

Jingle Balls!

“And we are seeing a record number of shoppers here at Draper’s Department Store tonight,” trilled the perky news reporter. Her white teeth almost twinkled. “I’m here with the owner of the store himself, Mr. William Draper the fourth. Hello, Sir, and Merry Christmas!”

A tall, muscled, and mildly alarming middle-aged man smiled coldly.

“Hello, Linda,” he rumbled.

Linda visibly fluttered. Though, whether it was in response to the fact that he was handsome, in a rugged kind of way, or that he appeared to have more muscles that he you could shake a stick at, or that he was clearly richer than slab of double chocolate fudge cake, it was hard to say. Either way, Mellie decided to change the channel. Ever since she saw a news report last year about people getting trampled during Black Friday last year, department stores made her anxious.

She flipped to the next channel, and on seeing that it was a cartoon about a futuristic family, she quickly flipped again. Ever since she saw that film about robots taking over the world and wiping out humanity, robots made her anxious. She couldn’t even watch the harmless antics of Ruthie the Robot anymore.

Mellie chewed on her lip as she landed on a different news channel. Oh, there was bound to be something that made her anxious here too – she had a lot of anxiety. In fact, nearly everything made her anxious. She couldn’t help it – it seemed to be a trait of her kind. Mole shifters, in general, had a lot to be anxious about – they were tiny, near-sighted, and not physically strong. Humans always walked around with this crazy idea that all shifters had superhuman strength and speed, but that was so not true – their misconceptions made her pretty anxious.

But, if her therapist had taught her anything, it was that she had to try and confront her anxieties. Otherwise, she would just spend the rest of her life cuddled in a ball too afraid to do anything. While that sounded all fine and dandy to her inner mole, Mellie wanted a little more out of life than that. Not much more – she wasn’t greedy, but a little more.

So, with a deep, fortifying breath, she switched the channel back to news report about the department store. She barely even quivered as the huge, terrifying bear shifter came into view again. She barely quivered because he was safely in the TV and couldn’t physically reach out and touch here... unless that awful horror movie she stupidly watched, while trying to combat another one of her fears, was to be believed.

“Indeed, we are expecting record sales this year,” he said in a deep voice that had Linda the reporter cooing with every syllable. “That’s why we are keeping our doors open until midnight for everyone’s shopping needs, and members of staff will be mingling with our customers offering assistance and free hot cocoa to the kids and peppermint schnapps to the adults. Not to mention the chocolate chip cookies.” He winked at Linda and she almost giggled flirtatiously.

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” breathed Linda, looking at him as if he was some kind of god.

Mellie frowned, wondering whether it was just a ploy to get his customers drunk and therefore get them to buy more. She worried that in reality it would just result in lots of fights – as if shopping wasn't already violent enough!

She was just pleased that she had planned ahead and bought all of her Christmas presents online. Okay, she had been a little anxious when they moved the delivery date back to today, but she could handle that. She had paid extra for guaranteed delivery, and she told herself – over and over – that it would all be fine. Now, she was waiting at her apartment for her parcel to arrive, and when it did, she would wrap everything and be all ready to go to her parents' house tomorrow.

Yes, it would be here any moment... any moment... any...

Mellie yelped as her phone vibrated. She rolled her eyes – she had muted the sound on her phone because it made her jump, but apparently, even the vibration startled her! She grabbed her phone, thinking it would be her mother confirming the arrangements for tomorrow again. Her mom was just as big of a worrier as she was, and constantly had to check what time she was arriving, and also that she wasn't bringing her boyfriend. Since Malcolm dumped her three months ago when his head was turned by a rabbit shifter, she doubted he wanted an invite.

But rather than the fifteenth text that day from her mom, it was a message for the delivery company. Unfortunately, due to adverse weather conditions, her package would not arrive that day, but would instead arrive on December 26th. As a gesture of goodwill, they were refunding her postage charges. They wished her Merry Christmas.

Mellie squeaked as she read the message for the eighth time.

"No, this can't be happening," she murmured over and over.

But, no matter how many times she read the message, or how many times she said that, it was still true and very definitely happening.

Mellie sagged onto the couch. That meant that all her presents were delayed – tomorrow, on Christmas Day, she would have nothing to give to her mom, her siblings, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles – she had nothing to give to MeeMaw!

"No, no, no, no, no!"

No, she couldn't turn up with nothing. She couldn't turn up with a promise that it would arrive the following day. The adults would probably understand – but how could she explain it to a four-year-old who wanted a Tammy Tinkles doll?

But, if she was determined to get presents for everyone that meant... Her eyes drifted over to the TV, where Linda was shamelessly flirting with the huge bear shifter.

Oh, no. Her inner mole eeped. That meant she had to go shopping on Christmas Eve!

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"Feet off my desk," growled William Draper Sr.

William Draper Jr – or Bill as he preferred - smirked and removed his feet. He turned the TV off, which until a few moments ago beheld his father being interviewed by possibly the biggest beehive hairdo ever concocted.

“I was just enjoying watching you and Linda. You make a very cute couple. Did she ask you out?”

His dad scowled at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. Out of my chair.”

Bill let out a theatrical sigh and got up. He watched as his meticulous dad lowered himself into his chair, glared at him, and proceeded to reset it to his specifications. The man knew if his chair was even off by an inch – he was painstakingly fastidious about everything. If the two of them didn’t look like so much alike, Bill would have suspected he was adopted. Though, he was probably more like his mother than he cared to admit – while his dad was working on Christmas Eve, and would be until the cluck struck midnight, his mom was in Switzerland, skiing with her fifth husband.

He perched on his dad’s desk – his antique, ‘they only made a hundred of these’ desk. “So, you wanted to see me?” he asked.

His dad’s eyes flashed to the black of his inner bear, but he swallowed his annoyance and leaned back in his chair, trying to be nonchalant. Bill and his own bear had to swallow his chuckles. When his dad tried to act relaxed it was painful. The guy needed to loosen up – he needed to find a female to throw all of his pent up frustration at. Though, given how disastrous his mating was, Bill wasn’t surprised he was reticent.

While Bill... he was going to say loved but he didn’t think that was true. While Bill had some regard – yes, that was much better – for the woman who gave him life, he knew what and who she was. She was a beautiful she-wolf who had charmed her way into mating the rich king of a bear clan. His dad – usually so stiff and exacting – had been charmed by her, let his guard down, and gave her the keys to the kingdom. She had nearly bankrupted the clan, nearly taken away all their stores with her selfish spending and partying. She was a golddigger through and through, and his dad had virtually had to give her half his wealth to get rid of her – she was now tearing through it in Europe with increasingly younger husbands. It was clear she had never cared for his dad, and Bill doubted she ever wanted him. The experience also made his dad incredibly sour... more sour... sourer... more of a hard ass about females, mating, and just generally anything other than hard work.

His dad tried to smile; it was like watching a walnut crack. “Nothing important, really. I was just wondering whom you would be bringing to the clan Christmas celebration tomorrow.”

His tone was casual, but his eyes were sharp.

“Really? You don’t want to be surprised on the day?” asked Bill innocently while his bear grunted in amusement.

The sour expression returned. “Well, as much as we enjoyed meeting the aspiring actress last year, or the aspiring dancer the year before, or the aspiring singer before that...”

Bill had dated a lot of aspiring women, who just needed to catch a break with the right person behind them... funding them. Yes, he was multi-millionaire bear, he didn’t tend to attract women other than those who found his bank balance infinitely attractive. It was almost insulting – he was,

after all, a handsome and fun guy, and his bank balance wasn't the only enormous thing about him. He had lots of other qualities a woman could enjoy – particularly his enormous...

“But, really, m'boy, isn't it time you found a decent female to mate? Someone a little less keen to spend all our money, and a little more keen to err on the side of caution.”

“Mmm, sexy,” rumbled Bill.

His dad snarled at him in rebuke. Bill shrugged, and his bear growled. His inner bear had also been wondering the same thing, but Bill wasn't about to admit that – his bear should be on his side!

“It won't be long until I'm retiring and the stores and the clan will be yours. Really, you don't want to be doing this on your own. You don't want to make the same mistake I did.”

A hint of weary sadness entered his voice and Bill shifted uncomfortably as his bear whined uneasily. The idea of his large, indomitable father being lonely didn't sit well with him.

“Plenty of years left in you yet,” he said jovially, to cover up his awkwardness. “And don't worry, you're going to love the aspiring singer-songwriting-dancing-actress I'm bringing tomorrow.”

His dad scowled and Bill beamed. In truth, he hadn't invited any female. He ended his last dalliance months ago out of sheer boredom. She had been an aspiring artist, though – and Bill was no judge of art – he didn't think he'd want any of her rubbish hanging on his walls. It was literally rubbish – she was a dumpster diver. She had wanted Bill to invest in some galleries to showcase her art piece – or crap pieces, as he thought of them. Bill couldn't even be bothered to pretend he was going to give her any money, and they soon broke up.

“I'll see you tomorrow morning,” he said and squeezed his dad's shoulder with affection. As much as they didn't get along, they did love one another very much.

“Don't be late,” grumbled his dad, though, without any heat.

Bill whistled as he made his way out of the store. They had half a dozen across the country, but this was the first and largest, and, he reflected as he bypassed harried shoppers, the one likely to take the most money on Christmas Eve. He chuckled as he saw two women fighting over the last pair of purple leather goods. They started calling one another the B-word, and burly security guys hustled over to carry them away. Ah, Christmas – it always brought out the best in people, and he was being serious when he thought it. He loved all the jostling and the last minute craziness. It was the best time of year.

He nodded at a few of the salesgirls as he passed them - they always gave him dreamy looks. As he forcefully pushed the front door open, he wondered whether he should rustle up a female companion for tomorrow, though, he wasn't sure how polite his dad would be to them. He was too lost in thought to notice the tiny creature on the other side of the door. No, it was only when the door slammed into her face and she was propelled to the sidewalk that he saw her and his bear roared in alarm.

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“Eep!”

Mellie landed on the ground with a thud, and yep, that crunch was probably her glasses. She squeezed herself as small as possible as people milled around her. Oh no, her fear of being trampled to death really was coming true. Her inner mole started to yelp and then went silent.

“Jingle balls! I’m sorry,” rumbled a deep voice. “Watch it! Don’t you dare step on her!” menaced the voice.

Just like that, she was no longer being jostled – people were giving her a wide berth, rather than stepping over her. She let out another eep as strong arms pulled her up, and up, and up. They didn’t just pull her to her feet and set her on her way. Nope, the arms pulled her up against a hard chest with a very delicious, fresh scent. Her mole just squinted in wonder – moles didn’t tend to do the wide-eye thing, they were squinters, through and through.

“You okay?” asked the voice as the chest vibrated.

Mellie squinted at whomsoever was carrying but all she could see was an indistinct blob. It was a good smelling blob though.

“My glasses?” she queried without much hope.

“Double jingle balls,” muttered the voice. “Ah, broken, I’m afraid.”

“Hmm.”

Mellie rubbed her forehead where the door hit her. Undoubtedly, she would have a whopper of a bump there tomorrow. Not that she minded that – her whole family was pretty clumsy, and bumps were a way of life for them.

“Ah, jeez, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she murmured.

The anxiety about being trampled was finally passing, and her heartbeat was returning to normal. Though, that didn’t last long. The male, whose arms she was currently residing in, started moving.

Mellie yelped and wrapped her arms around a pair of unbelievably large, hard shoulders. Her inner mole snuffled, and she wondered where he was taking her. She didn’t have any anxiety about being kidnapped – mostly because she never believed she was important enough to be kidnapped – but should she have anxiety about that? For a strange moment, she almost thought that she would be happy to go wherever this male wanted to take her, but then she allowed her normal anxiousness to return.

Finally, he lowered her to a soft chair.

“You can let go now,” said the amused male.

“Oh, right!” she loosened her clamped arms from his shoulders and tried her best not to blush.

Though, as she felt fingers stroking her already forming bruise, there was no way she couldn't blush. Her inner mole cooed and Mellie hushed her. There was no point in getting ideas about this... this... She sniffed and tried not to whimper. He was a bear shifter. No wonder he was so tall thought her inner beast dreamily - the usually timid and scared creature didn't see anything amiss about being this close to such a large predator. Mellie, on the other hand, couldn't help but think of her anxiety about being eaten by a bear... while shifted, of course. Not the other way! Her mind went to a very dirty place that, usually, it never bothered about.

Her blush deepened at her lewd thought and she started to get to her feet.

"I should really..."

A strong, gentle hand propelled her back to the chair and she saw the vague outline of him kneel in front of her. "You're injured."

"Oh no, it happens all the time," she squeaked dismissively. "I really must get all my shopping, I really must..."

Though, even as she thought about trying to shop, particularly without her glasses, she virtually started hyperventilating. She had anxieties about losing her glasses, not being able to see, and walking off a bridge or a canyon or something equally as worrying. Admittedly, that was probably unlikely in a department store, but still.

Mellie clutched at the list in her hand, screwing it up into a ball. But, as a warm hand landed on her shoulder, she calmed. Her mole stilled, her anxieties paused, and she looked up at the blob of a male in wonder. Just like that, everything seemed fine. She felt... secure, and like danger wasn't lurking around every corner, and in her refrigerator – she had anxieties about her appliances exploding - for the first time ever. This male really was something special. No one had ever been able to calm her.

"It's okay," he soothed, rubbing his warm hand over her shoulder.

"Ooh."

"What was that?"

"Nothing!" she squeaked. It was just dormant arousal springing to life. Her mole cooed again. She cleared her throat, hoping to get herself back on track and rid herself of this foggy lust that had sprung up so unexpectedly.

"But I need to get all my presents. They were supposed to be delivered today. No, they were supposed to be delivered last week, but then they delayed, and then they sent me a message today telling me that there was bad weather and now I'm here trying to get everything last minute, and now my glasses are broken and I can barely see a thing..."

She was aware she was babbling, but she had to do something to cover up her shy embarrassment.

"Do you have a list of what you want?" he asked simply.

Mellie nodded and managed to unscrew her hand.

“Hmmm.”

He took the list and she heard the crinkle of paper as he smoothed it out. A few moments later he said, “I don’t think that this will be a problem.”

“It won’t?” she breathed.

“No. I can help you get all this.”

Mellie’s mouth gaped in surprise. “You’re going to help me?” she asked wondrously.

If she weren’t so surprised, she might question why her usual anxiety about strangers wasn’t kicking in. But, truly, she didn’t consider him to be strange. No, he was rather... nice.

“Sure. I’d be happy to help.”

Mellie heard the smile in his voice, and couldn’t help but smile bashfully in return. Wow, he was really something. Her heart started beating faster, and certainly not for any anxiety related reasons. Not even the fact that he was a bear could diminish her immediate crush on him.

“Plus, it’s the least I can do, after I bashed you with the door.”

She shook her head and reassured him, “It happens all the time – even when I have my glasses, my vision isn’t great.”

There were a few moments of silence before he finally said in a slow voice, “So you really can’t see me?”

“Well, I can see the shape of you,” she said, gesturing in the air around him, “but that’s all. I really need my glasses to see more. I have spares at home.”

She was just in a rush and forgot to bring them today – another anxiety which didn’t seem to bother her at that moment.

“So, you have no idea what I look like or who I am?” he continued in his slow, uncertain voice.

“No,” she admitted immediately.

Usually, she might have a few qualms about being vulnerable around a bear shifter, but, for some reason, she had no such misgivings around him.

“Should I know who you are?” she asked, wondering if perhaps he was someone she should know.

But, honestly, if they went to school together she doubted she would remember him – that period of her life was best forgotten. Or, if he was a celebrity, she doubted she would know who he was anyway.

“I’m Bill,” he said and grasped one of her hands.

“Eep! I’m Mellie,” she quickly amended. The eep was for how wonderful it felt to feel his skin against hers, and it came right from her smitten inner mole.

“Okay, then, let’s get your shopping.”

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Bill scowled at a wolf shifter who had jostled Mellie’s elbow. The wolf sneered, saw Bill’s unflinching expression, and then slunk away. Bill maneuvered Mellie in front of him so he could try and act like a cocoon for her.

People never walked into him. Either they knew who he was, or they could see his size, and ‘don’t flip with me’ expression, and they got out of his damn way. But Mellie, people just walked right on into her like she wasn’t even there. What, just because she was a tiny mole shifter, did that mean people could walk all over her?

His bear let out a rumbling snarl at an oncoming cheetah shifter. The male’s eyes widened and quickly turned in the opposite direction. Humph, yeah he better run thought the bear in satisfaction.

He placed both hands on her shoulders and she let out another coo. His bear virtually grinned. He rarely elicited such frank, and frankly adorable, reactions from women. Mostly, women targeted him because they knew who he was. It was good for his ego. Especially as this woman appeared to have no clue whom he was, or what he looked like.

Bill admitted to a little skepticism at first about that. In the past, plenty of women had pretended they didn’t know who he was, then feigned complete and utter shock when he told them. He usually found it amusing, but he didn’t like the idea of Mellie faking it at all. No, she shouldn’t be faking anything with him whatsoever thought the lewd part of his mind – namely his bear. But, he genuinely believed that Mellie had no clue at all. If she was that good of an actor she would be trying to hide her arousal for him, which seemed to cause her no end of embarrassment, and him and his bear no end of satisfaction.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear, smirking as she shivered in pleasure at his closeness, “Let’s start downstairs in the basement – that’s where the toys are. Then, we’ll work our way up floor by floor. I know where everything is.”

Mellie nodded. “Sounds good. You must come here a lot.”

“Well, now and again,” he admitted vaguely as he steered her to the escalators. He had practically grown up in this store. He used to terrorize customers and chase other clan mates around it. His dad had not approved in the least. “What about you?”

Mellie shook her head fervently. “Oh no, department stores make me anxious.”

Bill chuckled softly. “Really?”

She nodded and he could just imagine her face creasing in cute worry. His bear sighed dreamily and Bill rolled his eyes – what the hell was happening to him? One pretty – no, one gorgeous, sweet girl in distress and he was all sappy doo dah for her.

“Everything makes me anxious,” she sighed.

Bill tried not to smile but he couldn't help himself.

"Okay, here we go."

Mellie let out an eep as he lifted her onto the escalator. Then she let out another eep at the bottom when he lifted her off and steered her through the many displays of toys.

"Where are we headed?"

"To the books please – I think my nieces and nephews should have at least a few books for Christmas."

"Books it is," he chuckled as he drove her to the many shelves lined with colorful picture books.

Shopping like this was kind of fun. Of course, he had been shopping with previous girlfriends, but that involved visits to jewelry stores and clothes stores while they tried on dozens of overpriced outfits. Mellie was much more entertaining.

"Okay, here we go. How about this one, it's called the Mole in the Hole."

It had a cute picture of a little mole on the cover.

"Oh no, they... they already have that one," she stammered, and he saw she was blushing again - profusely.

His bear growled softly and he wondered at her sudden discomfort. He looked at the book and smiled. "Wait a moment. Are you Mellie Carter?"

As in the illustrator of the book!

Mellie shrunk a little and nodded. "When I have my glasses I'm actually not too bad at drawing," she said with an enormous amount of modesty that no bear would ever possess.

"Holy candy canes," he chuckled as he flicked through the picture book. "Not too bad, these pictures are amazing."

Mellie shrugged self-consciously and smiled. "I do my best. I illustrate a few children's books, but also do other things like flyers and logos – just small stuff really.

"You're too modest," he said truthfully, as his bear grunted in admiration. "This is amazing. You're so talented."

His eyes wandered over the shelves and the other books on there by the same author, and clearly sporting the pictures Mellie had created.

"I'm pleased at how they turned out, " she said, "the author and I spent hours getting the design right."

"The author?" he repeated gruffly.

"Yes, he actually requests me to do all his pictures," she replied, again without a hint of bragging.

But Bill was rather stuck on the whole working closely part. “How closely?” he wondered aloud, and then almost kicked himself. It was a question his bear had asked, and not one that Bill had been able to stop. Luckily, Mellie didn’t hear him.

“Just any of the books on my list will be fine,” she said, still a little bashful from his praise.

It was well deserved though. But Bill duly picked up the books from her list, as well as a handful of those she had a hand in creating, and grabbed an employee – literally grabbed by the collar. Bill told him to ring up his purchases and have them wrapped up and put in his car. The young man hopped to it.

Mellie blinked up at him in confusion. “What’s happening?”

“They’re ringing up your purchases.”

“Wait, don’t they need my credit card?”

“I got it covered,” he said vaguely.

“Umm, but...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Mellie took a deep breath. “I worry about everything - I can’t help myself.”

“Well, let me do the worrying today.”

Mellie chewed on her lip uneasily “I...”

“Right, next on your list is perfume – that’s on the first floor. Let’s get moving.”

“Umm, ooh!”

She wasn’t moving so he picked her up, and apparently, she liked it.

Bill and his bear chuckled again at that sound. It was a deliriously arousing little moan of a sound and he was starting to enjoy it just a little too much.

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Mellie found herself enjoying herself perhaps just a little too much. She hadn’t ever had so much attention from a male before, and it was actually kind of nice. She couldn’t believe her luck at stumbling into Bill. Or rather, her luck at being knocked on her behind by Bill. Okay, so that part wasn’t so lucky, but, honestly, it was bound to happen that someone knocked her over today. Tiny submissive mole shifters were usually beneath everyone’s notice, but now that she had Bill glued to her side, the world was a very different place. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t just that part that she liked, maybe she just liked having Bill by her side. He was kind and nice, and he wasn’t irritated by her anxieties – as all her previous boyfriends had been, and he wasn’t impatient with her when she waffled over what to buy for her mother. He made suggestions and helped and let her take her time. He was sweet and gentle and oh, as she looked up at the blob-shaped face of him, she knew what she wanted this Christmas. Her mole mewled in agreement and then she blushed at her

almost lewd thoughts about him. She had to remind herself that he was just helping her because he knocked her on her derriere and felt guilty about it. Maybe he worried she would sue him. She wouldn't – if she sued whenever someone knocked her down, she'd never be out of court.

"Hi, Bill," cooed another female voice.

Bill grunted in return, but continued moving her toward scarves.

That was possibly the only fly in the eggnog. As they walked through the store, or as he bearhanded her through the store, dozens of females called out hello to him. It was perhaps a relief that she couldn't see what they looked like. She was already mildly jealous by them saying hello, seeing them might send her anxieties soaring.

"Friend of yours?" she asked innocently.

"I suppose," he said almost reluctantly. "She works here."

"Oh." Both woman and mole felt a little better at that.

"And we used to date," he said even more reluctantly.

"Oh." Both woman and mole felt a little worse at that. "But not anymore?" she asked, hoping to sound casual, and not like her little mole would burst into tears depending on the answer.

She was being silly – she knew that – because even if he wasn't dating anyone, it didn't mean he was interested in dating a neurotic, clumsy mole shifter.

"No," he snorted, almost sounding angry. "She only dated me because she wanted something from me."

Mellie blushed. "Oh, I was going to ask if you wouldn't mind snagging me one of those cookies I can smell being handed out, but now I feel bad."

Bill roared with laughter making her jump and then giggle. "I think I can manage a couple of cookies. You stay here with the scarves, and I'll get us some."

"Okay."

He hesitated. "Don't move, will you?"

Mellie shook her head. It wasn't like she could get far, but the idea of moving when Bill and cookies were coming her way was unthinkable.

"Good, you pick out a scarf and I'll be right back."

She nodded, and if she didn't know any better, she could swear she heard him running. Mellie thought nothing of it as she ran her hands over the cashmere scarves, hoping to find one for her mother.

To think of how worried she'd been about coming shopping, and now she was having a surprisingly wonderful time. Even though she couldn't see much, and it was hot and stuffy and the fear of being

trampled still loomed, she liked being with Bill. He was so settling, and so easy to be around. Her anxiousness didn't abate completely, but it felt so much easier with him next to her. Her inner mole chirruped in agreement. She wasn't even anxious about him not coming back – she just knew he would, she knew she didn't have to worry.

She was lost in her thoughts of Bill, and didn't even realize anyone was approaching until there was a wolf shifter at her elbow and he mole yelped in danger.

“Hi, there, are you Bill's new girlfriend?”

“Eep!”

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How was it so hard to get cookies – his dad owned the freaking store! But, Mellie wanted them, so she was going to get them whether he had to chase all over the store to make it happen.

He didn't really like leaving her alone; he found himself uncharacteristically anxious about it. It was a strange feeling. His whole life, he'd never had to worry about anything. He'd always had money, always had friends – everything had been easy, and he'd always been pretty fearless about everything. But now, he worried about leaving a female he just met in his family's department store for just a few moments. He was going nuts surely.

She can't see on her own argued his edgy inner bear. That was true. Anything could happen to her continued the bear. Yes, that was true too. Someone could walk into her, injuring her more than he had. Or some thuggish wolf shifter could try to snatch her bag. Though, given the security guards, it was unlikely that he would get far. But, some male could hit on her.

Bill inhaled deeply as his bear snarled. It was hard to say which of the options angered him the most, though he guiltily suspected that it might actually be the latter.

“Cookies!” he rumbled at the employee dressed as an elf. She was currently handing them out to shoppers, but on hearing his call, she scampered over to him and he grabbed a few.

Not entirely forgetting his manners, he roughly said, “Thank you.”

But, she still raised her eyebrows in surprise. Usually, he might have flirted a little with her, but things were different now. At least, they seemed different, and he didn't have the time to think about why. He had a little mole shifter who was depending on him and he needed to get to her and...

Jingle balls! His bear growled as he realized his ex, Angela was talking to her. Unlike his other exes, she hadn't taken it well when they broke up. His other exes wanted him to fund their fledgling careers – they weren't interested in him long term, which, strangely until he met Mellie never bothered him. No, he'd been fine with it until he met her – it royally pissed off his father, but Bill hadn't minded. But, when Mellie tripped into his life and smiled, blushed, and shivered with desire at just him, he realized what he'd been missing. Mellie didn't even need a look at his face, never mind his bank balance to like him - she just did.

Angela, though, she was something else. She was a leopard shifter who worked at the store on the perfume counter – he made sure someone else served them when they picked up Meemaw’s perfume. But, Angela clearly had her sights set on a huge diamond ring on her finger and the title, Mrs. Draper, and she didn’t take the word no well. She had scared away his two girlfriends after her.

He watched as Angela threw back her head and laughed, showing all her teeth. His bear howled at him to hurry. Double jingle balls.

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Mellie frowned and wrinkled her nose.

“But then, you know how Bill is,” continued the woman in front of her.

At least she definitely sounded like a woman, and all Mellie could smell was heavy perfume and a hint of leopard. The woman had been gabbling on about Bill for a few minutes now, and Mellie couldn’t make head nor tail about what she was saying. Despite all her squinting, she couldn’t make out any of her facial expressions either, and given that she kept pausing, Mellie assumed she was giving her some significant looks that were completely lost on her.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” admitted Mellie.

“Well, he is such a tease,” sniffed the woman.

“Is he?” wondered Mellie, and her mole perked up in interest. She wouldn’t mind seeing a teasing Bill.

“He always has at least a few women dangling.”

“From what?” asked Mellie in confusion.

“Mellie!”

She let out a yelp as Bill appeared beside her. Or at least as the familiar blob known as Bill appeared beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder, eliciting that damn coo from her again.

“Everything okay?” he asked roughly, and if she didn’t know any better, she would say he was irritated.

“Oh yes, I found a scarf.” She held it up for inspection. It felt wonderful, and the bluish blob color seemed nice.

“Wonderful,” he said, relaxing his manner and his grip on her shoulder slightly. After a few beats he added, “Angela.”

Angela audibly gulped. “Mr...”

“Bill will do,” he said hastily. “Ring this up for me, make sure it is put with the rest of Mellie’s purchases.”

If Mellie didn’t know any better, she would swear he was almost threatening Angela.

“Of course,” said Angela in a small voice, “it would be my pleasure. It was nice to meet you,” she said to Mellie.

“You too,” replied Mellie, mildly baffled.

A delightful thrill coursed down her body as she felt Bill lean down to her ear. “What did she say to you?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” she admitted with a frown. “She kept saying something about you being a player – do you play baseball or something?”

Bill let out a breath and chuckled. “Something. Now, shall we complete your list.”

*

The rest of the shopping trip while, not uneventful, was easy. Mellie may have dropped cocoa down her shirt, walked into a display of champagne glasses when Bill wasn’t looking, and also tripped over straight into Santa Claus, and into a very tender area of Santa Claus, causing him to yell an expletive heard by quite a few children – who then started repeating it – but it was uneventful compared to some of her past shopping escapades. Also, it helped that Bill was patient, and nothing she did annoyed him, and when she broke things or inadvertently pissed off Santa, he was there to defend her, and made sure she didn’t have to pay for the glasses.

Finally, when everything was ticked off her list, she was back on the first floor with a pile of parcels – which had all already been expertly wrapped. She couldn’t see them clearly but she bet they looked amazing!

“I can’t thank you enough for all this,” she said to Bill. “You really saved me tonight.”

Bill let out a deep growl - which her mole found strangely sexy. Oh, who was she kidding, Mellie found it sexy too.

“How did you get here?” he asked and then inhaled sharply. “You didn’t drive, did you?”

Mellie giggled and shook her head. “I came on the bus, but I was planning on getting a taxi home if I could find one.”

“Good, I’ll get us a car.”

“Us?” she squeaked.

“Umm hmm, you’ll need help getting your packages into your house, unless you have a husband or boyfriend...”

Bill’s voice trailed away and they were left with an uncomfortable and somewhat angry silence.

“No, I’m on my own,” she said, wondering why she wasn’t more anxious about admitting that to a stranger, and a little baffled as to why he would be angry about her being involved with someone.

Bill breathed out and chuckled. “I’ll get us a car. One moment.”

He stepped away and she could have sworn she heard him asking someone to bring his car around. Mellie shrugged; maybe he's already ordered one from a car service for himself.

*

"Here you go, Mr. Draper," said his cheerful chauffer. Well, actually, he was his father's chauffer, but he would take Bill anywhere he wanted to go.

"Is your name..." started Mellie.

"In we go," said Bill, bundling her inside.

"Eep!"

Four employees from the store had already carefully put all of her packages in the trunk. He got the address from Mellie, gave it to the chauffer, and climbed in after her.

"Thank you so much for today," she said, smiling enchantingly.

"You're very welcome," he murmured, shuffling a little closer.

Mellie picked at her jeans in silence for a few moments. "I..."

"Yes?" He growled eagerly.

She flushed and her eyes twinkled. "I had a nice time today. Thank..."

"You don't have to keep thanking me," he rumbled, as his bear chuffed at him. "It was... it was my pleasure."

Mellie's chest heaved in a very pretty, mesmerizing way. "Really?"

Bill moved a little closer still. The back of the car wasn't that big, and he was virtually pressing her against the door.

"Really."

He smiled and reached out to cup her face. He ran a thumb over the burgeoning bruise.

"Does it hurt?"

"A little, but I don't mind," she added quickly and more than a little breathlessly.

Bill ran his fingers down her cheek. His inner beast growled softly. "Too much?"

"Too much for what?" she murmured, squinting at him innocently.

He pressed his lips to hers, and she gasped. He gave her a brief kiss, and pulled back. His bear was howling excitedly, desperate for more, but Bill waited to see if she welcomed his kiss. He didn't have to wait long. The moment his lips left hers, she followed him, wanting more.

Mellie let out that beautiful ooh as kissed her passionately. He pulled her flush against him and she wrapped her arms around him, giggling and oohing as the car jostled them all the way home.

*

“Thank...”

Bill chuckled and she stopped saying thank you again and just giggled.

Mellie felt her way through her apartment as Bill stacked her purchases under her tree. Usually, she wouldn't invite a man back to her place until after dating for a month and a thorough background check courtesy of her brother. But Bill was hardly a stranger to her, certainly not after what they were doing in the backseat on the way home.

She felt her way to her desk drawer and pulled it open. Her hand dropped on a spare pair of glasses.

“Wait.”

She gasped as Bill appeared beside her. He placed his hand over hers, stilling her.

Mellie looked up at him, trying and failing to focus on him. “What's wrong?”

“Just before you do that, will you go out with me?”

His tone sounded so hopeful and sweet that she beamed and almost bounced up and down in joy. All her anxieties were forgotten, for the moment at least.

“Yes, yes, please.”

She could not be happier or more grateful. Bill laughed and leaned down and kissed her again. Her inner beast cooed.

“Okay, now you're allowed to see again,” he murmured against her lips.

Mellie giggled and pulled her glasses on. It was such a relief to see everything again, it was such a.... Thoughts failed her as she looked up at the handsome bear shifter.

“Ooh!”

He grinned and oh, he was like a ray of sunshine.

“Oh, I never realised you were so handsome,” she breathed.

His forehead creased in amused confusion. “Are you disappointed?”

“Oh no... just... I just...” she flustered and he kissed her again.

“You're adorable,” he chuckled.

“I am?”

Bill looked down at her and his eyes glittered to the black of his beast. “You've no idea how lovely you are to me.”

“Lovely?” she breathed.

He nodded.

“Ooh!” Both woman and mole cooed.

“I love that sound,” he growled with feeling.

Mellie burst into thrilled laughter – and to think, she had been dreading her impromptu shopping.

“I can’t believe I was so lucky to meet you,” she gushed.

“Well, technically I hit you with a door,” he said as he placed kisses around her bruise, “but yeah, when we’re telling our folks about how we met, we’ll say we just met on the sidewalk or something.”

“It was lucky you were there.”

“Yeah, I’m there kind of a lot. I mean my dad owns the place and all.”

“Hmmm, wait, what?!”

Bill grinned. “So what do you think about spending Christmas together? We could go to your parents and then to my clan after, what do you think?”

He kissed the end of her nose and she let out an, “Ooh,” while her inner mole whimpered.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

The end