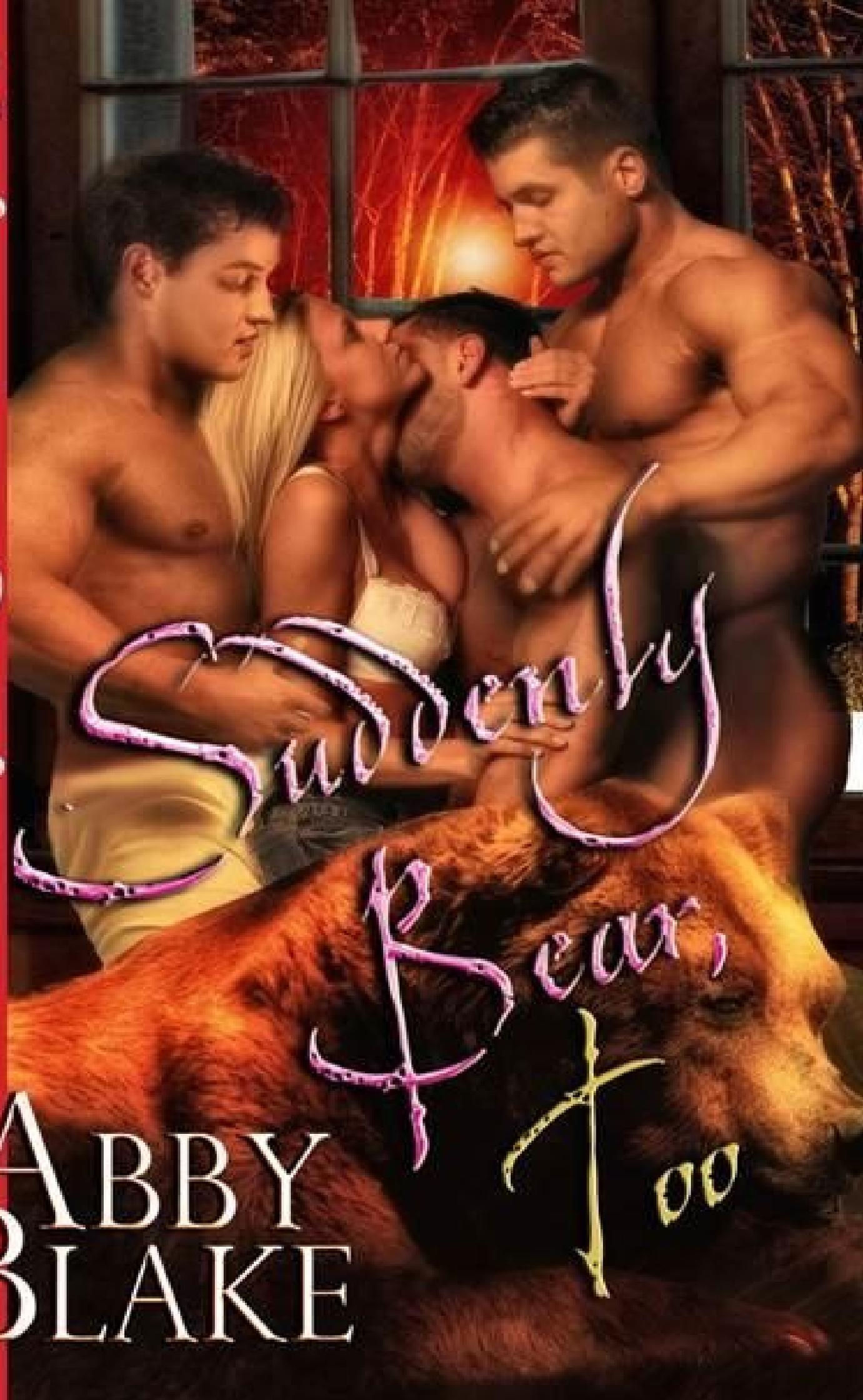


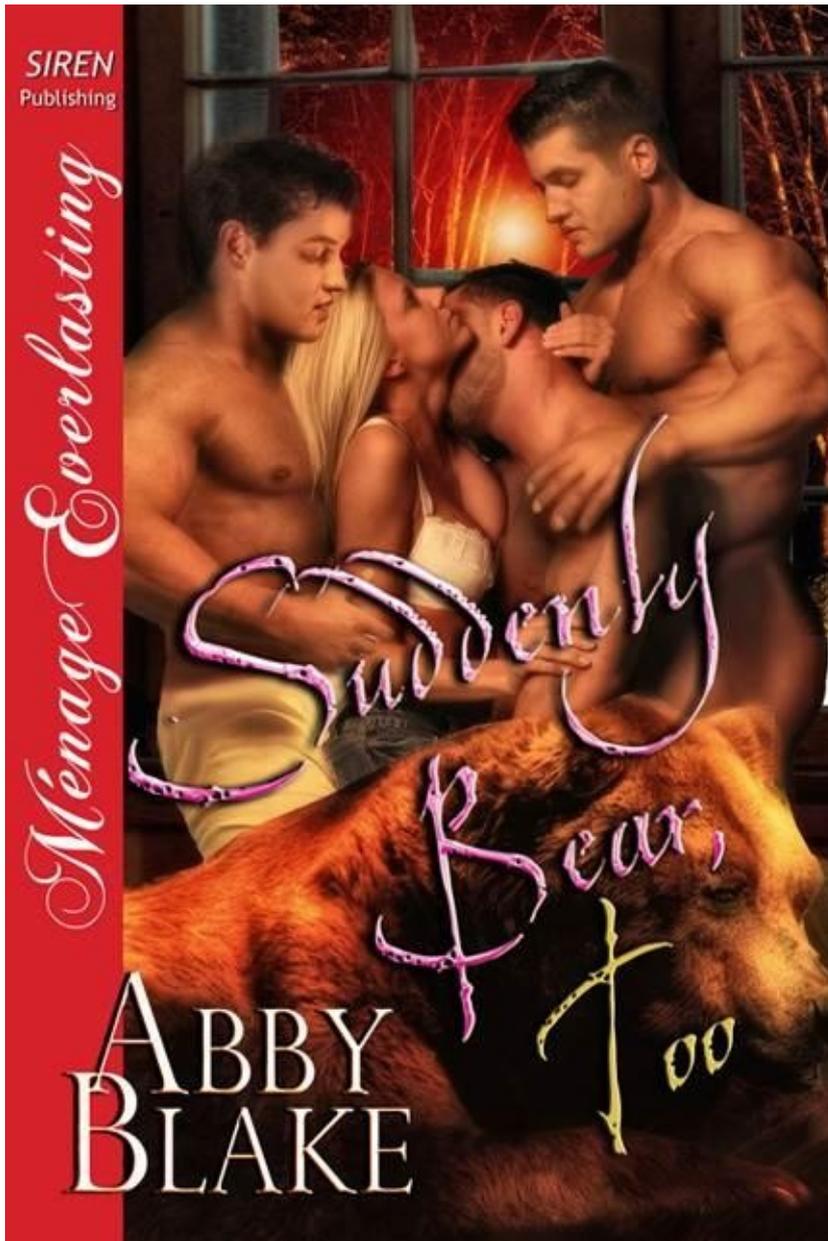
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*Love  
Bears  
Forever*

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## Suddenly Bear, Too

Ruby Rickardson has everything—or so most people think. The only daughter of ridiculously wealthy parents, she parties hard, she drinks a lot, and she has a tabloid reputation for being a wild child. Unfortunately, that image also makes her a target for every greedy lowlife on the planet.

Nickolas, Levi, and Zeek Brockman are trying to live a quiet life. When they find a young woman suffering a drug overdose and dumped in the middle of the forest, they risk exposing their existence to save her. Yet saving her has a side effect—it makes her one of them—so discovering that she is mate to all three brothers is almost a welcome surprise.

But a quiet life and massive media interest in Ruby's disappearance simply don't mix. And it sure doesn't help that whoever tried to kill her wants to finish the job.

**Genre:** Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Paranormal, Shape-shifter

**Length:** 32,371 words

# **SUDDENLY BEAR, TOO**

**Abby Blake**

**MENAGE EVERLASTING**



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# SUDDENLY BEAR, TOO

**ABBY BLAKE**

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## **Chapter One**

She was having that crazy dream again.

The one where half a dozen snakes decide to climb all over her.

Was it even normal for a city girl to have nightmares about snakes? She'd never even seen one up close, well, except in her dreams. Hell, if she weren't used to their weird, dead-looking eyes and sinuous, slithery movements from her nocturnal imaginings, she'd probably be totally freaked out by now. Fortunately, the hangover she was nursing prevented any real reaction.

She tried to wiggle so that she could grab the blankets and pull them over her head, but she couldn't find them. She groaned. Blocking out that obscenely bright light was top priority. Had the sun gone nova or something? It should not have been this sunny in her bedroom.

Moaning slightly as she moved on a mattress somehow hard enough to feel like solid dirt—would this nightmare never end?—she brushed away the imaginary dream snake that slithered too close to her face, and then tried to roll over. The sharp sting of fangs was so unexpected that she cried out. Her heart pounded wildly, fear overwhelming her even as she tried to convince herself that she was still just dreaming.

She managed to pry her eyes open and look around. Unfortunately, she wasn't in her bed. She wasn't even in her bedroom, and as she tried to force herself to wake up and think rationally, Ruby finally noticed that she was lying in what seemed to be a ditch in the middle of nowhere.

Struggling to comprehend what her brain was telling her, the final straw came when she noticed three black bears coming her way.

She welcomed unconsciousness gratefully.

\* \* \* \*

Levi loved being a bear. Especially on mornings like this one. The start of the day was crisp and clear, peak tourist season was finally over and done, and it wasn't yet bear-hunting season. Yes, days like today, Levi loved being a bear.

That's why it was so annoying to hear the shrill sound of a woman's scream. They might have worked for the police department, but they were supposedly retired, and in his furry form it was going to be difficult to offer the woman any sort of reassurance or assistance.

Well, she was going to get either his furry form or naked man. Considering that bears didn't have to explain where their uniform was, he chose to stay on all fours.

And besides, it was unlikely to be anything serious. The woman probably saw an extra-big bug, or something. Wasn't that what women usually squealed over?

He glanced at his brothers on either side of him and, despite his annoyance, turned to run in the woman's direction.

\* \* \* \*

Nickolas ran beside his brothers, very aware that they might make the situation worse by arriving in bear form. But the woman's scream had sounded so urgent that he couldn't simply ignore it and go on with his morning. He at least needed to know that the woman was all right. His conscience wouldn't let him do otherwise.

He pushed himself harder to keep up with Levi. His brother may have made annoyed sounds as they turned toward the woman's location, but it was obvious by his enthusiasm that he enjoyed getting involved. Levi loved nothing more than poking around humans when he was in furry form.

His bear's natural curiosity combined with his love of graphic novels pretty much ensured the guy had a hero complex a mile wide. Add that to his duties as a police officer, and it was pretty much guaranteed that Levi would be the first man, or in this case black bear, on the scene for just about every emergency.

But as they entered the clearing slowly and got their first look at the woman, it was obvious that this wasn't a squeamish female faced with an oversize spider.

Something was very, very wrong.

\* \* \* \*

Zeek's first emotion was one of disgust. This woman was clearly not prepared for the rigors of camping this high in the wilderness. A skintight white leather skirt, gold-colored top made of some silky-looking material, and high-heeled stiletto shoes were simply not appropriate for hiking. Hell, her outfit was more suited to drinking and dancing at some exclusive nightclub.

In fact, that seemed to be what she was dressed for. Her hair was tangled and messy, her makeup smudged under her eyes, and her jewelry ostentatious, but it seemed that drinking and dancing was exactly what she'd been doing. The faint whiff of alcohol reached his nose as they got closer. He sniffed the area, not scenting any other humans still in the vicinity, but turned away from his brothers to do a more thorough check.

He felt a growing sense of panic coming from the woman as he and his brothers drew nearer, and was almost grateful when she passed out. Dealing with a stranded tourist was something they'd been trained to handle, albeit in human form, but dealing with a stranded, screaming tourist dressed for a night on the town was not Zeek's idea of fun.

He wasn't really surprised when Levi turned back into human form and lifted the woman into his arms.

"She has several snakebites," he said urgently. Nickolas also returned to human form, then placed his hands on either side of her head and used his healing magic to ascertain her health. The look he gave Levi was not encouraging.

Needing to question the wisdom of the choice his brothers were making, Zeek also turned back to human form.

"Guys, even from here I can tell it will take too much magic to heal her. Let's just get her back to the ranger's station and call for an emergency evac." He tried not to look at the woman's face. It wasn't that he didn't want to help her. It was simply that the consequences would be too great and maybe put them all at risk. "Nick, you know what I'm saying is true. Humans have good-quality antivenin serums these days. If we get her to help fast enough, human medicine will save her."

“No it won’t,” Levi said, his tone one of barely suppressed anger. “She’s been drugged as well. Her internal organs are already shutting down. The snakebites are the least of her worries.” Zeek finally lifted his eyes to look at the woman’s pale face.

“Somebody tried to murder her,” Nickolas added, “and I suspect they’ve left her here, hoping bears would eat the evidence.”

Zeek felt sick to the stomach. Wild black bears rarely attacked. Most of their interaction with humans was limited to mock charges, blowing noises, and swatting the ground with their forepaws. Human encounters with a black bear rarely led to serious injury. But wild black bears were opportunistic feeders, often stealing prey from human hunters, so it was quite possible that whoever was trying to kill this woman might have succeeded if he and his brothers hadn’t been in the area.

“So what do we do? You know the consequences of using that much magic.” Hell, he must have sounded like a complete asshole, but one of them needed to keep a level head. He wanted to help her as much as his brothers did, but they needed to protect their own species as well. Revealing the existence of shifters was not a decision to be taken lightly.

Levi and Nickolas both gave him stubborn looks that meant they weren’t going to change their minds anytime soon. Even from six feet away, Zeek could feel the woman’s death approaching. Unwilling to let the woman die, he nodded once, resigned to the fact that his and his brothers’ carefree bachelor days were probably about to change irrevocably.

\* \* \* \*

Nickolas understood his youngest brother’s concerns and, quite frankly, shared them. If it had just been a couple of snakebites, he would have called for assistance, but thanks to the illegal drugs in the woman’s system they didn’t have that sort of time.

It was literally now or never.

Thankfully, Zeek agreed with them and stepped closer to help.

Letting the magic of his bear wash over him, Nickolas drew on his brothers’ energies as well, sending their combined healing magic through the woman’s body. He smiled with satisfaction as he felt the damage to her internal organs reverse and the drugs disappear from her system.

Surprisingly, he even welcomed the side effects the magic caused.

“Zeek,” he said in a rough voice, mildly embarrassed by his physical reaction to this woman. She was a beautiful woman, but this was neither the time nor the place. “Head back home, grab some clothes and shoes for the three of us. It’s going to be a long hike back to the cabin.” Zeek nodded, shifted back into his bear form, and ran as fast as his big paws could carry him.

\* \* \* \*

Ruby woke without the headache. A little surprised to find herself in a soft bed, she nevertheless groaned and rolled over. Whatever time it was, it sure as eggs wasn’t time to get up. Yet the nightmare of the previous night interrupted her determination to go back to sleep.

But it was the small movement from beside the bed that had her heart thumping hard against her ribs. Despite having grown up surrounded by servants, Ruby had never been comfortable having them in every corner of her home. When she’d moved to her own apartment a few years ago, she’d flat out refused to have any live-in staff.

Her parents had been horrified at the idea of their precious little girl getting her hands dirty doing her own housework, so they'd hired a maid who came twice a week. They'd also insisted that she send all of her clothes out for cleaning and have her meals delivered. It had seemed a reasonable sort of compromise at the time. Even just this small amount of privacy was very welcome.

Her mother still wasn't happy that Ruby knew how to use a microwave, or even that she could locate the kitchen in her apartment, but had finally stopped nagging her about it. Maybe it was even time for Ruby to start on convincing her parents she needed a job, a real job. She was a figurehead representative of several charity foundations, but practically all of the work was done by other people. As usual everyone seemed more interested in how she looked rather than what went on in her head.

She pried her eyes open to ask whoever had arrived to leave, but when her gaze landed on an unfamiliar room, filled with unfamiliar furniture, and a man as big as a mountain, Ruby screamed.

The man winced at the shrill sound, frowned when it continued, and finally smiled as she ran out of breath. She'd already dragged in another great lungful of air, ready to start over, when he held up his hand and smiled.

"It's okay, honey. You're safe here. We're not going to hurt you."

"Who the fuck are you?" It was supposed to be a demanding question, but thanks to her overinflated lungs it came out more like a breathy request.

"I'm Nickolas Brockman."

"You said 'we.' Who else is here?"

"My brothers are in the kitchen making breakfast. You're in our home."

Great. Fucking great. Her parents had warned her she'd be a target for every greedy son of a bitch who walked the planet, but she'd never quite believed she'd be abducted by some guy big enough to be Paul Bunyan. Trying not to give in to panic, Ruby decided to pry as much information out of her captor as she could. It would help at the kidnapping trial if she could remember details.

"Where is your home?"

From her vantage point on the bed, she could see a small window that seemed to show a lot of trees and a mountain in the distance. But she couldn't really trust her eyes, could she? If they were clever kidnapers, they'd be certain to set up an illusion so she would think they were in the middle of a forest. Wouldn't they? Or would they really just drag her into the middle of the forest and keep her prisoner until her parents paid the ransom?

Unfortunately, the man with arms the size of tree trunks seemed disinclined to tell her where she was. He surprised her with his next question. "What's your name?"

"What the fuck?" she blurted out. "Why would you kidnap me if you didn't know who the fuck I was?"

"Kidnap?" the man asked with what seemed to be an amused smile. "Sorry, honey, but we found you lying in a ditch about eight miles from here. You were dying from a drug overdose and had just been bitten by several pissed-off snakes."

"I was what? What the fuck does that mean? Drugs? Snakes? Ditches? Who the fuck are you?"

He seemed just a little annoyed this time. Hell, maybe she should rethink her whole

approach. If she was in the middle of a forest, surrounded by at least three men possibly all as big as this one, maybe it was a good time to play nice.

“I...I mean...” Okay, playing nice with the crazy abductor wasn’t in her nature.

“Holy shit,” a voice came from the doorway, the owner unfortunately confirming her theory about the brothers’ size, “you’re Ruby Rickardson.”

“She’s who?” the brother who’d said his name was Nickolas asked in obvious surprise.

“Ruby Rickardson,” the second brother said as he stepped into the room. “Her parents are seriously loaded. We’re talking billionaires, major billionaires, maybe even more than that. What’s more than a billionaire, darlin’?”

The words “What the fuck?” were bouncing around in her head over and over, but this time they didn’t quite make it to her lips. Both men were looking at her expectantly—how the fuck would she know what was more than a billionaire?—so she shrugged in the hopes that they’d at least tell her why, or even how, she got here.

“Hey, Zeek,” the guy leaning in the doorway called over his shoulder, “come meet Ruby. Turns out we’ve got ourselves a famous houseguest.”

\* \* \* \*

Zeek shook his head before he left the kitchen. The last thing they needed was for the woman to be famous. Considering the side effects of the healing magic, it could be a serious, perhaps even deadly, complication for them all.

The day had started with such promise, yet it was barely breakfast time, and it had already made a rapid dive into trouble.

“Zeek,” Levi said with a broad smile, “this here is Ruby Rickardson.”

“Never heard of her,” Zeek said, grumpy enough to say the words quite loudly. “What is she famous for?”

“Um,” Levi said as he turned to the woman and waited for her to answer. How the hell could the woman be famous if she wasn’t famous for actually doing something? Zeek ground his teeth together. For fuck’s sake, please don’t let her be one of those spoiled Internet brats who was famous for being famous. The last thing they needed was a woman who thrived on public adulation. Fuck, their quiet, peaceful existence could well find its end at this woman’s hands.

Ruby sat on the bed looking pale and confused. Zeek knew exactly how that felt.

“I’m not really famous,” she said, raising Zeek’s hopes momentarily before smashing them onto hard rocks. “I’m only well-known because of who my parents are.”

Great. Just great. All she needed to do was upload something about bear-shifters to a social networking site, and their mountain would be crawling with people searching for true evidence. He still shuddered at the memory of meeting a couple of Sasquatch hunters a few years ago. Fanatical kooks.

“Where’s her cell phone?”

Levi looked puzzled by his tone, but pointed to the small pile of possessions they’d taken off Ruby before cleaning her up and tucking her into bed. Ruby dived for the phone, nearly falling out of the bed in her haste to grab the damn thing. Obviously the woman trusted them about as much as he trusted her.

Zeek snatched the phone from her hand, threw it to the floor, and ground it under his boot. The crunch and snap of delicate technology was music to his ears. The

screech of rage, however, was not.

“What the fuck did you do that for? That phone was made to order. Only three people in the world have a phone like that one.”

“Seriously?” Zeek asked, momentarily distracted by the fact that she would care more about the actual phone than the fact that he’d just destroyed her connection to the modern world.

“What do you assholes want?” she asked furiously, her arms crossed over her breasts, her chest heaving as she telegraphed her annoyance very clearly. Zeek had to remind himself not to admire her guts. Not many women, or men for that matter, would be ballsy enough to demand answers from all three of the Brockman brothers. Even in human form they were an intimidating bunch.

“Ruby,” Nickolas said as he approached the woman like one would deal with an injured animal, “we don’t want anything from you. We found you dying, we healed you, and now we need to explain the side—”

But clearly the woman wasn’t listening to reason because she began yelling even before Nickolas had finished his reassuring speech.

“I don’t give two fucking hoots what you want. My parents won’t pay you. They don’t deal with terrorists.”

“Terrorists?” Levi asked with a half laugh. “How did we get that label?”

She seemed taken aback by Levi’s question. Hesitantly she said, “Because you guys have been...um, terrorizing me since I...you know...woke up.”

“Darlin’,” Levi said, smiling widely, “I believe by definition terrorizing someone means scaring them. You don’t exactly seem scared.”

“Yeah, well...” She glanced around the room, seeming to finally notice she was dealing with three very large men. “I don’t deal with terrorists either.”

Levi laughed, sounding delighted at her outburst. Zeek grudgingly admired the woman’s ability to stand up to them, but wanted nothing more than to smack both his brothers upside the head. Even Nickolas seemed amused. Didn’t they realize how serious this was? This spoiled brat of a woman could literally be the end of them.

“That’s right, princess,” Zeek said, stepping into the room, annoyed enough to not really think things through. “We’re terrorists who turn into bears.”

He felt a moment of satisfaction as Ruby’s face showed her confusion. She even shut up long enough to watch him shift into his furry form—tearing a good set of clothes in the process. She looked fascinated, and he was actually starting to feel pretty good about his way of telling her about bear-shifters. If she stayed calm and listened, maybe they’d be able to figure a few things out together without the name-calling and baseless accusations.

But it was the ear-piercing scream that assaulted his sensitive bear hearing and caused him to back up and knock over the bookshelf behind him that finally convinced him it probably hadn’t been such a great idea.

\* \* \* \*

Ruby couldn’t make her mouth form words.

There was a big fucking black bear less than three feet away from her. In a bedroom. In a cabin. In the middle of nowhere. How the fuck could there be a bear in the room? Shit, the thing was probably hungry. She wanted to run and hide behind one of the three men. Surely a bear would find their big, muscular, taut, sexy bodies very

delicious—she certainly did. Except now there were only two of them.

The third brother, Zeek, was no longer in the room. She tried not to look at the shredded clothing. She knew for a fact that she couldn't have seen what she'd thought she'd seen, so that meant that Zeek had stood in the room, shredded his clothes, dropped them to the ground, and...and...

“Zeek, knock it off. You're scaring Ruby.”

...and turned into a freaking bear!

As the bear slowly turned back into a sexy, naked man, Ruby did the only thing she could think of—she screamed again.

Hey, there was a method to her madness—sooner or later all this screaming was going to wake her up.

It seemed like a solid plan. She was only dreaming.

Of course, it was more like a bizarre nightmare, but that was the only explanation. Men didn't turn into bears, and bears didn't turn into men, and starting first thing tomorrow no more alcohol, ever! She dragged in another deep breath, ready to scream some more.

“Ruby, honey, that's something we need to talk to you about.” Nickolas sat on the bed beside her, and she fought the urge to crawl onto his lap. He was deliciously handsome, but maybe she should listen to what he wanted to say first. But then again, this was a dream, right? She was naked. She never slept naked, so it stood to reason that she was simply dreaming. That meant she didn't have to play by anyone's rules but her own. She'd caught a quick glance of Zeek's rather impressive equipment before he grabbed the blanket off the end of the bed and wrapped it around his hips. Were they all similarly built? Wow, maybe this dream didn't have to be a nightmare after all.

But before she could actually crawl into his lap, Nickolas lifted her and her blankets with his seriously strong arms and put her there himself. She snuggled into his warmth as a strange sense of finally finding where she belonged melted through her body. A large hand cupped her head, pressing her against his heart as she silently wondered what to do next.

“Ruby, we're bear-shifters. We found you dying. To save your life we needed to use a lot of magic, but there's a side effect.” He seemed to hesitate a heartbeat before adding, “You're now a bear-shifter, too.”

“Wow! I can turn into a bear like Zeek just did?”

“Eventually, yes.”

She giggled gleefully. Her dreams had never been so vivid before. Whoever would have guessed she had this much imagination? Maybe she should write children's books. She ran a hand down Nickolas's muscled abs and reconsidered. Maybe she was more suited to adult novels. Some of the naughty thoughts swimming in her brain at this present moment would probably be more appropriate for a different genre.

“So do you have any questions?” Nickolas seemed a little thrown by her enthusiasm, but she just smiled and dipped her hand a little lower. If the hard cock pressing against her bottom was any indication, they were finally about to get to the good stuff.

“Yes. When are you going to fuck me?”

Nickolas shoved her off his lap so fast, she almost bounced off the bed and hit the

floor on the other side.

“Hey!” she exclaimed indignantly. This was her dream. Shouldn’t she get some say in what happened next?

“Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” she said in what she thought of as her sexy voice. Granted, her dream lovers were usually more co-operative, but maybe this was a part of her new complex imagination. She smiled as the fun brother, the one who hadn’t yet introduced himself, stepped closer to the bed. She probably should give him a name. Dream lovers were all well and good, but this guy was handsome enough to need a name. “I think I’ll call you Josh.”

The guy smiled, touched her face with his big paw of a hand, and said, “I usually answer to Levi, but you can call me whatever you want, darlin’.”

“She still thinks she’s dreaming,” Nickolas pointed out with a slight hint of amusement. She growled in frustration. At this rate she was going to wake up before they even got to the good stuff.

“I suppose that’s to be expected,” Levi said as he leaned in and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Her freaking forehead! Maybe this new imagination stuff wasn’t so hot after all. Maybe she should go back to dreaming about her faceless lovers. They were far more fun. She crossed her arms and pouted, not caring that she probably looked like a kid doing a tantrum.

“Ruby,” Levi said as he again touched her face. “I promise you all of this will make sense...eventually.”

“Uh-huh.”

Why did it feel like she wasn’t actually dreaming?

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later Nickolas still wanted to crawl back into bed and hold the woman. In all of two minutes cuddling Ruby in his arms, he’d discovered something amazingly wonderful. Ruby was his mate. It seemed completely incredible that he’d actually found her, but as excited as he felt, and as much as he wanted to tell her, a part of him realized he needed to be cautious.

When she’d asked him to fuck her, it had taken every ounce of mental strength he owned to not follow through. Images of her gorgeous body laid out for his enjoyment, his hard cock sliding into her warm, wet pussy, her cries of passion filling his ears as he took her over and over had played through his mind. Oh, God, he’d desperately wanted to make it a reality. But bear-shifters had to be a completely new concept to the woman, and considering her lifestyle thus far, it was a safe bet that she wouldn’t take it as welcome news.

Fortunately, Ruby had stayed awake long enough to eat a little breakfast and then had promptly gone back to sleep. The healing magic had helped reverse the damage, but it was very likely she was still exhausted. He laughed quietly to himself as he dried the last dish in the rack and put it away.

Levi appeared almost as happy as Nickolas felt, but it was Zeek’s behavior that seemed out of character. He’d always been the strong, silent type, preferring to avoid social contact rather than seek it out, but his reaction to Ruby was troubling. Granted, it wasn’t every day they stumbled across the daughter of a billionaire who needed their special healing skills, but it didn’t quite explain Zeek’s dark mood.

“Where are my car keys?” Zeek growled as he stomped into the kitchen and started opening and closing drawers at random.

“In the basket near the front door,” Levi answered as he also stepped into the kitchen area. “What bug climbed up your butt?”

“Fate and its fucking sense of humor.” Zeek growled as he slammed the drawer he’d been searching and tried to push past Levi to get into the hallway.

When Levi attempted to stop their younger brother, obviously intending to ask for more details, Zeek let loose with a straight jab to Levi’s face. The blow hit Levi hard. Levi, of course, returned the favor.

They hadn’t fought amongst themselves since they were teenagers, but it seemed that some things, once learned, were never completely forgotten. Zeek’s jawline was already swelling, and Levi’s eye had started to close over. Nickolas grabbed two dishcloths, filled them with ice, and handed one to each brother. They could shift later, that would heal the damage, but right now they needed to talk.

“What the hell was that for?” Levi asked Zeek as he shook his knuckles and used the other hand to cradle the ice against his eye.

“Sorry, bro,” Zeek answered in a surly voice. “You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Levi growled low in his throat, but thankfully chose not to beat the shit out of his brother.

“Not good enough,” Levi answered. It was obvious he was holding on to his temper by a thread. “Is it about Ruby?”

“Of course it’s about Ruby. She’s a spoiled brat, probably never worked a day in her life. She wouldn’t know hardship if it bit her on the ass, but fate chose her to be my mate. Can you believe that? My mate. If there was ever anyone less suited to me, I haven’t met her.”

“Whoa,” Levi said, looking even angrier. “You’re mistaken, little bro.” He practically spat the words at Zeek. “She’s my mate, and if you talk like that about her again, I’ll rearrange your teeth.”

“Go ahead, Levi. I’d pay for tickets to be able to watch me knock you on your arrogant ass. You might be older, bro, but you ain’t bigger.”

“Actually,” Nickolas said, stepping into the fray before things got completely out of hand, “I think we need to talk.” It was obvious neither of them was really listening, but he said the words anyway. “She’s my mate, too.”

“What the fuck?” Levi exclaimed loud enough to wake every nocturnal creature in a five-mile radius.

Signaling for both his brothers to lower their voices, Nickolas took a seat at the kitchen table and waited for them to join him. Levi hesitated but sat down. Zeek leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and waited.

“I’m not sure exactly what’s going on,” Nickolas said in a quiet, hopefully neutral-sounding voice, “but it’s possible that she truly is mate to all three of us.”

“I’ve never heard of a bear with three mates,” Zeek said in a belligerent voice.

“I have,” Nickolas said. It seemed rather ironic that the day after their cousin Brandon had called to invite them to a human-style wedding with one bride and three grooms that they would find themselves in a similar situation. Zeek wasn’t pleased with Nickolas’s explanation, but Levi started to laugh quite loudly.

“You can’t be serious. Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“To be honest I was sure I’d misunderstood him, or that Brandon was playing one of his practical jokes. But in light of what we’re currently facing—”

“You can face it,” Zeek said as he rolled his shoulders and pushed away from the wall. “I don’t care if fate chose her. She’s not going to be my mate, not now, not ever.”

Despite the anger Nickolas felt toward Zeek for rejecting their mate, this time both he and Levi let their brother leave. A moment later they heard Zeek’s all-terrain four-wheel drive start up with a roar and then the sound faded into the distance.

“What’s a mate?” a small, frightened voice asked from the doorway.

## Chapter Two

“Ruby, I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to wake you.”

“What’s a mate?” she asked again, stepping into the kitchen with as much dignity as she could muster while wearing a shirt three times larger than her. She’d searched the room for clothes, hoping to find her own, but all she’d found were work shirts, jeans, and jackets. She’d snagged the smallest-looking shirt off the hanger, dragged it on, rolled the sleeves up about a million times, and gone looking for a way to escape her captors.

It had seemed strange to find that she wasn’t locked in, but a quick peek out of every window she found suggested that they were high up on a mountain somewhere. Clearly they knew she was a city girl and weren’t at all concerned that she would be brave enough to wander off.

Ironically, that’s exactly what she’d been planning until the argument between the brothers had broken out. She’d even planned to use the noise of their fight as a cover for slipping out the front door. But she’d heard their words, and curiosity had overridden common sense. She was pretty sure she wasn’t dreaming any longer, but sorting what actually happened from the foggy dream fantasy was proving to be tough.

“A mate is a gift from the Great Spirit,” Levi said after a quick glance at his brother.

“Uh-huh,” she said as she crossed her arms. This didn’t sound good. Not at all. There was no way in hell she was going to be anyone’s “gift.”

“Ruby, honey, we know this is a lot to take in. Maybe you should go rest for a while longer.” Nickolas looked really uncomfortable, and it was becoming quite obvious that he really didn’t want to explain any further.

“I’ve had enough rest. I want answers.” It was supposed to come out as a demand, but her confusion over everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours made the words more of a breathless plea.

Levi stepped closer, wrapped his arms around her, and held her close. It was probably testament to her addled thinking processes that she didn’t push him away, but rather snuggled into his warm embrace and held on tight.

“Ruby, darlin’,” he said, “I promise you everything is going to work out.”

It was hard to think clearly when she felt so safe in his arms, but she ruthlessly reminded herself that this man had abducted her. She was being held for ransom. Despite what she’d said earlier, her parents would pay dearly to get her back.

Unless...Was it possible they were actually telling the truth about how she got here?

“Where did you say you found me?”

“You were lying at the edge of a clearing several miles from here suffering a drug overdose and snakebites,” Levi said in a deep voice that rumbled through his massive chest.

Trying to keep her mind on the problem at hand, and not on Levi’s rock-solid pectoral muscles, she asked, “So how did you find me?”

“We were out running in furry form, heard you scream, and went to investigate. You were dying, so we used our healing magic to reverse the ill effects of the drugs

and neutralize the snake venom.”

Okay, so she hadn't dreamed that part. Obviously, these guys were as nutty as fruitcakes. No way on earth could they change into bears or use magic to cure snakebites. Following that logic, it meant that she couldn't possibly have been sick or dying, and so it brought her full circle—they must have slipped a drug into her drink at the club, kidnapped her, and transported her here while she was out cold. Except, they didn't seem inclined to ask for ransom money, so what did they want with her?

“Ruby,” Nickolas said as he stepped closer to press a kiss to her forehead. “We know this is confusing, but we really do turn into bears, we really did heal you, and we don't mean you any harm.”

“Because I'm a gift from that spirit guy?”

“The Great Spirit,” Nickolas corrected. “But we healed you even before we knew you were our mate.”

“So what does a mate do?” Ruby asked, suddenly suspecting exactly what role a mate was supposed to play. She'd spent some time traveling around Australia, where every second person used the word “mate” as a simile for “friend,” but it was only now that the alternate meaning had occurred to her.

“She lets us love her.”

Oh, fabulous, she wasn't being held for ransom. She was here as a fuck toy for the three of them.

Levi seemed to immediately realize how Ruby interpreted his words. It was still quite possible that all this—the cabin, the bears, the mate thing—was part of some strange, drug-induced delusion. She briefly considered asking Levi or Nickolas to change into a bear right there in the kitchen, but realized it wouldn't necessarily convince her. She'd likely just write it off as another dream.

She didn't object when Levi moved them to a different room, sat on the sofa, pulled her onto his lap, and held her close. It felt almost natural to be lying in his arms, and with everything else running through her head, she decided, in this at least, just to go with it.

“He didn't mean that the way it sounded,” Nickolas said as he dragged a chair in front of the sofa and rested his forearms on his thighs. “Ruby, we're sorry that all we seem to be doing is making the situation more confusing. We really did find you. The question we can't answer is how you got there in the first place. What do you remember about last night?”

“Not much,” she admitted grudgingly. It seemed a far easier scenario to explain strangers kidnapping her for ransom than to try and figure out how their version of the story fit in with what she remembered. It didn't matter that she was snuggled up to one of her possible kidnapers. She'd deal with her out-of-character behavior later.

“You were dressed for a night on the town,” Levi told her as he ran his fingers through the long length of her hair.

“It was a friend's birthday, so a group of us went out for dinner, and then hit the dance clubs.” If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that it was the last thing she'd wanted to do at the time, but as her father constantly reminded her, she had a duty to uphold. The more times she was mentioned in the society pages and tabloids, the more free advertising his business received. He wasn't even picky over what sort of attention his daughter attracted. Ruby hadn't quite gotten over her father's apparent

disappointment when he'd discovered that the sex tape that had been circulating last year claiming to be of her hadn't actually been her.

"What's the last club you remember going to?"

Her memories of last night were quite clear up until they reached a small, rather exclusive club called Sanity's Edge. She wasn't even certain she'd made it out of the limo. She remembered them making the decision to go there, but everything after that was a blur.

Before she could answer, the shrill sound of a telephone broke the silence.

Nickolas patted her knee, smiled apologetically, and headed back into the kitchen. A moment later, the ringing sound cut off, and Nickolas's deep voice reached her ears.

"Zeek, slow down. I don't understand you. What ransom?"

Levi stiffened the same time Ruby did. She'd been half convinced that they hadn't kidnapped her, and now all of a sudden they were talking about a ransom. She wasn't sure whether to deny her gullibility and kick some crazy bear-man ass, or wait quietly for an explanation.

Considering how large all three men were, it was probably a safe bet that her self-defense classes wouldn't help, so she chose to sit quietly.

After a few more minutes of talking, Nickolas hung up the phone and came back into the kitchen. "That was Zeek," he said unnecessarily, "and it looks like we have a problem."

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For the first time in his adult life Nickolas had no real idea what to do next. Zeek had sounded completely freaked out. It wasn't like him, and his brother's unusual loss of control affected Nickolas even more than the news he'd just delivered.

Nickolas stepped back into the living area, and hoped like hell that honesty was the best way to handle this. He sat facing Ruby once more.

"Ruby, honey, can you remember anything else about last night?"

"Only what I told you," she said, looking completely bewildered now.

"Zeek just heard on the radio that you've been reported as being kidnapped." She didn't seem all that surprised, and he supposed under the circumstances he shouldn't have been either. "The news report says that they have video footage of you bound and crying, begging for your parents to pay the ransom."

"What the hell?" she exclaimed, pushing away from Levi and sitting up straighter. "I don't remember anything like that."

"Zeek is heading into town to see if he can find out more details on the Internet."

"My pho..." Her words trailed away as she obviously remembered what Zeek had done to her phone.

"You wouldn't have gotten a signal up here anyway," he said, trying to sound reasonable.

"Why did he break it then?" It was a good question, and one Nickolas wasn't really sure he knew the answer to.

"I suspect he was worried that you'd tell someone about us before we had a chance to explain." She looked ready to argue, probably about why Zeek would break a phone that wouldn't have worked anyway, but seemed to change her mind and asked another instead.

"Can I use your phone to let my parents know I'm all right?"