

# Bear Essentials

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by Rob Keeley

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“Now, you’ve just brought one case each.” Mum’s voice echoed back along the hall of Auntie Paula and Uncle Ged’s house. “And then there’s hand luggage. You did remember that list of all the stuff you can and can’t take? Cases go at the bottom of the boot, and there’s a system for the soapbags. Good. We’ll unload everything and keep it in our hall overnight. Now, you know you’ve got to be at ours for five a.m.? Taxi to the airport five-fifteen, and we’ve ordered you a veggie breakfast on the plane, Paula.”

“I don’t know why we bother going abroad,” Mason said. “Getting up early. All the stuff you’ve got to do. Be better to stay home, where you can get a proper cup of tea. Go in the garden. D’you know, last September they had a heatwave, here, just before we went back to school. And where were we? In Portugal. And it rained.”

“Ah, stop moaning,” his twin sister Jess told him. “I like it on Santa Amelia. We’ve not been there for two years. There’s the beach... the sea...”

“The clubs,” Mason put in. “I got woken up at three in the morning *every* day last time. And that place on the other side of the hotel... they were still building it!”

“Yeah, well.” Jess shrugged. “It’ll be finished by now.”

Another voice came drifting along the hall to them.

“Now, you make sure you guard the house for us while we’re away. Leo: you look after the kitchen. There’s meat in the fridge. And Mr Orang-utan – you can look after the garden. Have a swing in the trees, if you want.”

Jess grinned.

“Sounds like Ruby’s got everything organised, too.”

She walked along the hall in the direction of the voice, and Mason followed.

“Now, Mr Ted,” Ruby continued. “You’re coming on holiday with me. And I need you to be very brave. You’ve got to travel in my case, and be x-rayed. Otherwise, the nice men at the airport might think you’re a bomb.”

Jess pushed open the door of Ruby’s room. A large crowd of soft toys smiled back at her. Their little cousin was now giving instructions to an orange teddy bear.

“*Jess!*” Ruby squealed. She put the bear down on her bed and came running to hug Jess. Mason stood to one side, looking as lost as any man when two women meet. “*You’re coming on holiday with us! You’re coming on holiday with us! You’re -*”

“Yeah, thanks,” Mason interrupted. “We’ve got the message.”

“I’ve packed everything,” Ruby went on. “I’ve got my sunglasses, for when we go to the beach. And my rubber ring, in case we go swimming, or the plane crashes into the sea.”

She paused.

“Where are we going?”

“Santa Amelia,” Jess explained. “It’s... like...an island. Sort of...between Spain and Portugal. You’ve not been before. Mason and I have. You’ll like it. We’re at the Hotel La Playa. It’s right by the beach, and it’s got *everything*. Amusement arcade. Restaurant.”

“Another hotel going up next door...” Mason muttered.

Jess ignored him.

“Trust me, Ruby. We’re not going to forget *this* holiday.”

“That was a good breakfast,” Jess said, on their first morning on Santa Amelia.  
“They do proper sausages, here. Lovely buffet.”

“I haven’t got over that breakfast on the plane, yet.” Mason was still looking glum. “And those tour guides on the coach, all the way from the airport. ““Are you having a good time? I said, ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD TIME?””

“I don’t know what’s up with you,” Jess said.

She walked through their white-walled hotel room and out onto their balcony. A brilliant blue expanse of Mediterranean greeted her.

“Look at that. You don’t get a view like that in Sansford.”

“Right.” Dad entered the room, in Hawaiian shirt, long shorts and sandals. “Your Mum and I are going to the Welcome Meeting. And your Auntie Paula, Uncle Ged and Ruby... are going to the beach.”

Jess beamed, and even Mason looked a little happier.

“Which leaves you two...” Dad went on, “for the Holiday Club.”

Two faces fell.

“*Dad!*” Jess yelled. “I’m not going to *that!* That’s for, like... little kids!”

“We did that two years ago,” Mason moped. “We spent all the first day colouring in. And when we did the sandcastle competition... that girl who put my turrets on gave me nits!”

“I’m not arguing with you.” Dad looked annoyed. “There’s nothing wrong with the Holiday Hamster Club. Horace the Hamster’s down there right now, with a free glass of juice for everyone. And I’ve put you both down.”

He looked at them.

“Oh, cheer up. They’re going for hamburgers, later. They make ‘em with toast, out here. Look, tell you what. Do the first day. If you can’t stand it... we’ll talk again this evening.”

They did talk again that evening.

“I’m not doing it again,” Jess said firmly. The back of her neck was sunburnt where she’d forgotten to put cream on, and she’d broken all her nails building sandcastles. “We were the oldest ones there! And there was this little girl with a runny nose... kept telling me about her pedal-car.”

“And look what I won in the Fun Run,” Mason said. “A Holiday Hamster Winner’s Wheel.” He held up a cheap piece of plastic.

“We’re older than we used to be,” Jess pointed out. “We just want to chill out now.”

“All right.” Dad smiled. “The Welcome Meeting wasn’t much more fun, to be honest. There’s a trip, to see some old ruins. And tonight, it’s Bingo. With some other old ruins. I give up. You can come on the beach with us tomorrow. Help Ruby build *her* sandcastles. And I’ll cancel Holiday Hamster’s Hungry Harvest at five. You can come down to dinner with us instead.”

They did go down to dinner, and queued with all the other holidaymakers for food, and there were grilled steaks, and a cheese omelette for Auntie Paula, and crème caramels, and the holiday looked like taking a turn for the better. Ruby was very bright, and giggly,

and told Jess and Mason all about the beach. And after dinner, they ran, before any of the tour guides could make an announcement of any kind. They went to a cafe close to the hotel, and sat outside on the veranda, and the adults had coffee, and Jess and Ruby drank orangeade, and Mason even managed to get a proper cup of tea. The sun was setting, amidst gorgeous pink and yellow and grey, and a warm breeze was blowing.

They went back to the hotel happy, and jokey, and relaxed.

But just before bedtime, Jess found Ruby in the hotel corridor.

And she was crying.

“What’s up with her?” Mason asked. He was already in bed when Jess returned to their room.

“She’s lost one of her toys,” Jess said. “Mr Ted. She thinks she left him on the beach.”

“That the orange teddy with the spooky eyes?” Mason asked.

Jess nodded. “She wanted to go back there now and look for him. I told her it’s too dark. We’ll have to look when we go tomorrow.”

“Bet we don’t find it,” Mason said. “Someone else’ll have had it.”

“Poor little Ruby.” Jess scrambled into bed. “She looked so miserable. She said she goes to bed with him every night.”

“She’s got lots of others,” Mason said.

“Mr Ted’s the special one, though,” Jess said. “I could tell. Like when we were little. Remember? When my doll, Ophelia, went missing? I cried for three nights, ‘til Dad found her in Grandma’s shed.”

“I remember,” Mason said. “We were in the same room, then. You kept *me* awake for three nights.”

“I’m going to find him.” Jess frowned. “I mean... it.”

She avoided Mason’s eye.

“I mean... we can’t have Ruby crying. Can we?”

After orange juice and bacon and eggs and proper sausages the next morning, Jess and Mason walked down with the rest of the family to the beach.

Ruby ran ahead of them, leading the search party. She pointed out to Jess and Mason exactly where she’d been the day before.

Jess and Mason helped her look. But there was no sign of the missing bear.

They were early enough to get sun loungers, and Mum and Auntie Paula sunbathed, and Dad and Uncle Ged fell asleep under the big umbrellas, and eventually Mason did as well, and Jess helped Ruby build a sandcastle.

But Ruby was very quiet.

When lunchtime drew near, Ruby went back to the hotel with her parents and, once they’d dried out after their swim, Jess and Mason and their Mum and Dad prepared to follow.

“That was good,” Mason admitted. “I’m ready for my lunch now. You should try some of them... *calamares*, today. Just like onion rings.”

“You do know what they are?” Jess asked. “They’re... squid?”

Mason’s eyes grew.

“*Eeuchh!*”

“Hey, hey Mason!” Jess grabbed her brother’s arm as they followed Mum and Dad up to the path back to the hotel. “Look!”

She pointed across the beach to a group of teenagers, who were messing about with the pedalos. A frizzy-haired girl standing with them was holding an object, waving it about, and laughing.

A bright orange teddy bear.

“That’s him!” Jess said. “It’s Mr Ted!”

She ran for the water’s edge.

“Come on!”

“Excuse me,” said Jess. “Could we have our bear back, please?”

The teenagers grinned.

“Yours?” the frizzy-haired girl asked. “Found it on a sun lounger, first thing.”

She smirked. “Bit old for toys, aren’t you?”

She turned to a lanky boy with floppy hair and a pierced nose, who was chucking pebbles into the sea.

“I was thinking of giving it to Gaz, here. He’s about the right mental age.”

“Can we have him back, please?” Jess repeated. “He’s not mine. He’s my cousin’s. He’s called Mr Ted.”

“Give him back, Fran,” another girl said.

Fran smirked.

“All right. Catch!”



She threw the bear across the beach. A red-faced boy caught it deftly. He threw it on to a chubby boy in football kit, who lobbed it back to Fran again. She, in turn, threw it on to a girl with dreadlocks...

“Ah, now, come on!” Mason leapt up and down, trying to forget he was the worst goalkeeper in their class. “Don’t muck about! Give it!”

Jess looked at the group. They were none of them long out of secondary school. This must have been their first holiday without their own Mums and Dads. And she could tell they were enjoying the power.

“Come and get it!” Gaz had got the idea of the game. He caught the bear again, and went racing off up the beach.

“COME HERE!” Jess bellowed. She was about to give chase. But she was interrupted.

“Jess!” Mum yelled, so the whole beach could hear. “Mason! Come on! It’s lunchtime!” She beckoned them over to her. “What have I told you? About talking to strangers?”

Fran turned smugly to Jess.

“Looks like Mummy’s looking for you.”

Jess looked back at the older girl. And her eyes declared war.

She headed back towards their parents.

“I’m sorry.” Very politely, the young receptionist led Jess and Mason from the hostel. “You can’t come in here, without a grown-up.”

“But they’ve got our bear!” Jess insisted. “The girl’s called Fran...”

The young man didn't look particularly surprised.

"I suggest you come back here with your Mum and Dad. But we're a youth hostel, not a toyshop. We can't just have random people marching in, demanding bears."

Mason stood awkwardly next to Jess in the middle of the town square. The rest of the family were in the gift shops nearby. Mum and Auntie Sandra were buying cheap perfume. Uncle Ged was trying to cheer Ruby up by buying her a windmill on a stick.

The young man turned and walked back into the hostel.

Jess's eyes narrowed.

"I *know* they're staying there. It's the only hostel here. I saw the logo on that boy's t-shirt."

"Maybe he's right," Mason said. "Maybe we should just tell Mum and Dad."

Jess ignored this.

"Mr Ted's been kidnapped. And it's up to us to get him back."

Mason gave his sister a funny look.

"You do know he's only a toy?"

"Hey!" Jess grabbed Mason. "I was right! Look."

She pointed out two youths going into the hostel. It was Gaz, and the red-faced boy. Gaz was carrying a large, flat cardboard box. Neither of them took any notice of Jess and Mason.

"I was right," Jess said. She peered at the box. "What's he got?"

Mason squinted to read the label.

"Barbeque. Disposable one. You can buy 'em. I saw a sign. Little place near the beach."

They went on watching. Then Jess pointed to an upper window.

“Told you.”

Fran appeared at the window. The young receptionist had obviously told her about Jess and Mason’s visit. Fran was holding the teddy bear. And smirking.

As they looked up at her, she moved the bear’s arms, making it wave at them. Then, she put her hands around the bear’s neck and slowly, dramatically, removed him from view.

Jess’s brow clouded.

“If they harm him... and upset Ruby...”

Even Mason felt frightened as he saw the look on Jess’s face.

Jess and Mason didn’t see the bear or his captors again that afternoon. After rejoining the rest of the family, they took another stroll along the beach. They said nothing about their discoveries. Jess walked with Ruby, and they played with her windmill, and Jess told Ruby a joke about a crocodile. But Jess could tell that Ruby was still thinking about Mr Ted.

“Ow,” said Uncle Ged suddenly. He picked up the beach ball that had struck him a glancing blow on the head. Two youths ran past, grabbing it back from him, laughing. “Bunch of yobs.”

Jess followed his gaze. There was a small group of teenagers, standing near the beach cafe and shops. On cue, they started playing music, very loudly.

“Aren’t some people thoughtless?” Mum agreed. She took a look. “They’re setting up a barbeque, over there.” She turned away. “Come on. Time we were getting back.”

Jess lingered.

Among the group, she thought she saw Fran. And a glimpse of something orange.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” said Jess, back at the hotel. “We need to find out what they’re up to, down there.” She looked at her watch. “Six o’clock. That gives us an hour before dinner.” She frowned. “But Mum and Dad’ll wonder where we are.”

“We could tell them we’re going down the Holiday Club,” Mason said. “They’re all down there now, in the Panorama Lounge. They’re doing a sort of kids’ party, tonight. Horace the Hamster’s Fab Fiesta.”

“Euuw.” Jess pulled a face.

Then she smiled.

“Hang on. That gives me an idea.”

“So.” Jess looked around the Panorama Lounge. “Anyone fancy doing something a bit different, tonight?”

The assembled children in Holiday Hamster t-shirts didn’t need much convincing. They were looking thoroughly bored. There were two white-clothed tables, with plates of tiny sandwiches and cakes, and balloons emblazoned with Horace the Hamster. An ancient set of speakers was playing the kind of music that reminded everyone of school discos.

“Will there be a prize?” a tiny little girl asked.

“No,” Jess answered. “It’s more important than that. It’s a rescue mission. Mr Ted’s been kidnapped. And it’s up to us to save him.”

“I wouldn’t mind escaping for a bit,” a freckle-faced boy said. “I’m fed up with colouring. And I shook the Pass the Parcel, before. It rattled. I reckon it’s another jigsaw.”

“Great.” Jess walked around the room quickly. She picked up several balloons from the table. “Few things here could come in useful... could you carry these, love?” She passed the balloons to the tiny girl. “And we’ll borrow this, too.” From a side table, she picked up a canister with a klaxon mounted on top. Horace the Hamster had used it to start the Fun Run.

She turned to a boy called Chung, who was holding a large torch he’d won in another competition. It was quite a good torch, with a slider on the front that allowed you to change from normal light to red to amber to green and back again.

“Could you bring that, as well?”

“OK!” A minute or so later, a young woman in the travel company uniform breezed into the room. She was followed by an uncomfortable-looking colleague in the Horace the Hamster suit. “Hi there, kids! Are we having a good time? I said, are we...?”

The lounge was empty.

Very quietly, the entire Holiday Hamster Club slipped through the shadows, following Jess and Mason down to the beach. The tiny girl carrying the balloons, whose name was Milly, was the only one to look at all scared, and Jess held her hand.

There weren't so many people on the beach now the sun was setting. The beach cafe and shops were closed, and a young Spanish man was washing down the sun loungers with a hose.

The teenagers were no longer playing music. The only sounds were laughter and yells from a very noisy game of volleyball. The children could smell charcoal. The barbeque was obviously hotting up.

"That's them," Jess said. "Right. Now, split up. And take cover. We can use the fronts of the shops and the cafe. And remember. Wait for my signal."

The squad moved off along the beach, taking cover around the verandas and shop doorways. The children were very quiet, and the teenagers were far too wrapped up in their party to hear. As she passed by, Jess gave out a supply of balloons.

Jess had given the best vantage point to herself, Mason and Milly. They were in the doorway of a shop that sold buckets and spades and beach tents, right opposite where the barbeque was taking place.

They stood and listened.

"Right, guys!" Flushed, excited, Fran emerged from the crowd, and stepped up to the barbeque. The smoking metal tray, with its basic grill, was resting on a small pile of bricks. With so many building sites still on the island, it wasn't hard to see where the bricks had come from.

The other youths stopped their game and gathered around Fran.

"Welcome to Fran and Gaz's Beach Bonanza!"

The name made Jess wonder whether Fran had once been in the Holiday Club too.

“And welcome,” Fran said loudly. “To our special guest for this holiday. Our mascot! MR TED!”

She held the teddy bear high, amidst cheers.

“I thought you were giving him back?” someone asked.

Fran sniggered.

“I’ve got a better use for him.”

She looked at the chubby boy in the football shirt, who was looking after the barbeque.

“Ready for cooking?”

The boy nodded.

Fran indicated a bag of burgers of unknown make.

“Food’s coming. But first. A sacrifice! In the name of freedom!”

She held the bear out towards the barbeque grill.

“Goodbye, childhood!”

Jess’s eyes widened.

“You’re not putting him on *there*, Fran?” the chubby boy asked. Some of the others were looking uncertain, too. “I mean, it belongs to those kids. It’s dangerous...”

“Ooh!” Fran stepped forward. “I was wrong. It’s not burgers, is it, Gaz? It’s chicken!”

The others were jeering, sniggering, encouraging Fran.

Jess nudged Mason. She indicated to him to look after Milly. Then she slipped back along the beach, to the man with the sun loungers. He seemed to have finished for the day.

“Excuse me,” she said, as loudly as she dared. “*Por favor*. Emergency. *Puedemos... borrow... that, please? Gracias.*”

Gaz had piled more charcoal onto the miniature barbeque, and the flames were licking higher and higher.

Fran stood over them, her hair and face lit up, cast into eerie shadows.

“Come on, then!” Gaz shouted. “Go Fran! Go Fran! Burn!”

Several of the others took up the chant.

“BURN!”

“BURN!”

“BURN!”

“BURN!”

Fran held the bear out towards the fire.

Suddenly, a deafening noise cut through the chant. Several of the partygoers staggered backwards, putting their hands over their ears.

“Aargh!”

“What’s that -?”

Jess gave another signal. The klaxon was accompanied by a series of loud bangs, as the large party balloons were burst all along the beach.

The teenagers were no sooner deafened than dazzled as well. Chung quickly switched his torch from one colour to another, giving the beach party a mini-light show. Their bodies turned red... then amber... then green...

“Not in their eyes,” Jess instructed. “Now. Time to dampen things down a bit.”



The barbeque was ended in seconds, and several expensive haircuts destroyed, as Mason turned the hose on full. Gaz's hair was plastered to his forehead, and the red-faced boy looked like a newly-washed tomato. Jess told Mason to pay particular attention to Fran, who was whirling about wildly at the centre of the storm, drenched, trying to work out what was going on.

Finally, most of the crowd simply turned and ran.

Fran ran after them.

"No – wait –"

"All right!" Jess yelled. "That's enough! Turn it off, Mason!"

Mason turned the water off.

Jess ran across the dampened section of sand. The teddy bear was lying next to the smoking barbeque, a little soggy, but otherwise quite unharmed.

Jess held him up like a trophy.

Then all the kids cheered.

"There was the weirdest noise going on earlier," said Mum, over their paella and chips that evening. "Down on the beach... terrible racket."

"Probably those teenagers again," Uncle Ged suggested.

"That girl Joanne who runs the Holiday Club was in a right state too," said Auntie Paula. "They were about to start some kind of party – and the whole lot of kids disappeared! Horace the Hamster's being treated for shock. They're all back, now, and playing video games... these things can be so badly run." She looked across the table to Jess and Mason. "I'm glad *you* two didn't stay with them."

Jess and Mason just smiled.

After dinner, Jess staged the scene very carefully. They were sitting with the family in the Vasco da Gama Bar. Jess had been back to their room, given the teddy bear a quick blast with the hairdryer, and smuggled him downstairs.

Holding the bear behind her back, Jess approached Ruby.

“Ruby. I’ve got a little surprise for you.”

Ruby beamed.

“And *I*’ve got one, too.”

She went on talking before Jess could get a word in.

“We went to the beach cafe again, before, because I wanted a lolly. And *look* who we found there!”

She produced a large, toy tortoise in brown and green.

“Mr Ted!”

Jess and Mason’s jaws hit the floor.

“One of the waitresses found him,” Uncle Ged explained. “Ruby must have left him there after we had lunch yesterday.”

“But...” Jess brought the teddy out. It seemed to be grinning. “But... I thought *this* was Mr Ted...”

“That’s not Mr Ted,” Ruby said. “Ooh... he looks just like William. Look, Mummy! He’s just like my bear back home. I left him with Leo, to guard the house.”

She showed the brown and green toy to Jess.

“Haven’t you seen him on TV? Mr Ted the Tortoise? He’s my favourite.”

“Where did you find this?” Mum asked. She examined the teddy. “He looks like he’s been around a bit. Still. If we can’t find the owner...”

She smiled.

“Perhaps that Holiday Club would like it.”

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**Read more about Jess and Mason in *The Treasure in the Tower!***

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