
Prologue

March 13th
Kade

"**R**emind me again why I'm here," I asked my brother as we walked through the aisles of merchants at the annual home and garden show in Ridgewood. It wasn't that I didn't know, and it wasn't that I didn't appreciate the business side of it. It was just that, out of the two of us, Kain was by far more social and I had a strange sense of unease I couldn't figure out. Kit, my bear, was anxious and pacing inside me. I rubbed my chest to calm him.

"Networking, Kade," Kain reminded me with an eye roll. "Supporting the three businesses we invested in that are here today, getting out of the office and stretching our legs, and checking out the scenery." His eyes followed the backside of a curvy little brunette when he said that last part.

I elbowed him before anyone else caught him leering like a

perv. He grunted but didn't even try to hide the shit-eating grin that split his face.

"Grow up," I advised. "We're not going to get far *networking* once someone starts a rumor that the Barrett Brothers are a pair of horny dogs."

"That would be horny bears, thank you very much," Kain announced, a little too loudly.

I didn't even respond, walking away from him instead. I knew he'd follow. I stopped at a vendor advertising a new solar technology. Kain wandered to the next booth, where some hot girl was sitting in a hot tub. The entire Ridgewood Civic Center was blocked off for this event, the floor covered with different booths advertising popular or up-and-coming businesses from the area. There were four rows from what I could tell. We were halfway through the first row and I was getting more uneasy with every step.

I listened to the sales pitch for about thirty seconds, snagged a business card because it really was worth doing some further research, and then grabbed Kain's elbow and led him away from the area. The last thing he needed was a casual hookup.

He took it in stride and immediately stopped at the next booth, a local gardening company that specialized in growing fruit trees for our climate and was even teaching a seminar in the main area the next day. I listened with half an ear while Kain chatted away merrily with the owner.

We stopped at every booth on the west side of the civic center over the next hour. I was pretty bored, to be honest, it wasn't my scene, but Kain visited with everyone, taking business cards and giving out some of his own. Kain had always been the social butterfly of the two of us. The man could make friends anywhere.

It wasn't until we stopped at a landscaping company that specialized in authentic looking turf that I started to get *really*

uncomfortable. Kit began raging inside of me, and no amount of chest rubbing would settle him. What the hell?

I smelled the sweetest fragrance and sniffed the air to identify the aroma.

Mate! I felt the jolt of awareness at the same time he screamed inside my head.

Fuck no!

My whole body lit up like I'd grabbed a live wire, my cock achingly hard in my slacks as I searched around frantically for the source. I'm slightly ashamed to say, I ducked behind the giant Astro Turf sign as I scanned the crowds of people.

There were so many people bumping elbows to get better views of the booths, I'm not even sure how I knew it was her. But when I saw her, I knew.

She was pretty tall for a woman, especially in those fuck-n pumps she had on. Long, trim legs led up to a navy skirt and jacket that hid tantalizing curves. Her honey blonde hair was twisted and clipped somehow at the back of her head. She was absolutely beautiful, remarkably so. Big eyes, elegant nose, high cheekbones.

She was absolutely everything I *didn't* want in a woman.

Because she was my mate.

As soon as she moved away, I approached the man she was talking to. He gave me several dirty looks, but finally let me copy the information from the business card she'd given him.

Abby Bradley.

"What in the hell are you doing?" Kain asked, peering over my shoulder.

I hid the note card from him and gestured towards the exit. "Nothing. We're leaving."

"But we're only halfway done!" Kain protested.

"You can come back tomorrow without me," I reasoned as I walked away.

We'd driven together, but as soon as I dropped him off, I

picked up a bottle of Johnny Walker and drove straight home to drown my sorrows.

Kit was pissed, raging inside me for not talking to her, claiming her. I didn't care. There was no way in hell I was going there. I'd taken her information, but I was convinced that it was only so I could do everything possible to avoid her like the plague she potentially was.

Yes, that was harsh. And yes, I know I was being a dick, but you can't judge me until you've seen what I've seen and know how bad mates can fuck up a man's life. Then you'd understand why I never wanted a mate. Then you'd understand why I didn't want her.

The only problem with that was, now that I'd found her, I didn't know how to live without her. As far as I knew, it had never been done. Once a bear meets his mate, it's almost impossible to keep him away from her, and they rarely separate. The bear marks the mate to seal the bond, usually during sex, and then he's forever sealed to her.

But *she's* not sealed to *him*, and that's where things can go wrong.

Anyone who wasn't familiar with bear culture might ask, if you're so afraid of your mate, why not just find a nice girl and mark her instead. Unfortunately, it's not possible. The man could bite a woman a hundred times, and it still wouldn't work. The mark has to come from the bear, and the bear will only mark that one destined mate. There's no way to trick the rule, and there are no second chances.

Each of my thoughts sunk me further and further into depression, panic and anger as the whiskey bottle started to dwindle. I wasn't even aware of what day it was when the pounding started on the door of my penthouse apartment. There were only two people who security would let up without calling me first: my assistant, Holly, and Kain.

And only one of them could pound on my door so obnoxiously.

"Fuck off, Kain!" I yelled, not even bothering to haul my ass off the plush reclining chair in my stylish apartment.

"Open this fucking door!" he yelled back.

"No!" I might've been a bit childish at that point, but the truth is, I probably wouldn't have been able to walk to the door anyway.

"I'll break it down!" he called.

"Use your key, dumbass!" Sometimes I wondered about him.

After some swearing, Kain finally figured out which key was my spare and opened the door.

"What the fuck, Kade?" He barreled in and then paused, taking in the dirty clothes on the floor from Friday after the home and garden show, and me sitting in my boxers with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other. "What am I looking at right now?"

"I believe it's called a nervous breakdown," I told him, slurring my words, and chasing them with a drink.

"Why?" he persisted, taking a seat on the couch across from me.

"I saw her," I said, scowling into my empty glass.

"Who?" He jumped up lightning quick and grabbed the whiskey bottle out of my hand before I could pour more into my glass.

"Give that back." I lunged for the bottle, but he dodged me easily and I went crashing down to the floor, sending my empty glass flying. It shattered against the wall next to my chair. "You motherfucker."

"I didn't do that!" Kain set the bottle down on a bookshelf and reached down to help me into an upright position. We tried to get me vertical, but it just wasn't happening.

"Leave me!" I barked. "Get me a new glass."

"You've had enough," Kain informed me.

"There's never enough," I growled, flashes of Abby appearing in my mind. No amount of whiskey would be enough to drown out the memory of how beautiful she is, or how my dick was hard as steel before I even saw her, or how badly I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and run away with her.

"Who did you see?" Kain asked, his voice softening as he knelt on the floor next to me. "Mom or your mate?"

"Mate," I snarled, both at the truth and at the mention of Mom.

"It's not the end of the world, Kade."

"It very well could be the end of me!" I tossed back. He knew damn well why I didn't want a mate. He knew as well as I how deep my fears ran.

"What are you going to do, then?" He ran his hand through his hair and glanced up at the whiskey bottle longingly. "You know you missed work today?"

"Fuck, is it Monday already?" I worked myself up to my knees, using the couch as leverage against the swaying and dizziness. We'd gone to the garden show Friday afternoon. "What happened to Sunday?"

"It's lost in that bottle." He smirked when I glared at him. "Don't worry about work. I handled your meetings."

"Thanks," I grumbled, pulling myself up onto the couch to sit when it was obvious my legs weren't going to work enough for me to stand. I leaned back into the cushion and threw my arm over my eyes. "Can you handle my mate too?"

Kain let out a noise that sounded like a cross between a scoff and a chuckle. "No, but I do have an idea for a plan."

"Great, what is it?" I sat up, lowering my arm and leaning forward to hear his thoughts. There were two of him, but I focused on the one that wasn't swirling around the other.

Kain sat in the chair across from me, elbows on his knees,

leaning toward me as he considered it. "I think one of the things that kept Dad going for so long was that he had us," he said thoughtfully.

I bristled at the reminder of our poor father. What that man suffered was incomprehensible. "What are you suggesting? I get her pregnant and take the cub?"

"Yeah," Kain shrugged, chewing on his bottom lip. "Cover the girl with your scent, fuck every orifice, knock her up good, and then move on. With your cub."

I scratched my jaw, noting the significant beard growth I'd developed in the last few days and winced. "Wouldn't that involve a custody battle?"

"Not if she puts the cub up for adoption." Kain grinned. "How old is she? What's her situation like?" At my blank look, he continued, "We could get Lisa into the clinic to bend her ear a bit."

It was a stupid idea, but it was the best I had. Maybe if I just fucked her once, to satisfy Kit... Maybe if I had my cub... Maybe I could get through this without going completely crazy. I was very interested in any plan that potentially led to me not losing my mind and killing myself.

That may seem dramatic to some, but that's exactly what happened to our dad, so I knew how very likely it was.

"I could test her out for you, if you want, make sure she's worth the effort," Kain goaded me as only little brothers could.

It worked too. I shot off the couch, finding a strength and stability I hadn't had moments before, and glowered down at him. "If you fucking touch her..."

Kain stood up, matching my height, and smiling wickedly. "There you are. I was worried ol' Johnny had won."

I snorted, attempted to turn away from him, lost my balance and went toppling onto the couch. My asshole brother laughed. I growled. "Not a fucking word."