

A Family Thanksgiving

Erin bobbed her foot in time with the perky music on her exercise video. A skinny instructor bounced over the screen, encouraging Erin to get up and get fit. Erin ate another chip and concentrated on not falling asleep.

Every few minutes, she told herself she should get up and join in. Then she flicked her eyes to the baby monitor, sank further into the couch, and ate some more chips. Her triplets – Anna, Axel, and Arik - were all sleeping at the same time for once. So Erin thought she might take a moment to exercise and lose the last few pesky pregnancy pounds. Except, she was exhausted from just putting on her workout clothes, and was now watching the video while eating an enormous bag of tomato-flavored chips.

To be honest, she was nearly back to her pre-giant babies weight. Looking after triplets and not having time to eat was the best diet ever. But being thin and being in shape were two different things, and she needed to be fit if she wanted to get back to the Supernatural Enforcers Agency and catch bad guys again. Automatically, she looked at the baby monitor and tamped down her unease.

Erin was psychic and working as an agent for the SEA had been her dream job, and she worked hard to get it. However, within a few weeks of working there, she met her polar bear shifter mate, Gunner, and in less than a year they were mated, married and expecting triplets. She hadn't actually spent much time doing her job before she was banished to desk duty. Not that she minded that – while pregnant, her health came first. In fact, she didn't mind it all. She used to hate desk duty back in her old job in Playa Lunar because the agents treated her like a mere tool. Here in Los Lobos, they actually respected her input. Even if she wasn't running around with a gun, she still felt like part of the team.

The instructor stretched and bent herself into an extraordinary position. Erin was glad she hadn't bothered trying that and ate some more chips.

She heard the front door and the tread of enormous boots. Her face lit up, and she felt a distinct twinge of arousal as Gunner came into the room. Big, blonde and sexy as hell – he could always make her sex flutter.

“Hey, babe,” he crooned, leaning over the couch and pressing his lips to hers, giving her an urgent kiss. Well, they had been apart for quite a few hours...

He flourished smaller kisses over her cheek and rubbed his chin over her neck and the bonding bite he had already given. He always liked to rub himself over her. At first, she'd found it funny, and giggled when he did it. But he told her it was down to

his bear wanting to put his scent on her, to make sure other shifters knew she was his. Now, she kind of liked it. He did it to their babies, too.

“Hey, busy day?”

“Yeah. Couple of turkey farmers were killed.”

Erin raised her eyebrows. “That’s gruesomely festive. Were they shifters?”

“Yeah. One was a wolf, one a coyote.”

“No leads?”

“Too many - none that look promising,” he sighed. “Sorry, I’m late.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Take out at the office.”

Erin thanked the heavens because she didn’t have the energy to make him anything, or the energy to argue with him that she should do it when he told her he would make it himself.

Gunner collapsed on the couch next to her, and given his massive weight, she naturally rolled to his side. He put his arm around her shoulder and curled her against him.

“Cubs asleep?”

“Yes, and all at the same time – it’s a miracle!”

He snagged a chip and frowned at the exercise video. “Nothing on TV?”

Erin indicated to her yoga pants and t-shirt. “I was going to work out, but I used up all my energy just changing my clothes. I was hoping watching it would inspire me to find some energy.”

A rumbling growl vibrated through his huge chest. “You want a workout? I will give you a workout.”

Gently, but surprisingly quickly, he had her on her back on the sofa and his hand was working its way into her pants.

“Okay,” she giggled, “but if I fall asleep in the middle, finish without me.”

Gunner damn near pouted as he pushed her top up her torso. “You fall asleep, I’m not doing it right.”

Erin closed her eyes, threw her arm over her face and enjoyed the sensation of her mate kissing her stomach.

“Your mom called today; she wants to know when they can come down for a visit again.”

He licked her bellybutton. “Ummm hmmm.”

“My mom called, too. My family is coming over for Thanksgiving.” An invitation hastily given and then repented at leisure.

“Ugh.” He pulled her pants down to her thighs, and she marveled that not even the thought of their mothers could put him off.

“My sister’s coming by to babysit tomorrow...”

“Ummm.” He kissed her mound.

“Oh! I have a meeting with Director Sanders.”

Gunner paused. “What about?”

Erin lifted her arm and peeked at him. “My return to work. You know, the exact date I’ll be returning, daycare – stuff like that. He said on the phone I could take a peek at the SEA daycare center – see what I think of it. If you’re around, you should come with me.”

He lifted his head, and when he spoke, there was a slight edge to his voice. “Don’t you think we should discuss that first?”

Erin wiggled her hips, hoping he’d continue what he started. “What is there to discuss?”

Gunner raised himself on his knees, and Erin sighed, pulling up her pants. She could sense his burgeoning unhappiness through their bond, and if he wasn’t prepared to power through it to have sex, then it really was bad. Not much could put him off.

“I just thought...” he started before taking a deep breath. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to go back.”

“I sort of have to - my job.”

Gunner shrugged. “With the money we get sent from my clan, we could manage on my salary.”

“But I have a job.”

“You have three cubs,” he replied testily.

“So do you, but I don’t see you hesitating when you step out the door every morning!”

Erin jumped to her feet, balling her hands on her hips. It wasn’t the first time he brought this up, but the other times she was pregnant, and he didn’t want to upset her, so he was as vague as possible.

Gunner remained seated, but his muscles rippled in annoyance. “The cubs need their mother.”

“They also need their father.”

“Your job is dangerous.”

“So is yours!”

Gunner jumped up and growled. “What if something happened to you? My beast can barely come to terms with the idea of losing you, but how the hell could I tell our cubs that I didn’t protect you? That I allowed you to get hurt? I couldn’t live without you, but how could the cubs?” He threw back his head and roared.

The baby monitor instantly sprang to life, three wails echoing in the room to let them know that three babies were awake and very unhappy.

“Gunner...” she started.

He looked at her, his eyes brown from his beast and his body quivering with the need to shift. “I’ll go,” he muttered and turned on his heel.

Moments later, she could hear the soft growls through the monitor, and the babies’ answering mewls. Gunner was not an unreasonable man – not like some of the male shifters they worked with. A certain wolf shifter sprang to mind. But he had always been worried about her working at the SEA – she just didn’t have the healing strength of a shifter. If she got hurt, she might not be able to heal herself. On her first day on the job, she was nearly strangled to death. Thankfully, Gunner saved her. But he worried he would not be there to save her again, and now he was having trouble holding back his possessive need to protect her because of the cubs. He was trying to protect them as well as her. His need to protect his family clouded his judgment.

But she loved her job, and she helped a lot of people. Surely if she were more cautious, it wouldn’t be an issue. It wasn’t like she purposefully ran into dangerous situations. Her shifter team members were the ones who took the risks. Surely she wasn’t selfish in wanting to go back to work.

Erin melted a little on hearing her huge mate singing a lullaby. She loved him and the cubs with all her heart, but should she really allow him to steamroll over her about this?

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Thanksgiving

“No, but, Mom, just... just listen... Mom? Mom?!”

Erin looked up as Gunner bounded into the kitchen yelling into his cell phone.

“Damnit, woman!”

He hung up and slammed the phone on the counter.

“Gunner, language,” Erin hissed, nodding her head at the triplets rolling around in their playpen.

Gunner grimaced and walked over to give them all a quick kiss. Erin froze in the act of retrieving the cranberry sauce to watch him. He certainly was fine. Long, muscled, jean-clad legs led up to a wide chest, with acres of muscles that were currently covered in a blue shirt that matched his startling eyes. Gunner was perhaps more rugged than handsome, but he was the sexiest man in the world to her. She almost dropped the sauce as he leaned over and his incredibly firm butt pressed against his jeans.

He turned back and smirked at her. He must have felt her lust through their bond, or even scented her. In spite of how intimate they had been before, she blushed.

Erin pulled the sauce out and dumped it into a bowl. There. She was ready. Offering to cook Thanksgiving meal for her family had been a spur of the moment gesture, one that she regretted later. They intended to take the triplets up to Alaska over Christmas to be with Gunner’s family and his bear clan, and when Erin’s mother found out, she was disappointed she wouldn’t see the babies for their first Christmas. Erin had a very difficult relationship with her family, one that she was trying to improve for the sake of her babies, so she thought it would be a good idea for them to spend another holiday together instead.

Gunner didn’t exactly get on with her family, but he had grudgingly agreed to it – for the cubs.

It had been a long time since Erin actually celebrated Thanksgiving. Gunner and his family didn’t, so the two of them didn’t do anything last year. Before then, Erin was barely speaking to her family and spent all holidays alone, and before then, she was in a mental hospital...

Erin was young when she first started getting visions and seeing ghosts, and her parents were unable to cope with her. She was put in an institute and stayed there until she was eighteen. After that, she was on her own. The SEA gave her a scholarship to go to college, on the basis that she would work for them after, but until she met Gunner, she was exceedingly lonely.

Gunner growled at her. He could sense her maudlin thoughts through their bond.

Erin shook her head. "Sorry, just thinking about the last Thanksgiving I celebrated. It was two years ago, I was living in Playa Lunar, and I was eating a turkey dinner for one while my roommate had extremely noisy sex with her boyfriend and his cousin."

She shuddered at the fact that it had been one of her better Thanksgivings. They had offered to let her join in the sex, but she declined and then moved out of the apartment as soon as humanly possible after. It wasn't so much the noise of the sex as the fact that they seemed to want to do it in front of her. They were exhibitionists, but she was no voyeur.

Gunner curled his lip, and she could feel his disgust. He blamed her family, blamed her parents. He thought they abandoned her, and he hated them for it. Erin felt sympathy for them. She wasn't an easy person to be around, even as a child. Her psychic abilities made her weird, and hard to get on with. Not that Gunner seemed to have any problem, or his family for that matter, but though they could be gruff and intimidating, they were incredibly easygoing people.

Time to change the subject. "Why were you yelling at your mom?"

Gunner let out a sigh. "She's invited herself for Thanksgiving – she'll be here soon."

"What?" Panic flared. "I don't have enough food!"

"She's bringing food with her."

Erin gaped at him open-mouthed. "Why exactly is she coming? Not that I don't love your family, but why now?"

"Not, just her, Dad, Fredrik, Astrid and the twins, too."

So, that meant his parents, his twin brother, his brother's mate and twin nephews.

Wow. That was a lot of polar bears.

"I told her your family was coming, so she decided to come down and meet them. She said it was about time they got to know each other."

"Oh, boy."

Her family was uptight and still new to the supernatural world, and were just getting used to being around other creatures. Her sister married a fox shifter, and that was perhaps why they were more open, though, with the exception of her sister and fox shifter brother-in-law, they couldn't get along with Gunner. She couldn't imagine how they would take Gunner's, frankly, loud and brazen clan. But, she wasn't about to snub Gunner's family – she adored them.

“It'll be fine – as long as they bring plenty of food, we'll manage. We better see about finding chairs for everyone.”

Erin pulled off the oversized shirt she had been wearing to protect her clothes while cooking. Gunner blinked at her.

“Wow,” he breathed and sent her a zap of lust through their bond.

“Thank you,” she preened.

She smoothed her hands down her dress. It was forest green and fairly tight, coming a few inches above her knees. She bought it a few years ago but had never worn it. She'd never had an occasion to wear it and had been far too big during and after her pregnancy for it. But now she found she was nearly back to pre-pregnancy weight, and although snug, it looked good.

“You really are something, Mrs. Christiansen.” He placed his large hands on her hips and pulled her against him.

“Right back at you, Mr. Christiansen.”

Erin ran her hands up his chest. Things were still a little tense between them. They still hadn't resolved the work issue, but they weren't openly fighting. However, they were still a little distant, and Erin had missed their closeness over the past few days.

Gunner sensed her emotions and cupped her face to look at him. “I love you. I always will.”

Erin nodded and pulled him down for a kiss. Slower and tenderer than their usual embraces, it was just what she needed. He groaned against her and cupped her ass, lifting her small body against his.

She was just in the process of letting out a lusty moan when there was a sharp clearing of throats behind them. Erin dragged her lips away from her mate long enough to see four polar bear shifters and two cubs, crowding each other in the entrance to the kitchen.

Gunner's mother, Olga, beamed at them, “Goodness, boy, put her down unless you want another set of triplets in nine months time.”

Gunner grumbled and set Erin down.

“There’s my favorite human daughter-in-law!” Olga ran over and pulled Erin into a bear hug.

“Thank god she said human,” laughed Astrid – her sister-in-law, “I was about to be annoyed!”

“It’s lovely to see you,” gasped Erin.

“Mom,” admonished Gunner while being wrapped in a hug by his dad, Karl, “don’t break her.”

Olga snorted. “She managed to give birth to three giant cubs – she doesn’t break that easy.”

“Three giant, gorgeous cubs,” corrected Astrid, pulling Anna and Axel into her arms.

They cooed at her, and she made little growls at them.

Fredrik, Gunner’s brother, picked up Arik and let out a roar. Arik blinked back at him unconcerned and yawned. “Definitely a shifter, this one,” he chuckled.

“Play nice,” warned Astrid as she leaned down for her own two cubs to kiss the babies hello.

Astrid and Fredrik’s twins were four years old, huge for their age, blonde, blue-eyed, impossibly adorable, and naughty as hell.

Olga let go of Erin, but only so she could cuddle the cubs. Erin was given a moment’s rest before Karl started hugging her. Thankfully, he wasn’t quite as enthusiastic as his mate.

“How are you, sweetheart?” he asked sincerely. He was huge and gruff, and an absolute darling.

“I’m really well, thank you, Karl.”

“Ah!”

“Okay, Dad.”

Karl beamed. He insisted on her calling him dad, and she wasn’t about to disappoint him.

Fredrik gave her a wave before handing Arik to his mother and running after his own two cubs that had escaped to another part of the house. “Don’t you dare break anything!” he howled.

“You don’t mind us dropping in on you like this?” asked Karl.

“Of course not,” Erin said with feeling. “You’re always welcome.” Gunner had the kind of family she always wanted, and she was honored to be a part of it.

Astrid handed Axel and Anna over to Karl and grinned at Erin.

“No, I haven’t had a vision about the lotto numbers,” said Erin, knowing what the lovely polar bear was about to ask her.

Astrid clicked her fingers. “Darn it!” she chuckled.

“You’ll be the first one I call if I ever do.”

The she-bear grinned and swooped in for a hug. “That’s my girl.”

Erin gasped as a vision came to her. “Oh my god, Astrid, congratulations!”

Astrid put her down and stuck her tongue out at her mate. “See? Didn’t I tell you we couldn’t keep anything from this one?”

Fredrik groaned as he tried to wrangle his sons.

“What’s going on?” demanded Olga.

Astrid patted her stomach. “I’m pregnant.”

This was met with a chorus of congratulations, demands to know why they weren’t told sooner, more congratulations, and a large amount of roaring.

“Well done, son,” boomed Karl giving Fredrik a sound slap on the back. Gunner and Fredrik hugged trying to out-squeeze one another. Astrid and Olga rolled their eyes.

“It’s early days,” said Fredrik, looking extremely proud of himself as he wrapped his arms around his mate.

Astrid looked at Erin eagerly. “So, boy or girl?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” she asked, biting her lip. “I mean I already ruined you being able to tell everyone.”

Gunner curled an arm around her waist protectively while eyeing his twin brother.

Fredrik snorted at his brother. “Settle down; we had a bet going to see who would work it out first. I said you,” he pointed at Gunner, “would be able to smell her changed scent before Erin got a vision. You seriously let me down.”

Astrid beamed. “Thanks, Erin, you just won me fifty foot-rubs.”

“I can’t smell your changed scent,” grumbled Karl.

“I put on a lot of perfume today to fool everyone,” declared Astrid smugly.

“That I can smell,” said Olga dryly. “Why do you think I kept the window open on the drive over from the airport?”

“So come on, boy or girl?” asked Astrid. “We have another bet going.”

“Just remember my visions aren’t one hundred percent.” They all nodded impatiently. “But I did see you with twin girls.”

“Twin girls!” exclaimed Fredrik excitedly.

This was met with another round of roars, that only stopped when they saw the open mouthed stares of a group of humans and one fox shifter at the front door.

Erin’s family had arrived.

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“It’s so quiet in there,” whispered Erin worriedly. They were in the kitchen.

Gunner grunted, and his inner bear huffed. “Better than them fighting.”

The only sound was of Fredrik running around trying to control his cubs – who were, frankly, uncontrollable. His polar bear chuckled. Though maybe he shouldn’t laugh. How long did he have until the triplets were mobile?

Why he had told his mother about Erin’s family coming for Thanksgiving, he did not know. This was just the kind of thing she would do. He wasn’t embarrassed by his family, more like he was embarrassed by Erin’s. How they could have produced his lovely mate he did not know. After much wheedling, Gunner had told his mother about Erin’s strained relationship with her parents, and his mother was completely understanding... nah, not really. She was absolutely livid and wanted to give Erin’s parents a piece of her mind for abandoning their cub the way they did. Part of the reason he wanted to keep his mother away from them.

Erin didn’t want to waste time in playing the blame game, even though she carried a lot of hurt over what happened. His mother, on the other hand, knew how to hold a grudge, and since Erin was now part of her family, anyone who hurt her family was considered an enemy to be hunted down and devoured. She was a scary she-bear when she wanted to be, had to be, otherwise she never would have kept him and Fredrik in line growing up.

Erin rearranged the turkey she had cooked and the pre-cooked one his mom brought with her. Good job they had an enormous kitchen and a way too big oven.

“Are you sure I can’t help?” boomed the voice of his mother.

“We’re fine,” he yelled back.

He was about to suggest they make a run for it when his phone sprung to life. He pulled it out with a groan. Crap.

“Work,” he growled.

Erin looked a little saddened, but she nodded. “You have to go.”

“I’m sorry, babe.”

He really was sorry, too. Thanksgiving wasn’t a big deal to him, but it used to be for his mate, and she had wanted to recapture a happier memory from her childhood while creating new ones with her own cubs. Hopefully, he could be back before it was bedtime for them and he could at least enjoy bathtime – his favorite time because the cubs adored it and he also got to splash his mate. Wet t-shirts suited her something fierce. It pained him to leave his mate to referee the two families, especially with her looking so fine – he had plans for how he wanted to drag that sexy dress off her luscious little body... Maybe later.

“It’s okay. Work is important, too,” she said pointedly.

His bear growled. He’d walked right into that one. How could he persuade her to quit her job when he left at the drop of a hat? It wasn’t that he was sexist and thought that she belonged at home, he was just increasingly worried about losing her. Every moment he was with her, it hit him anew how much he loved her. Losing her would be devastating. Why couldn’t she do something safe like becoming a florist? His bear chuffed. Right, except he wouldn’t allow her to sell roses – those things had thorns.

He leaned over and gave her a lingering kiss. “Just remember, if my mom does something crazy, just shout the word pineapple at my dad.”

Erin’s forehead furrowed. “Pineapple?”

“Yeah. That means she’s entered a danger zone. We used it when I used to bring girls home when I was younger, and she started showing them pictures of me in the bathtub while I was holding my winky.”

“Really?” Erin smirked. “I’d quite like to see those pictures.”

Gunner ran his chin over her bonding scar, and she shivered. “When I get home tonight, you can see the live show.”

“I can’t wait,” she whispered and placed a kiss just below his ear.

“Tease,” he grumbled before dragging himself away.

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Gunner parked his SUV, and a second later, Cutter jumped into the passenger side. The wolf shifter gave him a toothy grin.

“How come you’re working today?” asked Gunner. He thought Cutter’s mate had insisted on a big Thanksgiving meal as Cutter’s pup from his first marriage would be visiting, and it was on pain of tears that he didn’t show up.

Gunner led his team, and he had no choice but to be on call, but he thought Avery had volunteered to work that day.

Cutter looked away shiftily. “I was asked to.”

His polar bear harrumphed. He could scent the lie a mile away, and Gunner raised an eyebrow.

“Fine!” snapped Cutter. “I begged Avery to switch with me. Lucie invited her ex-husband to Thanksgiving.”

“So? I thought they were friends.”

“They are,” he grumbled.

“Isn’t he also gay and married?”

“Him being there isn’t the worst part. My ex-wife split with her boyfriend and Lucie thought it would be nice to invite her, too.”

Gunner snickered. Yep, that sounded like something the hedgehog shifter would do. Lucie was sweet and generous to the point of distraction for Cutter. Gunner remembered Cutter’s ex – the she-wolf was about as volatile and irritable as Cutter. Nobody was sorry when they broke up.

“I had to get out of there before I did something crazy like beat her to death with the turkey.”

“Probably not a good idea to get arrested on Thanksgiving.”

“Plus, we have to eat that turkey.” Gunner gave him a pointed look. “And it would upset Lucie and my pup, and Lucie bursts into tears over nothing at the moment. We were watching a commercial for a chocolate bar last night, and she lost it. Took me an hour to get her to stop. She thought it was just really moving when the older brother broke the bar in half to share with his younger brother.”

Cutter gave him a harrowing expression, and his polar bear tried not to laugh too hard. Lucie was heavily pregnant and on the high end of the emotional Richter scale at that moment. Erin's pregnancy had been pretty much free of dramatics, but shifter pregnancies – especially between two different species – could be explosive.

“Isn't Lucie upset you volunteered to work today?”

“No, she's in a pretty good mood right now. My ex brought by my pup's baby clothes, so I left them cooing over them.” He rubbed his forehead.

Gunner grinned. “So how many pups does Lucie want again?”

Cutter glowered at him. “Last time she said three but yesterday she was talking about four – it keeps going up! By next week she'll probably want seven!”

The polar rolled on his back hooting with laughter. Not all shifters were as lucky as he was. Three cubs with a perfect mate. One determined to put herself in danger growled his bear, sobering up.

Yeah, that was something he still needed to work on.

“So what the hell are we doing here anyway?” Cutter glared at the winding dirt track.

“We got a potential lead on our turkey farmer killer. Turns out both our victims have been getting threats.”

“We already knew they were getting threats from that Animals First group. Bunch of unwashed, vegetarian hippies,” he grumbled.

True, both their dead turkey farmers were targets for the Animals First initiative. The group always targeted both of them in the lead-up to Thanksgiving, claiming it was wrong for them to farm turkeys, that they kept them in squalid living conditions, and so on and so forth. The rest of the year, the group left them alone, but every year leading up to the holiday, people from Animals First harassed them with annoying practical jokes. Nothing in the vicinity of murder though.

Plus, Cutter didn't really think it could be them. In his words, vegetarians just don't have the energy to do anything other than sit around, complaining and farting all day. Though he didn't say it very loudly, Lucie wouldn't approve of such sentiments. Cutter was more of a 'condemn everyone' kind of guy, while Lucie was a 'live and let live' gentle soul. And people thought he and Erin made an odd couple.

“They weren't the only ones sending stuff. A guy called Arliss Gobbler sent them both threats, too.”

“Gobbler?” Cutter’s lips quirked.

“Turkey shifter. Apparently, he didn’t like the way the farmers were treating his fellow birds.”

Cutter grunted. “But they weren’t farming shifters.”

“Doesn’t matter. According to his record, Gobbler has a few problems. He has previous arrests for attacking other turkey farmers. Claims a turkey farmer killed his girlfriend.”

The wolf hesitated. “Was his girlfriend an actual turkey or a shifter? Actually, don’t tell me – I still plan on eating turkey when I get home later.”

“Probably for the best,” Gunner grunted. “His prints came back on threatening notes found at both our victims’ houses, so hopefully, this will be a slam dunk.”

He grabbed his phone and pulled up the picture he surreptitiously took earlier of Erin bending over in her green dress. His bear almost purred. She was so lovely; she took his breath away. His mate, the mother of his cubs – jeez, he ached just being apart from her for an hour.

He swiped to the most recent pictures of his cubs – taken half an hour ago. His bear virtually cooed at them. They were all blue-eyed, and both boys had his blonde hair, while Anna took after Erin with wisps of chocolate brown curls. Each cub was sucking on something – Anna demurely had a rattle, but somehow Arik had managed to get hold of his grandfather’s wallet, while Axel was content with the TV remote. Little monsters he thought affectionately.

He tried to show the new pictures to Cutter – indeed his pride as a father pushed him to show the thousands of pictures of his cubs to everyone he came into contact with – but the wolf shifter was in no mood and Gunner put his phone away.

“C’ mon, let’s go bag a turkey.”

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Dinner had started so well...

It was a miracle they weren’t throwing food yet. Erin rested her head on her chin and tried to block out the whispered yelling. Yes, it was whispered, but it was definitely yelling. They were at least quiet for the sake of the triplets.

Everything was going fine, everyone was being polite, but when Erin, aided by her younger sister, Vanessa, went to put the triplets down for a nap, all hell seemed to break loose.

Her mother was angrier than Erin had ever seen her, and Olga was practically growling. They were arguing about the cubs, about what was best for them, and it had devolved into insults. Her mother was being rude about bear shifters. Olga was sneering at her parents' treatment of her. Her father was now outraged and whisper-yelling at her to butt out of their family business. Karl jumped in to defend his mate. Astrid joined in, which meant Roger – Vanessa's fox shifter mate – then jumped in to defend his in-laws. Erin's two brothers were trying to get everyone to calm down, and one of them made a very unfortunate comment about 'your kind' to Fredrik who was now joining in the muted roaring and threatening to bring a bear clan down on all of them.

Erin took a deep breath and slowly got to her feet. For once, the twin bear cubs were quiet. The blonde terrors were staring at the adults who were acting worse than them for once. Erin held out her hands to them.

"How about we get some pie, boys?"

They grinned twin smiles and slipped their hands into hers. No one noticed them leaving for the kitchen. The two boys clambered up on the tall chairs at the breakfast counter, and she dished out generous portions of pumpkin pie and whipped cream. She watched them eat with gusto, and that cheered her a little. She wasn't that upset about the two families fighting. Really, she wasn't surprised. They were oil and water – they were never going to get along. She just wished Gunner was there to commiserate and hide in the kitchen with her. She wished they weren't fighting about her going back to work.

Wanting to go back to work wasn't unreasonable. Gunner was just trying to protect her – he was scared of losing her. Erin was scared for him too. Every time he left for work a part of her worried he might not come back, but she had to deal with that. She'd wanted to be an agent for years. She wanted to use her abilities to help people; otherwise, what was the point in having them? Being a psychic had cost her dearly as a child. Years of loneliness, peppered with horrific visions of things no child should see, and the ability to see ghosts, was not something she would wish on anyone.

But she didn't want to hurt Gunner. He was... everything to her. Without him, she'd probably still be a lonely and shy woman who spent her Saturdays color-coordinating her closet. He brought love and happiness into her life, not to mention her cubs.

Erin picked up the pie, ready to put it back in the fridge. She so wanted to give him what he wanted, but she didn't want to give up her job completely. They needed to find a way to compromise, they needed...

Electric coursed through her, and Erin jerked, the pie splattering all over her dress. Her vision darkened for a moment until she saw Gunner. He was walking up to a cabin, his large body moving easily in long strides as he jumped up the steps to the door. He raised his hand and knocked on the door. Two seconds later, a shotgun blast exploded through the door, straight into the chest of her mate.

Erin's legs gave way as she dropped to the floor.

"Mommy!" screamed the twins in unison.

Astrid and Fredrik burst into the room, quickly taking in the scene. Fredrik picked her up; worry etched into his familiar face. He was so like Gunner, but she could easily tell them apart. She would know her mate anywhere.

The image of Gunner being hit thundered through her mind.

"My phone, I need my phone. Hurry!"

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The shotgun blast erupted through the door.

"Put your weapon down, and come out with your hands in the air!" howled Gunner.

His bear roared, wanting to shift, wanting to run in there and tear the turkey shifter apart. The tactical team led by arctic wolf shifter, Lake bristled, eager to do the same.

That had been close...

He almost didn't answer his phone. Almost let it go to voicemail, but when he saw it was Erin, he worried it might have been something to do with the cubs. Good job he did answer. Erin was frantic at first, but when he calmed her down and listened to her, he called for back up and made sure he and Cutter stayed the hell away from the cabin. He knew from experience that Erin's visions were not to be ignored.

They watched tensely as a tall, thin male slowly walked out of the front door of the cabin. He was holding his shotgun.

Lake tightened his grip on his gun. "Drop the weapon," he commanded.

The male scowled, but he did and raised his hands over his head. Lake nodded to a couple of his people, and they ran over to check him for other weapons and to secure him. Cutter stomped over and arrested him, grudgingly reading him his rights.

His bear rumbled in satisfaction, though he couldn't quite get over his unease. If Erin hadn't got that vision... No, not worth thinking about. But it did give him second thoughts about another matter.

*

Erin was waiting for him outside their front door when he arrived home. She burst into tears when she saw him and ran to him, jumping into his arms. The wave of relief, worry, and fear he felt through their bond was staggering.

His bear whined for their mate as Gunner tried to soothe her. He walked over to the porch swing and settled on it with Erin in his lap.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, "I thought I had a handle on it, but when I saw you just now, I couldn't hold back."

Her bottom lip trembled, and he stroked her back, making hushing noises.

"It's okay; I'm okay."

"I know, but seeing you get shot..." Her small frame shuddered in his arms. "It was awful."

He didn't bother to mention the fact that the shotgun had been loaded with silver – he wasn't sure he could have survived the shotgun on its own, but with silver in the mix, he'd definitely be dead. "The triplets..." he breathed, trying to calm himself too.

"They're fine," she reassured him quickly. "Vanessa and Astrid are with them."

His bear whimpered for their mate. Not the first time he had felt utterly useless when it came to his mate and her abilities. They caused her such pain, and he could do nothing to help her. But he couldn't deny how grateful he was that she was special.

"I was wrong," they both said at once.

Erin looked up and frowned as Gunner's forehead furrowed. "What?" they both said.

"You go first."

"No you."

"No you."

"Gunner!"

Gunner rubbed a tear away from her cheek. "I was wrong about you going back to work. You have a gift – a sometimes really fucking annoying gift, but you saved my life today. And you'll probably save a lot more lives. I don't want to hold you back."

Erin gave him a watery smile, and he felt her love through their bond. "You don't hold me back. You saved my life – I can't imagine how awful my life would be if I never met you. Actually, I can, which is why I'm so grateful for meeting you. And I was wrong for dismissing your worries. Our jobs are dangerous. Which is why," she let out a breath, "I've decided I'm going to tell Director Sanders that I want to be a part-time consultant."

His bear howled triumphantly, but all Gunner felt was guilt. His mate had overcome so much to get where she was. "Babe, you worked so hard to become an agent."

"I know, but watching you get shot was really... words can't describe how terrible it was."

Gunner rubbed her arms and kissed her forehead. "Maybe you should sleep on it."

Erin giggled. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"I am," he admitted. Ecstatic amended his bear. "But you're still shook up from your vision. Don't make any hasty decisions. You told me you hated being a consultant when you worked in Playa Lunar."

"They didn't let me get involved in the cases – they used me like a magic eight ball. I think things will be different here. But yeah, it's been a long day, we'll discuss it again tomorrow, but I think this will be a good idea. I'll still get to help people, but I'll also have time with the cubs."

Gunner cupped her cheeks and pulled her in for a soft kiss, brushing his lips against hers, licking away the salty tears.

Erin groaned as there was a crash from inside the house, Fredrik yelled "Boys!" and arguments broke out among the families.

"How was dinner?" Gunner asked.

"Terrible," she sighed. "They settled down when they thought you were in danger, but when they found out you were okay, they went back to arguing."

"Yeah, about what I was expecting." He ran his hand up her leg, frowning at the brown stains her dress. "What happened to your pretty dress?"

"Dropped pie on it when I had my vision."

"Shame, but you look better without it anyway."

Erin giggled and rubbed a sleeve over her wet cheeks. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Damn straight.” He rose to his feet with Erin in his arms. “I need to get you out of this dress. Think we can sneak into our room?”

“Don’t you want to break up the fighting? Shouldn’t we try and make them get along.”

“Hey, I already had one near-death experience today, I’m not going for a second.”

Erin curled her arms around his neck. “Are you scared of your mom?”

Gunner gave her a wry smile. “I’m terrified of her – and not a bit ashamed of admitting it.”

Erin snuggled against him, and his bear rumbled happily as he rushed into the house. Vaguely he noticed there was some kind of food fight going on, but he saw his cubs were safe with Vanessa and Astrid so he decided to let them get on with it. Though he did shout ‘pineapple’ for good measure – his mom was advancing on Erin’s mom holding the gravy boat just a bit too menacingly.

Gunner grinned on hearing his mom’s squawk of protest. He ran up the stairs to their bedroom two at a time, Erin shaking with laughter in his arms.

Yep, he couldn’t imagine the families would ever be BFFs – that would take a miracle. He’d settle for them just not destroying his house... or at least not completely destroying his house. He had his mate, and his cubs, that was more than enough magic for one holiday.

The end