw what had really happened. The cat condo was on the ground in many pieces. "Crap," I mumbled.

Carlton followed me out and was standing behind me. "Oh." He rested his hand on my shoulder. "Maybe next time we need to get a shorter one."

I wasn't sure if that was the solution to the problem, but this one had definitely seen its last day, and they used it all of the time.

"Yeah, maybe."

We spent about fifteen minutes picking up the chunks and piling them up for the trash. Nothing else in the living room was broken, so that was a plus and pretty shocking.

Things were a little crowded now that we'd moved in together. I'd been pretty minimalist before the move, so it worked for the most part. And what hadn't fit and that we didn't want to get rid of, we put in a storage unit to figure out later. We didn't want to make any rash decisions, but also, we didn't want to live with piles of items we had no immediate use for.

It was great finally living together—not that we hadn't been already, you know, been doing so. But now we officially lived in one place. One bonus was that doing so helped alleviate some of my mate's stress over having his income being cut with the job share. I had plenty of income for us both, now that we had one shared space. If we still had two places, that would be different. Double the electricity, taxes, and all of the other expenses that came with it would've sucked up my savings pretty quickly.

"I guess I know how we're spending our Saturday." I wrapped my arms around my mate and held him close. "What do you think about going cat condo shopping?"

"I think we might end up with more of the same," he said. I wasn't sure if he was right or not, but I couldn't remember seeing anything sturdier at the pet store, but to be fair, that day had been pretty overwhelming.

"All right, bed first, and then in the morning we decide." He grabbed my hand, and the two of us went and climbed into the bed that I lovingly called our "Three Bears" bed, even though there was only one actual bear. It was just right.

I snuggled in close, wrapping my arm around him, listening to him breathe until his breaths evened down and his soft snores began. It was only then I let myself follow

along behind him.

We woke pretty early in the morning for a Saturday, especially for having interrupted sleep. But since we were up, we decided to go out and get breakfast before the store opened.

The place we decided to go to eat was famous for their waffles, and Carlton had been craving them all week. He wanted one that they called the Super Berry Deluxe. Apparently, there had been an advertisement for it on the radio, and he couldn't get it out of his mind.

And once I saw it arrive at the table, I could see why. If I hadn't known he was a bear before, then I certainly would have figured it out after seeing his food. It was topped with all different kinds of berries, nuts, and honey. It was like the trifecta of bear stereotypes.

"Is that as good as it looks?" I asked.

He mumbled around his food and then pushed the plate toward me, offering me a piece.

I said, "No, I think I'm going to stick with mine."

There was nothing about my plate of food that should be called breakfast. I had a chocolate waffle with strawberry sauce that was less fruit and more sugar, and all of that was topped with whipped cream. It was perfection, but also nowhere in the realm of nutritious.

I offered him a bite, and he took one look at it and started to turn green.

"Just kidding." I pulled it back toward myself.

His morning sickness was getting better, but it still wasn't perfect. We both held on to the fact that everyone said that it meant that the pregnancy was healthy and the baby was doing great. Didn't make me like him being sick any more, but it was reassuring that he wasn't coming down with some kind of stomach ailment, or worse... something was wrong with our baby.

"Ready, Freddie?" I signed the credit card slip for the bill and slid out of the booth.

"Ready." He joined my side, and we were on our way to the store a minute later.

We tried a different pet place this time, one that the computer said specialized in all things cat. Once inside we found out that was a very accurate description. There was one entire wall of just cat treats, and most of them were the same kind you would find in the grocery store, but some of them were freeze-dried different kinds of fish. And I wasn't sure what some of them were—possibly bugs.

I didn't look too carefully. We were gonna stick with the grocery store variety. I had a feeling once you started with the fancy fish ones, you were going to have some very picky cats. That and they warned of the smell on the back of the package. Didn't need to be adding any of that to our lives, especially now with my omega being pregnant.

"We should look at one of those fancy cat boxes," he said.

"Fancy?"

"The fancy ones that do all of the changing for you."

"Oh. It's fine. We don't have to." I half wondered if they even worked.

"I want to. I feel bad now that I'm pregnant and I'm not allowed to help with that. Not that I did before. My bear hates cat poop. Or any poop."

I hadn't felt bad in the least; it wasn't a task I particularly hated. I knew it was supposed to be the worst thing ever, but it made life for the cats better, and that made it no big deal in my book. Besides, I'd rather keep our babies safe than worry about some hypothetical rare whatever.

"We can look, but honestly, I don't mind doing it."

"I know, but it would make me feel better," he said.

And five minutes later, the sales associate talked us into some fancy fandangled contraption that had special lights that killed germs or something and odor catchers and was great for multiple cats, and the list went on and on. Hopefully, the thing didn't scare them.

"Let's go look at the condos."

And when we went to look, there were condos galore. But all of them had the same issues as the one that we had that crashed to the ground—a lack of stability. Each and every one of them looked as if they would go tumbling down.

"Are you looking for something particular?" a woman wearing the green smock with the store logo asked.

We told her the story, and she nodded understandingly.

"Have you thought about a cardboard palace?" I had not thought about it, nor had I known it existed in any real way until she led us over to it.

They didn't have any set up, but looking at the marketing material, they were impressive. And they for sure wouldn't be falling down. The base was too sturdy for that.

“They’re modular, so you just can type away on the screen,” she explained. “It’ll tell you which pieces you need and print out the layout and personalized instructions for you.”

That caught my attention.

Carlton enjoyed configuring the whole thing. We ended up paying a lot more for random cardboard than I thought I ever would, and I was surprisingly excited about it.

“Is it weird we just bought them a box when they came in a box?” he asked as we walked out with our new cat litter box and a cart full of cardboard.

I shrugged. “Nah, I think it’s good.”

We were soon to find out.

“Can we bring the kittens?”

The four furry little ones were doing their best to trip me up as I wandered from the bedroom into the living room. They loved snuggling against my belly and meowed when the baby kicked. I wondered if they “talked” to the baby, but that upset my bear who grumbled and huffed that not even he could talk to our little one.

“No, babe. No furry creatures are allowed in the clinic.”

I’ll be there, and I’m furry.

But no one can see you.

Theo had been reluctant for me to have an ultrasound, fearing I’d have a tiny bear nestled inside me. “At best the technician will faint, and at worst, they’ll haul you away to be prodded, poked, and studied by scientists.”

No amount of reassurance convinced him that our baby, whether a shifter or human, wouldn’t appear any different than any other little one. “Two arms, two legs, maybe a snout!”

My so-called joke was met with a glowering look. If I hadn’t been pregnant my snark would have earned me a cushion tossed at my head.

“It’s not funny.” My poor mate had gnawed his nails until there was little left, so I called my cousin. He had two little ones and got the name of a shifter midwife who performed ultrasounds.

“It’s outside the city, so we can make a day of it. Take a picnic.” I was getting close to my last shift before the baby arrived, and my bear was looking forward to the outing.

My mate clutched a cushion and nibbled his bottom lip. “Is it in... you know... a house?”

“I guess. Probably a wooden cabin.”

Theo let out a deep breath. “Okay.”

I sat on the couch and put my feet up, and the kittens bounded onto my lap, not that I had much of one with my expanding belly. “If you’d prefer a clinic in a big shiny office building, we’d have to find one here in the city.”

“No.” His voice was higher than usual, and he was studying his nails.

“Theo. What is it?”

He cleared his throat, still looking anywhere but at me. “Don’t laugh, but...” He twisted his hair, and Socks sauntered over to him, and sat on his feet. He stroked the furry kitty. “I thought a bear-shifter midwife might live in a den, as in a cave. A big dark, dank cave with bats and rats.”

Sometimes I forgot that while I’d grown up in a den, lived around shifters my whole life, and had a bear inside me, Theo was introduced to the shifter world less than a year ago. He often asked me questions that I assumed he knew the answers to, and yet if I’d given it some thought, how could he?

“Bit hard to trundle the ultrasound machine into a cave, love.” I beckoned him, and he slid over the couch until our thighs touched.

“You’re laughing at me.” He nudged me and grinned. If I hadn’t been pregnant, he probably would have tickled me, so I silently thanked the baby for saving me.

“I’m not. I’m trying to see shifter life from your perspective, and I’m so proud of you for not freaking out.” He side-eyed me. “Okay, not freaking out too much.” If our roles have been reversed, I might have run screaming into the night. “Perhaps we should take flares with us just in case!” I slapped a hand over my mouth, but it was too late to stifle my giggle.

Carlton! Stop!

“Carlton! Stop!”

That was weird. “Are you communicating with my bear?” There was nothing in shifter history about humans and their mate’s animal having a direct connection, but anything was possible.

“No. Is that a thing? Can we gossip about you without you knowing? Where’s the popcorn? Can your animal drink when you’re pregnant?” He tee-heed and it was my turn to scowl. Served me right for winding him up about caves.

“Doubt it. I’m being an ass, and you’re both telling me to shut it.”

My mate high-fived the air. “Well done, bear.”

Theo convinced me to leave the kittens at home, saying they might gnaw at the scanner cables at the midwife’s. “They’ll be happier here with food, toys, water, and...” He turned on the TV, and they all ran and sat on the bed in front. “The cartoon channel.”

“If we come back and they’re re-enacting a battle, it’s on you.”

“Would it be any different to their usual behavior?”

He had a point.

My mate drove, and when we pulled up in front of the midwife’s home slash office, it was a two-story house with a wraparound porch and a huge garden. My cousin had told me the guy grew a lot of herbs that he used in treatments for his patients.

“This is not what I expected.” Theo helped me out of the car, and we strolled up a zigzagging path to the front door.

“I’m out back. Come around the side.” We were greeted with the midwife, Jack, on hands and knees weeding a garden bed. “Do you like tomatoes and coriander?”

My mate and I shared a glance. Was this a trick question? Perhaps those ingredients were bad for pregnant omegas or perhaps the opposite?

“We’re huge tomato fans,” Theo gushed.

Were we? We liked them, but I’d never asked one for an autograph.

“Great. I’ll send some home with you. They make a great salad when combined with cucumber.”

Jake led us into the house, with him washing his hands in the mudroom and taking off his shoes. We sat in the living room for five minutes while he showered, and he led us into his office. The switch from shabby-chic decor in the house to a professional medical environment had my head swiveling back the way we’d come, making sure it was the same house.

“This is impressive.” Theo gazed at the wall, lined with Jack’s degrees and diplomas.

He shivered as the room was freezing, but the baby increased my body temperature, and I was glad because I'd been sweating in the garden.

"Did you expect something more cavelike?" He grinned.

Theo swung on his heel, his eyes narrowed at me. "Did you say something?"

I hadn't, and Jack caught my eye. "It's common among humans mated to shifters. I've had clients arrive prepared for an expedition into the wild."

"Guilty." Theo laughed, and Jack and I joined him.

Jack asked the usual questions about me and my pregnancy and tapped at his computer. When he was done, he pointed to the exam table. "Ready to see your baby?" He quickly added, "And no, it won't be a bear, Theo."

"It's like you've been inside my head."

"No, I've been doing this a long time." Jack picked up a bottle of gel that all the pregnancy blogs and books talked about, saying it was cold. "Don't worry, I've warmed it for you."

I lifted up my paternity shirt, and he squirted gel on my belly. Theo and I giggled at the disgusting sound. If the kittens had been here, they'd have been in fight mode. Theo held my hand. I hadn't given much thought to the actual ultrasound, my attention had been on soothing Theo's worries about dens and bears in my belly.

Now that we were about to see our baby, my heart sped up. "Wait!"

What? No, I want to see the baby. My bear wasn't interested in my state of mind.

Jack paused, the wand in one hand. “Do you need me to step out?”

I glanced at Theo who spoke to me, ignoring the midwife by holding up his hand. “We don’t have to do this. You’re doing it for me.”

“We do. I wasn’t prepared, but this isn’t something to fear.” All the horror stories on blogs and social media told me the late nights, crying, and teething that were to come were mountains we’d have to climb. The ultrasound was the build-up, the exciting part, only second to the pregnancy reveal.

“Let’s do this.” Theo grinned, his eyes on the screen.

The grainy image we’d read about appeared as we waited for a heartbeat. My heart thudded so loudly, I whispered an apology to the baby for drowning out theirs.

But a sudden burst of sound echoed around the room. A thump, followed by another and another.

“Is that?—?”

“Your baby, yes.” Jack showed us the head, spine, and limbs. Other than a few blobs, the only thing I could make out was the backbone. But I didn’t care. Our baby had a strong heartbeat, and after measuring our little one, Jack informed us our baby was bigger than average.

On the way, I clutched the black-and-white image Jack had given us, alternately hugging it to my chest and staring at it, trying to make out which blob was a leg and which was an arm.

“I can’t wait to meet our little one,” I told my mate as we walked into the apartment.

“I wonder how the kittens will react to the baby.”

It wouldn't be long before we found out.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“I’m just checking to make sure I didn’t mate a dragon.” I walked into the room we were setting up for our nursery to find it completely empty. It was no surprise. My mate had gotten up in the middle of the night and started moving things around. By the time I woke up, half of it was in the middle of the living room. I offered to help him, but he insisted he was going to take a nap and I could work.

His nap was short-lived. He was at the stage of pregnancy where insomnia was starting to kick in. He said it was because he had spent so much of his first trimester being tired and sleeping that he banked up his sleep. Now, according to him, he had an abundance of energy and didn’t need sleep.

I had a feeling it had nothing to do with that and more to do with our new bed not quite being firm enough for him. It just wasn’t comfortable enough to get a good night’s sleep. As our baby grew, so did his belly, making everything more difficult for him, including rolling over in his sleep. I’d recently picked up a full-sized pregnancy body pillow for him. It didn’t seem to help too much, but the cats liked it, making it half a win.

“Made your cup of tea.” I handed it to him, wishing I hadn’t listened to him and worked all morning. I’d made the mistake of thinking he would ask for help if the bigger pieces needed moving. I’d been wrong. At least he took them apart first and hadn’t carried them out as one huge thing.

“Thanks.” He indicated the tea. “Why did you call me a dragon? Because I’m hot?”

“You are scorching hot, there’s no denying that. It’s a fact. But I called you a dragon because you’re nesting.” At least that was what I’d heard this kind of behavior called

before. According to the internet, it was quite common. The name was odd, but the behavior made sense. Of course someone about to have a baby was instinctually going to feel the drive to be ready for them.

“Nesting?”

“Yeah. You know, getting ready for the baby.”

He looked at me as if I had three heads.

“And that has what to do with dragons?”

“Well, dragons lay eggs, right?”

Another blank stare.

“Did you not read any fantasy books when you were a kid?”

He shook his head. “No, I was more into action adventure and mysteries. I loved a good mystery.” That explained why my attempt at a joke fell so flat.

“Well, this...” I waved my hand around the now-empty room. “This is what I’d call nesting. You’re getting ready for our baby. And the joke is lost on you because you are not as well versed in middle school dragon lore as I assumed you would be. I’ll keep my day job.”

“Oh, I get it. Yeah, maybe I am a dragon.”

“Luckily, you’re stuck with me.... too late to find a funnier mate now.”

He forced a laugh. He really was the best mate ever. “It was funny.”

Carlton rested one hand on his belly and brought his mug up to his lips with the other. “I think we need to carpet this room.”

I looked at the hardwood floor; it was beautiful and nicely finished. Even so, I could see why carpet would be beneficial for a baby. Not so much for the cats, but for our child, for sure.

“We could do an area rug; it’d be less permanent. And the room is not overly large, so it probably could fill up most of the space if we picked the right one.”

He looked around the room, contemplating my idea instead of immediately brushing it off.

“And then, in the middle of the night when we come to get the baby because they’re crying, one of us trips, falls, breaks our nose, and we end up the night at the ER.” As much as I wanted to tell him that his scenario was implausible at best, he wasn’t completely wrong. The tripping was a very real possibility.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how that would go.” Even if it wasn’t all over the top. “But if you’re set on carpeting, we could look at some today.”

“And paint too.” The walls were currently the typical move-in, already-painted, everyone-has-it beige that was all the rage right now. The one that was almost white, but not quite. Super boring, in any case.

“Do you think you should be around paint fumes?” I asked and he shrugged. “I wonder—maybe they make some for pregnant people?”

I had no idea if they did or not, but I knew how we could easily find out.

“Okay, let’s make a list of things we might want for this room. We’ll go to the home

store and see what we can find.” It would be good for him to get out of the house, anyway. “I’m going to go log off work, and we can go.”

The two days a week had been working out beautifully for him. Although it wouldn’t be long until those two days became paternity leave. He was getting close to delivery, and his body was at the stage where sitting too long or standing too long or sleeping too long, or anything pretty much, was uncomfortable.

I couldn’t wait to be a dad. And he couldn’t wait to, as he put it, “evict our baby.” I could understand why. According to the midwife, the baby was pushing eight pounds already, and there was still some time to go. They were going to be quite a large baby, and currently they used all of that weight to perch on Carlton’s bladder.

Once inside the big box store, we were able to pick out some carpeting fairly quickly. They had a large selection to choose from, but once we limited to in-stock options only, there was only one real choice.

From there we went onto the paint aisle. There was paint specifically designed to be safe around pregnant people, children, and pets. Still, I thought it best that we hire out, and then the day that they painted, to hang out at our favorite spot, and if need be, spend the night in a hotel and have a mini-vacation of sorts. To my surprise, he quickly agreed.

I had a feeling he was missing his bear and our spot where I usually hung out with the furry side of my mate. Technically speaking, his bear was still there, but he hadn’t been able to let them out in a while. As this pregnancy got further along, his body wasn’t allowed. The midwife said it was very normal. That didn’t make it easy on Carlton.

So the day the painters and carpet could be arranged, we gathered up the cats and went to our favorite place, picnic in tow, and spent the day in the sun talking, playing

with the cats, and snuggling. It was an absolutely perfect day. And when we came home to find the carpet and walls all finished, it was just the perfect ending.

We had ordered nursery furniture a while earlier and it had arrived already. It still had to be assembled, but it was there and ready to go. We opted to skip the dresser and go with one of the units that had cubes in them for keeping the clothes and diapers and such. We figured it would be easier and grow with our sweet one.

As cute as a little dresser with carvings of cats on it was, it wasn't something we could see an older child liking. The more modular type units that could grow with a child did. Also they made some adorable inserts you could use for cats, made out of felt. It was important to us that the cats didn't feel displaced when the baby arrived. And we figured that was one way we thought could help ensure that.

Putting together the furniture the next day was actually easier than I thought it would be, and we got it done in record time.

"I think it looks wonderful in here," I said, looking around the new space.

It wasn't at all what we had originally planned to do with the space, but it worked. When your mate was nesting, you went with it, and I was glad we did.

"I think it needs more," he said, leaning into my side. "Maybe those fancy decals that are on all the Pinterest boards."

I wasn't sure which ones he meant, but when he pulled them up on the computer, I saw that they could do very nicely in here. We ordered some and then got pizza delivery for a movie night.

We snuggled on the couch with our cats and turned on the movie we'd both been waiting for. We were going to have to wait some more. The two of us fell asleep long

before the final credits came on. I wasn't even mad about it. It was a wonderful end to a wonderful day.

“Push, Theo.”

“I am pushing.” There was no doubt about my mate’s irritated tone, his huffing and puffing and the curse words spilling from his lips, not to mention the sweat stains on his shirt.

He stood, hand on hips, gasping, his chest heaving. “Isn’t that what I should be saying to you?”

He thinks he’s so clever. I was the jokester in the family, often with terrible timing, but now Theo was trying to be funny.

“I guarantee I’ll be pushing longer and harder.”

“Shall we give up and call roadside assistance?” He slumped into the passenger seat, his body odor masking his usual intoxicating scent.

“I think so.”

Thank gods we didn’t have the kittens with us. The sun was high and beating down on the car that refused to move, and without the air-conditioning, I was fanning myself with an ancient magazine that’d been stuffed under the driver’s seat.

“You need to be in the shade.” Theo chugged water from his bottle and handed it to me.

“We could call Jack.” We’d been for another ultrasound and were on our way home

when the car broke down. But the engine died a few minutes after we left the midwife's.

“Good idea. If he can pick you up, I won't worry about you overheating.”

“Just like the car.” I giggled. Theo raised a brow. “The car overheated too.”

Jack arrived and ushered both of us toward his vehicle. Theo protested, saying he had to stay here for when the mechanic arrived. But another car pulled up behind Jack's and a shifter got out, his scent signaling he was a wolf.

“I'll fix this.” He lifted the hood and rummaged around underneath. “Hmmm. This will take a while. You go with Jack and I'll drive the car back when I'm done.”

Arriving at Jack's was like stumbling on an oasis in the middle of the desert. He served us drinks and snacks, and I put my feet up while Theo and Jack went into the garden and picked vegetables for a salad. While they prepped lunch, the midwife explained how he came to live here, and Theo peppered him with questions. I sipped on apple juice, made from fruit in Jack's orchard, happy I wasn't in a car under the blazing sun.

When Marlowe, Jack's mechanic friend arrived with our car, he refused payment, saying neighbors helped neighbors, so we thanked him and said next time he was in the city, we'd take him out for a meal.

“That might not be for a while.” He explained he wasn't a city person.

After dropping Marlow at his car, Theo marveled at Jack's and the mechanic's generosity, and Jack's garden and orchard and how beautiful the area was. He was raving about the fresh air and wide-open spaces, comparing it to our small apartment and the noise and pollution in the city. That was a contrast to when I'd met him, and

he complained about creepy crawlies.

“Remember, love, you can’t order pizza at midnight out here.” I peered out the window as the countryside faded and was replaced with concrete and neon signs and freeways. “Besides, the kittens would not survive out here.” I didn’t go into detail, but they’d be no match for the wild animals that lived in the surrounding woods.

The poor kitties. My bear was sobbing, not with real tears, but my belly was flip-flopping, thanks to his shuddering.

“They’re house cats now. No reason for them not to be house cats here.”

His tone had my head snapping toward him. “Are you serious? Would you like to live near Jack’s?”

My beast stopped his weeping and gnashing of teeth. I could take my fur every day.

Theo pulled up at a red light, the sun reflecting off the car in front, and I held my hand up to the light. My mate glanced at me. “It would be a joint decision. And you would have to drive into the city two days a week when your paternity leave ends.”

The car edged forward as a driver in another lane beeped the horn at the car in front.

“Let’s agree to think about it after the baby’s born.”

We drove the rest of the way home in silence, with me noting everything I disliked about city life and weighing it up with the advantages, of which there were many. But houses didn’t come up for sale every day in Jack’s area, and if we wanted to move, we’d need to commit now and start searching so hopefully in six months or a year, we might find a home.

The kittens greeted us as if we'd been gone for years, and I headed to our bedroom for a nap, with a detour to the bathroom. But the baby had other ideas, waking up and bouncing around, so I didn't get any sleep.

"Theo, wanna feel the baby?"

My mate loved placing his head on my belly and talking to our little one about all the fun things we'd do after the birth.

"And your uncle bear is looking forward to meeting you too." My mate kissed my belly as the baby rummaged around as if they'd lost something.

I'm an uncle, my beast mused. What do uncles do?

They teach their niece or nephew the ways of the forest and allow them to snuggle close when they're tired.

I want to be an uncle.

"Would you like to live in the countryside?" Theo posed the question to my belly. "One kick for yes. Two kicks for no."

The baby kicked. "One kick, it's settled." Theo added, "That's a joke, babe."

We're moving to the woods. My bear was ready to pack his bags, not that he had any stuff.

Being heavily pregnant, my world revolved around naps, peeing, eating, and waddling. Rinse and repeat. I couldn't contemplate a move, even after the baby was born, and I had to be honest with Theo.

“Love, if I could click my fingers and we’d be settled in a cute country cottage with a huge garden that backed onto the woods, I’d move in a heartbeat.” Just thinking about packing up and I wanted to hide under the covers.

My mate patted my hand. “I get it. This is something for the future, maybe in a few years’ time.” His wistful tone suggested if I weren’t pregnant, he’d be scouring the real estate sites for suitable homes. “I don’t want to add any more stress to our lives, especially yours, when you’re carrying our child.”

Theo lay beside me until the baby quietened. The kittens leaped onto the bed, snuggled by my bump, and we napped. But when I opened my eyes, the room was almost dark, and Theo was beside me, sporting a broad smile.

Something was up. Maybe I was going to get a blow job, though not with the kittens on the bed. That couldn’t happen. He wouldn’t be plowing into me. I couldn’t find a comfortable position for sex now that my bump was so big, but blow job? Yes, please.

“You’ll have to pull my briefs down.” I didn’t have the energy to wriggle them off.

“I can give you a blow job later but first something better.”

What would be better than my cock in my mate’s mouth and me coming? My brain couldn’t fathom a substitute.

“Jack called, and he had a surprise.”

Hmmm. Unless somehow Jack had birthed our baby without me knowing and our little one was smuggled into the crib in their room, safe and sound, I was lost as to why my mate was beaming.

“No stress.” Theo held up both hands as if he was surrendering. This just got more weird. “It’s just something that he thought we might be interested in.”

“Did he find a baby in his cabbage patch? Did the stork make a delivery?” Why was Jack phoning Theo? I was his patient. Irritation niggled at me, and I grunted, peeved that Theo was holding something back.

“He says there’s a house not far from his place, nestled in the woods, that’s up for sale. But we don’t have to make a decision until we’re ready, in three months, six months, or whenever.”

It must’ve been a ruin, with no roof, barely any walls, and vines creeping through what was left of the rooms. “Sounds awful. And what owner says take years to decide but the house will still be here waiting for you?”

“That’s because it belongs to Jack. It was his late parents’, and he’s been renting it out, but his latest tenant left last month.”

That piqued my interest, but I didn’t want to appear too enthusiastic. “And it’s not a tumbledown shack?”

“Nope.” Theo popped the P. “Wanna see photos?”

I did, and I nodded. He gave me his phone, and I scrolled through the pics, trying to dampen my excitement. There had to be a drawback, something Jack wasn’t telling us. Houses like this didn’t fall into people’s laps. He must’ve been asking an outrageous price.

“What’s the catch?” I asked as I imagined our little one playing on a swing in that garden.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:58 am

“Let’s go.”

I looked up from the computer to see my mate standing there, hands on his belly, eyes serious.

“Go where?” I asked.

“It’s time.” He started to bend over, and I immediately saw what he meant.

“It’s time? Time, like it’s baby time?” There was no other “time” it could be, but still I had to be sure. We’d been waiting for this moment for so long, and it was finally here.

“Yeah,” he said through gritted teeth.

I waited until he was righted again before asking, “How long have you been in labor?”

I’d barely started my workday, and he seemed fine when I came in here. But that didn’t mean his labor hadn’t already begun by then. By the way he was hunched over, I had a feeling he might have left some information out of our morning conversation over tea.

“My water broke around 2 am.”

Yeah, I was right. He’d omitted a big detail.

“Did you think maybe I might want to know that before sitting down to work?” I wasn’t angry about it, more amused, and the way he half shrugged with a smirk on his face, he could see that.

“Yes. But there was nothing you could do.”

“If I knew what was happening I could’ve helped you instead of answering emails.”

“I didn’t need help, and you needed to answer emails. It’s all good.” He leaned against the door frame. “It was really just a waiting game. But now it’s not waiting time, and I could use your help, so let’s go.”

I shut my laptop, ready to leave.

I wasn’t sure where we were going. On all the television shows, the answer was simple—drive to the hospital. We had other options though, including Jack’s. We’d been round and round about Carlton’s birth plan, never making a firm decision. Not that it was my decision to make. Carlton was the one about to deliver a toddler. Fine, they weren’t a toddler, but Jack was guessing ten pounds as of our last visit, so they were going to be big.

The human in me felt most comfortable if he could give birth in a hospital because that was what I was used to. Even so, I understood all the reasons why a bear wouldn’t want to give birth in one. Still, my inclination was to get him in the car and speed over there.

Jack was another option and the one I suspected was the way Carlton was leaning. Jack had said we were welcome any time. He’d taken really good care of my mate during this entire pregnancy, and I trusted him completely. But Jack wasn’t location specific. He’d said on numerous occasions that he would come to us if we needed to.

The one thing my mate and I had both been in agreement on was that we were not going to have the baby at home, not unless we were settled into our real place. Unless it was the place we planned to raise our children in, it just wasn't right for us.

All of that had me guessing that we were on our way to Jack's. That was until I walked out into the living room. Carlton's overnight baby bag was there. I'd expected that. Heck, I helped pack that. What I hadn't anticipated seeing there was the laundry basket filled with blankets, towels, and I wasn't sure all what.

"Do I even want to know?" I asked, pointing to it.

"We're going to our spot," he said, grabbing his baby pack, waving to the sleeping cats, and walking out the door.

"Okay, then we're having this baby in the woods." I didn't know who I was talking to, he was already out the door.

It amused me that Jack insisted that we would know exactly what we wanted when it was time to know, and suddenly my mate was Mr. Decision-maker. It made sense he would be. He climbed up the ladder at work by making the right decisions at the right time.

I told the cats to be good, grabbed the basket, and followed him out to our car.

"Do you think we should call Jack?" I asked, crossing my fingers and toes he would say yes.

I turned on the ignition and backed out of our parking spot. Regardless of what he said, I wanted to be on our way. One thing we'd never even considered was birthing the baby in the car, and I kind of wanted to keep it that way.

“I already called him,” he said, much to my surprise and shock. “He said he’d meet us there.” Well, at least there was that.

I took the ride slowly, not so much because I was being extra cautious, though I was, but mostly because I wanted to avoid any potholes or bumps that would jostle him. He was already in so much discomfort that I didn’t want to make it worse by giving the shocks a workout.

We pulled into the spot we normally parked to find Jack already there. I led them to where my mate had chosen to give birth, carrying both the basket and Carlton’s baby bag. I wanted to be by my mate’s side, but Jack had that covered.

Jack had his bag with him, and when we reached the clearing, he took a towel out of the laundry basket and laid it out with his bag on it, unzipping it and rummaging inside. I took out the blankets and a picnic mat that Carlton packed for us and laid them all out. I also discovered there were a few pillows in there and placed them on the spread as well.

This was hardly going to be the kind of birth they wrote about in all the high-end magazines; the kind with sound machines and “only good vibes” and essential oils, and I didn’t even know what. This was back to his shifter roots and smack dab in the middle of nature. It was perfect.

As I set up the makeshift birthing bed, Carlton quickly got out of his clothes, saying he wanted no part of them. I was worried because I thought it was a bit cold, but he promised me his bear was keeping him plenty warm, and I had no reason to doubt him. If he got cold, there were a couple of blankets left. My mate had very much overpacked.

After Jack examined him to make sure everything looked on track for a smooth delivery, he had us walk around in circles. Jack said the best way for Carlton to

handle labor out here was to walk, and walk we did, round and round and round, stopping as the contractions became harder and harder and longer and longer.

After Carlton screamed that he felt like he was burning “down there,” Jack asked him if he’d decided which position he wanted to have the baby.

Jack had shared a few with us during our appointments. My mate had said he would know when the time came. I was glad to see that was, in fact, the case.

“Hands and knees,” he said.

We went over to the blanket and helped him get settled down just as the next contraction came in. Jack told him to push. I sat in front of him, looking him in the eye, telling him what a great job he was doing. He pushed and pushed until the contraction subsided.

“Excellent progress,” Jack assured him. “Next time, next push, you should be meeting your baby.”

And when the next one came, my mate cried out at first in pain and then victory. That was the contraction that brought our beautiful daughter into this world. I helped Carlton to get on his back on the blanket, pillows behind his head as Jack worked on cleaning our sweet baby girl up and making sure that everything was fine with her healthwise.

“She’s perfect,” he said as he laid her on my mate’s chest. She immediately began rooting for her first meal, latching on like a champ when my mate helped her achieve her goal.

Jack laid a soft towel over her, and I snuggled beside them.

“She’s absolutely beautiful.” Not that I could clearly see her, not with the tears of joy forming in my eyes.

“I guess my mate is more than a kind, sexy, cat-er-ific omega. He makes wonderful babies.”

“You had a part in this too.” He rested his head on my shoulder.

“I think I remember being there.” I kissed the top of his head.

“I can’t believe we made her,” he said, tears in his eyes. “We made an entire being.”

I couldn’t fully believe it either. Here she was, this beautiful, perfect little being. How could someone so amazing come from me? My mate, sure. But me? I was just a guy, and our little girl... she was everything.

“We did make an entire being.” I watched as she eagerly ate. “We certainly did.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:59 am

“I’m sad.” Theo rested his chin on my shoulder.

“Me too.”

This place that was originally Theo’s and became ours was where we brought the kittens home that first night, where we first made love and where our daughter spent her first night.

And where you hinted that I existed. My beast didn’t want to be left out of the memories. He was part of the family too.

I tapped my brow. “But we have our memories, and no one can take those away from us.” Turning around, I draped my arms around Theo’s neck.

“Something is driving a wedge between us.” He smirked. “Or should I say someone.” Bernadette, or Bernie as we called her, was in a carrier, resting on my chest. She didn’t care about leaving the only home she’d ever known and was fast asleep.

“And we’ll make new memories, the three of us.”

Four, my beast protested.

“Sorry, four. My mistake.”

“Make that eight.” Theo held up two cat carriers, the ones he bought the day we met. The kittens were complaining, which they often did when they couldn’t get out. They probably thought they were missing out on something.

“We’d better go before there’s any howling.” He closed the door on the empty apartment. “From the kittens.”

We’d been back and forth between the city and our new house all week. New furniture was arriving. Check, but someone had to be there. The movers were coming to pack up the apartment. Check. But the kittens and the baby shouldn’t be there. That same furniture was being delivered to the new house. Check. The internet was being connected. Check. The landlord was coming to inspect the apartment. Check.

We rented a short-term apartment for a week because the new house had little furniture and the apartment was in the midst of packing hell. Theo and I were exhausted, and I recalled what I’d said about moving being stressful.

But it was done now, and we were headed to our new home. No, not all the curtains had been hung, but our closest neighbor was a hundred yards away, and there was a wooded area between the two homes. The baby’s room was ready, complete with blackout curtains so she wouldn’t wake us at the crack of dawn. The rest of the house would come together over the next month.

We had been so fortunate in Jack wanting to sell his childhood home to us. None of his tenants were right for the house, he’d reasoned. They looked after the house, but he needed a special family, one who would treasure what his parents had built. And he thought we were that family. I hoped we wouldn’t disappoint him.

“Welcome home!” Theo whispered because Bernie was still asleep.

The kittens quietened and stared through the carrying case’s mesh window.

“Don’t get any ideas.” I wagged my finger. “If you’re outside, you’ll be on the leash. You know the leash, right?”

As we unpacked the car, I wished we could order a pizza or a curry. There was a

convenience store, gas station, and post office a mile away, but chips and soda or a frozen pizza wasn't what I had in mind.

"I'd love a pad Thai." Theo opened the fridge and put in the few items we'd brought from a cooler.

"Neither of us wants to drive back to the city to get takeout." We should have picked up something on the way here, but we were so eager to reach our new home, neither of us thought about it.

"Luckily, I thought about that this morning." My mate brought out takeout from the Thai restaurant around the corner from our old apartment.

"I knew there was a reason the universe chose you as my mate." I pressed my crotch against his. "It wasn't just for your sexy smile and your cute butt." I squeezed his ass. "Or your biceps." I walked my fingers over his upper arm. I lowered my voice in case the kittens or Bernie were listening and cupped the bulge in his pants. "Or your big, thick cock."

"Stop," he hissed. "Or I'll come." He nibbled my ear, his breathing speeding up, and he ground his crotch on mine. "And the kittens need food, and we should show them around the garden. Bernie will need another feed and a bath." He slid his hand inside my jeans, and I moaned as he stroked my cock. "And we need to eat."

"Thai noodles or cock?" I'd forgotten about food and was hoping to swallow my mate's length.

"I was thinking about your ass. Maybe shove my tongue in your hole and then my dick."

Bernie interrupted us, her cry ringing through the baby monitor. Our daughter had impeccable timing.

“You see to our daughter, and I’ll put the kittens on their leashes and we’ll explore the big wide world.” Theo kissed the end of my nose and called our four fur babies. They side-eyed him when he grabbed the leashes, but I dashed in to grab Bernie and changed her diaper.

Wanting to witness the kittens outside, I sat by the large picture window overlooking the garden and fed Bernie, while watching the kittens prancing around, inspecting flowers, chasing a butterfly, sneezing when a blade of grass tickled their nose and tumbling over one another.

In the long journey between buying the house and today, both Theo and I had been beset by doubts. Anyone who’d moved, with or without children and animals, would understand how the upheaval took its toll and often put a strain on a relationship. But we had come through our bad patch before I got pregnant, and we’d worked through our issues.

That might have saved us, because when stress threatened to beat us down, we’d turn on the music and dance, using headphones when Bernie was asleep. We’d bopped, shimmied, and wiggled our asses, punching the air and telling the stress to piss off until we flopped, exhausted, onto the couch or bed.

Theo shot me a “help me” look, and I beckoned him inside. The kittens were running in different directions, and my mate reminded me of a cartoon character where the animals twisted their leashes around the person, turning them into a mummy.

“That was fun. Not.” He closed the back door and the one leading to the rest of the house.

“We’ll have to build a catio.” The kittens could enjoy being outside but be protected from the wildlife, and they couldn’t escape.

“Good idea. Who around here is handy with a hammer? Not me.”

While I was a project manager for a huge construction firm—and still on paternity leave—carpentry wasn't my thing. But living where we did, I was sure we'd find someone who could build one.

After we bathed Bernie and put her to bed, the kittens were still hyped up after their outing. They chased one another around the kitchen, making me dizzy, but when they tired themselves out and collapsed in their bed, Theo heated up the food.

We ate out back on the porch, inhaling the perfume from the jasmine bushes.

"To us and our new home." We clinked glasses and took a mouthful of food. "Is this from our usual place? It tastes different, better somehow." I was ravenous after a long day, especially as I hadn't eaten much except a cereal bar and an apple.

"Same old, same old." Theo shoveled noodles in his mouth, suggesting he was as hungry as I was. "It's this place, Carlton. Everything tastes, smells, and feels better now that we're out of the city."

"You were right about moving here." If we'd been in our apartment, we'd have been in bed, eating and watching TV. Fireflies were flitting around the garden, but Theo took one look at them and tapped his phone. A wave of irritation swept over me at him ignoring our surroundings and reading whatever had popped up on the device.

"Babe, fireflies bring good luck and prosperity according to the internet."

And the internet was never wrong, but I chose to believe we would prosper in this place, not because insects predicted it but because we were building a strong foundation for us as mates, our family, and our careers.

And we'd left the city where we didn't know our neighbors except to nod and say good morning. In our to-ing and fro-ing in the past weeks, we'd already met some of the people who lived nearby, and they'd welcomed us with fresh eggs, flowers, fruit,

and vegetables.

Theo yawned. Maybe there'd be no sucking, licking, thrusting, or fucking tonight, but we'd sleep in one another's arms, our family safe under our roof, with a bright future ahead.

But my mate smacked his leg. "Damn mosquito."

I giggled, and he held up his palm, a tiny blood spatter in the middle. "Oh no! Bugs! The horror! Maybe we'd better return to the city. There's no mosquitoes there."

"Very funny. They like me because I'm so delectable."

"I agree." I didn't mention that mosquitoes didn't bite shifters. That'd be my secret.

Sometimes the wrong number is the exact one you need.

I never answer my phone, especially not when the caller's number is "private". Today is no exception, only unlike normal, they leave me a message and for the first time, I'm kicking myself for not answering. The man on the other end is choking up, telling me there's been a terrible accident and his son is in surgery, begging the person they thought they reached to come to the hospital waiting room so he isn't alone.

If I could call the man and tell him about the wrong number, I'd do it in a heartbeat, but I can't. So I do the only thing I can think of; I rush to the hospital. Only when I walk into the emergency department waiting room, my dragon doesn't want me to find the mystery man. He scents our mate and that becomes his only mission in life.

My beast discovers we're both there for the same man. The one who left me the voice mail is the father of the injured child and there's no one by his side.