



OLD MISSION COVEN

VOL. 2

BETWEEN
SHADOW
AND
BLOOD

B.A. STRETKE

Between Shadow and Blood

Old Mission Coven Vol. 2

B.A. Stretke

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A Story in the Bay Harbor Universe.

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CHAPTER ONE

Judah Helm had been back at the Coven for less than a week but already felt comfortable and at home. He loved his new quarters that overlooked a section of the vineyard. His previous assignment for the past sixty years had been as a field agent. He traveled the world gathering information and eliminating problems for his Master and Coven, and according to all reports, he was very good at his job.

Judah was contacted two weeks ago and offered the position of Commander of the security forces for the Coven proper. The new position would bring him home and put his focus on their immediate territory that encompassed Old Mission Peninsula, Eastport, and adjacent properties.

He commanded a team of five agents as lead field agent, and now, under his new command, he would lead several hundred. It was an elite team of security officers, and Judah was eager to put them through their paces. What he'd witnessed so far was extraordinary and showed the leadership skills of the previous Commander, Simeon Cortell.

Commander Simeon Cortell had received a promotion to Coven Second, a position he was eminently suited for, which left the position of Commander open. Judah was honored that Master Cabot had chosen him to fill Simeon's shoes and swore to carry out his duties with dignity and honor.

Upon returning home, he discovered that several of the Coven leadership, including Master Cabot, had found their beloveds and had settled into their blessed unions. He was happy for the Master, who had been alone for many centuries. He deserved to be happy and bonded. The Master's beloved was a young wolf, which made the pairing even more interesting and exhilarating for the Master.

According to legend, shifters and humans made impressive pair bonds with their earthy, powerful stock and life force. Such unions brought the vampire energy and revitalization unmatched by other couplings. It was legend only, but no one had ever contradicted the belief.

“Meet me in my office at the Black Dog.” The text came from Sam, the Master’s nephew and heir to the kingdom. Sam was a fine, strong man, and the Master had raised him well. He would be an outstanding leader when the time came.

“On my way.” He shot back and headed out.

“Nash, Nash!” The yelling began louder and angrier as the seconds passed, and he did not respond. “When I catch you, I’m going to ...” His voice trailed off as he went toward the woods lining the property to the north. Nash had decided to hide rather than run away this time.

No matter how hard he ran or how far he traveled, Arthur had always caught him, so this time, he hid. He was under a haystack in the corner of the large broken down old barn, and he was planning to stay there ... forever maybe.

They’d come to this town two days ago, and this was the third time Nash had tried to run away. He kept trying because it felt good to be free, even if just for an hour or two. There was hope when he was running that didn’t exist any other time. Arthur always made him pay in painful ways when he caught him, but the freedom, even temporary, was worth the pain.

They went from town to town and show after show, presenting Nash as the answer to prayers and problems. Arthur scheduled thirty shows over the course of three months, and then he would head off to Vegas for a month and spend everything they made. He would return broke and angry, and the routine would begin again.

He left Nash with his sister Edna in northern Wisconsin on the Michigan border whenever he went to Vegas. She was ruthless and lived in the backwoods on a makeshift farm. Nash was used like a slave during his stay, and she kept him locked in the barn in a small room with no windows when he wasn’t working. It wasn’t so bad, though, because it beat being in the house with her.

The only perk was the fact that she was afraid of him, and he knew it. His freaky talents scared the shit out of her, so

Nash made a point of acting as peculiar as possible around her highlighting his mysteriousness to keep her on the back foot.

Nash had escaped from there once and made it to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It was a nice area. He'd managed to disappear into the forest for several days before he was spotted by a hunter. He was then picked up by the cops and returned to Edna. She had her farm hand beat the living daylights out of him, injuring him so badly that Arthur had to return early from Vegas because Edna thought she'd killed him.

The positive in it all was that Arthur then beat the daylights out of Edna. He didn't want anything happening to his cash cow. She could treat him like shit; she just wasn't allowed to kill him. It didn't stop Arthur from continuing to dump him at Edna's every time he decided on a trip to Vegas, but the beatings were measured now and not life-threatening.

Tomorrow, when they finished here in Eastport, they were heading to Wisconsin and to Edna's farm. He overheard Arthur arranging a flight out of Green Bay and reservations at a hotel in Vegas. But things were going to change. Nash was over eighteen and legally no longer under Arthur's rule. He wasn't going to Edna's this time. Arthur no longer owned him, and he was done with these assholes; all of them could go right straight to hell.

"You're going to pay for this bullshit Nash. I'm going to beat you until you can't stand up anymore." The threats kept coming, and Nash sat deathly still.

Sam met with Judah in his office off the back of the Black Dog Lounge located inside the Indigo Hotel. It used to be a small, discreet little bar. They added an extensive drinks menu and a short but upscale food offering along with some interior design upgrades, and now it was a lounge.

The Indigo Hotel was an expensive and somewhat exclusive hotel and owned by the local wolf pack. Judah recently returned to the Coven after working for the Master as a field operative for several decades, and Sam wanted to make sure he was properly introduced to the wolf pack.

He also wanted him to be familiar with the Indigo Hotel, where many of the Coven members were employed. He and Sam had always been good friends since the days when they first came to this country and began to set down roots on the Old Mission Peninsula.

“Nice place you have here, Sam.” He commented as he sat down. “You like working with the wolves?”

“Yes, they’re honest, loyal, hard-working, and fierce as fuck.” He ended with a grin.

“That’s what I’ve been hearing.” He added approvingly.

Sam had worked for the pack for many years, rising from bartender to manager of the Black Dog Lounge, Weston’s Pub, and Pino’s restaurant. He worked at the hotel in order to maintain a good relationship with the pack and to stay informed.

He knew the time would come that he would have to leave the hotel and put all his attention on the Coven as they continued to grow and expand the winery, having recently acquired a vineyard in California. He was keeping good relationships and building bonds, which was smart for a man known as the Master’s right-hand man.

“I enjoy working for the pack. It also strengthened our connections in the area, which you know will be beneficial in the future. There are other groups moving into the region. Our paranormal societies are expanding.” Sam explained, and Judah nodded his understanding.

“Good idea to stay aware.” Judah smiled. “Master Emmanuel is lucky he has you.”

“I’m the lucky one, Judah.” Sam made that very clear. “Without my uncle, my life would have been a nightmare after my mother’s death.”

“He saved me too, Sam. Emmanuel took me in and brought me to the new world. He gave me a place in his home. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him.”

“Likewise,” Sam stated, and they clicked their whiskey glasses and took a long sip.

“I’m glad you still prefer the best when it comes to your liquor,” Judah remarked with obvious appreciation and then finished his drink.

“I’m glad you’re back, Judah.”

“I’m glad to be back.” They sat together, working out Judah’s schedule as he got familiar with his new duties and the men he would be leading.

Sam had suggested Judah to his Uncle and had pushed for his return. He wanted his friend back home again, and his Uncle saw the value in having someone of Judah’s skill and dedication guarding the Coven and winery. He’d been a valuable asset in the field, seeing to the Master’s interests, but he agreed, it was time for him to come home.

“Where are you headed? I thought you were on duty this evening.” Sam asked Koa, who was putting on his jacket and walking to the elevators. He and Judah were on their way to Pino’s for dinner. Sam introduced Koa to Judah, and there was an obvious sizing up of both parties.

Judah sensed the man’s internal animal and also his potency and intensity. Sam was correct in the fact the pack was fierce if Koa was an apt representative of their security force.

“I was, but there’s some kind of tent show or revival or something odd pitching up in the park that borders our lands, so Henrik is doubling up on patrols. We don’t know who they are or what they’re selling, but regardless, Henrik wants to be prepared.” Koa stated and hit the button for the elevator.

“Tent show? That’s rather old-fashioned.” Judah commented.

“Henrik’s getting a bad vibe from the group, but it might just be a bunch of grifters selling their wares and no threat to us.”

“Let me know how it turns out,” Sam asked.

“Will do,” Koa stated and hit the button for the garage level, and the doors slid closed. Judah had the thought of some old-timey tent show in his mind as he and Sam walked over to Pino’s restaurant. It seemed very out of place.

It was getting late, and no one had found him yet. The show was to start at seven, but the crowd would be gathering by six, everyone angling for a front-row seat. The fliers went up late, but Arthur was confident that he had flooded the right areas. Arthur knew their audience and where to promote. They appealed to the old, sad, and downtrodden people looking for understanding and a cure.

Arthur was running a scam on them, but Nash never lied to anyone. He told them what he saw, and he performed to the best of his abilities. He never gave anyone less than his best and tried to be honest and decent to those who sought him out. Arthur, on the other hand, made it all unseemly and tainted with his lies and exaggerations, but he had no control over Arthur.

He heard them beyond the wall of the barn talking together, Arthur and a man he hired locally to help with setup. “If we don’t find him, we have no tent show.” Arthur barked and began yelling for Nash and spouting more threats.

“I’ve been watching the kid, and I could fake it if you want to go ahead rather than cancel.” The guy sounded confident, and at first, Arthur said nothing, and then he began to get behind the idea.

“Show me what you got.” He pressed, and his mood began to shift to a more positive tone. The guy did a pretty good imitation of Nash and that pleased Arthur.

“Keep looking, but if we don’t find him, then you’re up.” Arthur and the guy walked away, and Nash settled intent on remaining hidden till after seven o’clock. They would all be at the tent, and he could get away. This was going to work. He was going to escape clean this time.

He heard the vehicles pull away, and still, he sat and waited just to make sure it wasn’t a trap. After thirty minutes, he began to move out from the hole he’d dug beneath the

massive straw pile. The fresh, cool air hit his face, and it was such a relief. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs full, and then listened, making sure there was no one about.

There were still no sounds or movement, so he made his way to the large doorway, which stood open, revealing the dusty parking area and the long driveway. The rental was in the sticks, but Nash didn't care. He would walk any distance necessary to be rid of these people.

He made it to the roadway and headed east. Since the tent show was west, he wanted to go in the opposite direction. Wherever this road took him would be good enough as long as it was far away from this terrible life. Nash took a thin, black knit cap from his pocket and pulled it on. He wrapped up his long hair and stuffed it underneath to cover his coal-black hair with the distinctive white streak that traveled from his hairline over his left eye to the very ends and was about two inches in width.

It made him stand out in a crowd, and anonymity was his goal, so the cap was vital, as were the dark glasses. His eyes were a striking light blue that looked to be glowing in some light and usually garnered attention, like his hair. Nash just wanted to fade into the background unnoticed until all the vicious parasites in his life gave up and went away.

The sun was beginning to set, and traffic started to pick up on this stretch of dirt road. The cars were making him nervous, so he moved to the trees, walking just inside so as to keep an eye on the road and where he was going. He'd gone a few miles, and the dirt road was now the black pavement, so he knew he was getting close to civilization. He had no plans but hoped to figure something out. Maybe he would simply stay in the woods. It had worked for him before.

His attention was brought to the road when a van slammed on its brakes and pulled to the shoulder. Nash's heart dropped when he saw his stepfather jump out of the vehicle and start running in his direction. This could not be happening, but Nash wasted no time running deeper into the woods as fast as his feet would carry him. He would not be taken back. No, again, never again.

“Stop, you’re not getting away; you will never escape. We have eyes and ears everywhere. There is nowhere for you to hide.” He kept yelling, and Nash kept running until he saw the river coming up in front of him.

It wasn’t wide but too wide for him to cross, so he ducked in behind a large tree root and hunkered down. It was nearly full-on dark, and seeing in the forest was not easy. He figured that he had a fifty-fifty chance of success as long as they didn’t start searching the banks of the river. Arthur stopped at the edge of the river, and the man with him, whom Nash did not recognize, stood by his side.

“Is that him?” The guy asked excitedly. Nash wasn’t sure what they were looking at, but they weren’t looking in his direction. “He’s trying to swim to the other side.” There was something or someone in the water.

“Yes, that’s got to be him,” Arthur shouted. “Stop, you idiot, you’ll never make it.” He shouted at whoever was in the water. “Come on, we’ll catch him on the other side. Hurry.” They headed back to where they’d parked, intending to drive around to the other side. Nash assumed there was a bridge nearby, considering how confident they were of catching him.

Nash knew he had to act fast before they discovered their mistake and returned, but fear was taking hold, and he didn’t know where to run. He stepped out of hiding and looked around, and to his right, beyond the thickest of the trees, was a flashing light.

It seemed like a sign to him, so he went for it and started running, tearing into the dense forest while keeping his eyes on the light. He ran for what seemed like miles, scratching his hands and face on the branches and thickets, and finally, there it was.

The light turned out to be a streetlight in front of a bus stop. The bus was there when he cleared the trees and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He did not hesitate in getting on board. It was free local transport, and he had no idea where in this town he was headed. He was just glad to have the opportunity to rest for a few minutes and hopefully disappear.

After about fifteen minutes, the bus stopped downtown Eastport; Nash got off, looking around and wondering about his next move. He looked a little rough with the cuts on his face and hands, but he kept his head down and his hands in his pockets. He was about a block away from the Indigo Hotel, which looked to be a high-end establishment. Beyond that were shops and office buildings. He was at a loss as to what to do.

As he was passing the Indigo, several men came out of the service entrance and left the door propped open. No one was around, so he ducked inside and went quickly down the flight of stairs to what looked like a large storeroom.

He could hide here for a while. The area was stocked full of kegs and boxes stacked high. There were so many places to hide. Arthur wouldn't find him here, and with any luck, neither would the hotel staff. It was late, probably nearing closing time, for a lot of the services that required anything from this stock room. The camera at the door was easy to thwart, and from what he could see, there weren't any cameras at this end of the room.

Nash crouched down on the floor and scooted over to the corner with boxes surrounding him, shielding him from view. His hands were aching from the deep gashes covering them. The forest had been brutal, and the wounds were bleeding profusely.

There was a cost for everything, and a few cuts for his freedom seemed reasonable. He wondered what his face looked like. The scratches were mostly along his jawline and neck, but some were deep, and considering the looks he got on the bus and on the street, they were quite noticeable.

He saw an open crate next to him that contained bottles of whiskey. The curative properties of a good whiskey were well known. He wasn't a thief, but he needed to treat his wounds. Finally, after several minutes of justification, Nash wrote a note naming what he took and that he promised to pay and then signed it. He wet a couple shop rags with the whiskey and cleaned the wounds on his hands and then his face. He then took the rags and wrapped them around his hands.

The whiskey application was painful, but it also felt good to know the wounds were clean and would heal. The pain persisted to the point that he took a full swig of the golden liquid in an attempt to temper the discomfort. After a few shots, the pain lessened to a tolerable level, and Nash decided he sort of liked the taste of the whiskey, or perhaps it was the numbing effect that he liked.

CHAPTER TWO

Judah was staying till close tonight, thankful that Sam was giving him the opportunity to meet members of the pack and to get a feel for the establishment that employed many from the Coven. He was behind the bar at the Black Dog with Sam when Koa came in and took a seat. Sam poured him a brandy and leaned against the bar. Koa had something to say. You could see it in his eyes and in the set of his shoulders.

“I attended the tent show I spoke of earlier.” He began. “They had all the required permits and such; there was no problem there. They followed all of the local ordinances; I know because I checked, hoping I could have found a reason to shut the thing down. It was wrong; the whole show, display or performance, whatever you want to call it, was way off.” Koa paused and took a drink of his brandy. Judah hadn’t known Koa long, but he didn’t strike him as reactionary. Whatever he felt at the tent show must have been significant for him to go to the lengths of trying to shut them down.

“Whatever it was, the humans couldn’t feel it, but every paranormal there ended up leaving, including me.” He finished his brandy, and Sam poured him another.

“What was it that drove you away?”

“Just a feeling that crawled under my skin. It was the feeling of tainted magic.”

“The humans were lapping it up?” Sam was becoming concerned. Sam then turned to Judah and added. “Magics have become a growing issue in the region.” Judah nodded his understanding of their concern. Magics were unpredictable as a rule, but tainted magic was pure malevolence and nothing you wanted near or in your area.

“Not all some seemed unsure but remained listening to that so-called faith healer and psychic seer.” Koa shook his head in disgust. “He was no more a healer or seer than I am. He was a total phony but a decent actor, and, in their defense,

he was not the actual headliner.” Javier came in and sat down next to Koa, and Sam poured him a whiskey.

“Who was the headliner?” Javier interjected, joining the conversation.

“His name is Nash Rhodes, according to the flyers. People who attended yesterday said he was young and gifted, and that’s why they returned, but it was announced he wouldn’t be appearing tonight.”

“Did you get the twisted magic feel from his replacement?” Sam came back to the bad magic perspective.

“No, it was the handler, a guy by the name of Arthur Tate. Something has attached itself to that man.” Koa nodded and glanced over at Javier. “They’re leaving tomorrow, and good riddance. We don’t need bad magic infecting the people around here.” He paused for another sip of his brandy. Judah’s uneasiness was growing with the suggestion of possession being added to the mix.

“Maybe you could have your mate Sacha check the area after they move out to make sure they don’t leave any lingering effects.”

“I will, and if there is anything hanging on, he can dispatch it before it grows.” Javier agreed, and Sam informed Judah that Javier’s mate was a powerful Mage, which was a distinct positive in the situation. Mage magic was pure and clean and was a valuable defense against dark spells.

“Now, the reason I stopped in was to let you know that you have a situation brewing in the basement stockroom.” Javier clarified with a smile while looking at Sam and then finished his whiskey.

“What sort of situation?” Sam asked as he quickly rounded the bar and headed to the back room, which gave access to the storeroom. Judah, Javier, and Koa followed.

“Someone broke in and started drinking,” Javier stated, and Sam turned to stare at him pointedly for a moment before continuing down the stairs. “He’s quite drunk and human, and he knows what we are.” That last tidbit had Sam hurrying a

little faster. The situation took on a seriousness that required immediate handling. Judah found the transition from dark magics to a lonely drunk rather refreshing but did not voice such, for Sam did not look amused.

Strangely enough, the minute Judah rounded the corner and saw several wolf shifters standing over the man seated on the floor, he felt a sudden surge of defensiveness. He wanted them to back up to give the guy breathing room, but he said nothing because his feelings made no sense. This man was a trespasser and had no right to peace or comfort under the current circumstances.

Just as he approached, he heard the young man bark at the man, attempting to help him to his feet. “Get your hands off me, wolf. Leave me the fuck alone. I’m not going back. Get away from me.” He was loud and desperate and very drunk, and Judah again felt himself leaning into the need to help this man.

“Who is he?” Sam asked, but no one knew his name. The men circling him stepped back, and Judah was able to see the young man huddled on the floor, attempting to fend them off. He was dressed in a long, dark coat, a black cap, and dark glasses, and he possessed a powerful magnetism that drew Judah in, urging him to come closer.

He began to wonder at the depth of feeling that was rushing him and the meaning and caught his breath on the possibility. Centuries have passed since the last time he even thought about such a thing happening to him and had resolved that Fate’s gift was only given to those who were esteemed and worthy.

Such an honor would never be his, and yet the reaction he was experiencing and the rush of emotions flooding his system indicated clearly that it was Fate’s call. It would seem that the drunken trespasser belonged to him. Shock filled him but was soon suppressed by a flood of elated anticipation.

“Leave me alone.” The man moaned, slurring his words, and Judah again felt a push to try and help. He moved closer, coming up beside Javier to try and get a better look at

the man in question, but the drunken man buried his face in his arms and covered his head with his bandaged hands.

He had been hurt. His face and hands carried deep gashes that needed to be tended. Judah took another step closer, and the young man slumped to the floor, all fight gone out of him as unconsciousness mercifully claimed him. “The whiskey won.” One of the wolves commented and was about to pick him up off the floor, but Judah stopped him.

“I’ll carry him,” Judah stated with enough authority that the wolves stepped back. He then bent and gathered the young man into his arms. He weighed no more than a feather, and it became clear that the man was malnourished as Judah could feel his ribs and his hip bones even through the heavy coat he was wearing. Whoever he was, he was not cared for or cherished by the people in his life.

Judah held him close and was being inundated by a barrage of thoughts and feelings regarding this man. The blood on his face and hands was calling to him, as was the overall scent that appeared to cling to him. There was no doubt who this man was to Judah, and his protective instincts began to kick in, along with the need to have him somewhere safe and secure.

“Take him to my office,” Sam stated and then added. “The sofa is large and comfortable. He will be able to rest there, and we can have someone look at his injuries.” Judah thought it was probably the best option at present. He hadn’t announced his connection to the trespasser yet, but it was about to become obvious if any of the men standing around attempted to touch or get close to the man in his arms.

He hurried back upstairs to Sam’s office. He had a large, comfortable sofa and several throw blankets. Judah carefully laid him out on the sofa and tucked a pillow under his head before covering him with one of the throws. This drunken teenager injured, scared, and hiding in the basement belonged to him, and he was going to make sure he was protected and received the care he deserved from this moment forward.

Koa sent for the doctor. Judah wasn't sure how he felt about the wolf doctor checking out the young man, but he had no reason to deny him. "The doctor will be here shortly. Luckily, he was upstairs meeting with Henrik." Sam told him that meant Henrik would be coming as well to check on the interloper. Judah crouched down next to him, removed the dark glasses, set them aside, and slid the knit cap from his head.

Judah was absolutely astounded by the beauty that lay before him. His hair was long, soft, and black as the night, with a streak of white about two inches wide that started over his left eye and traveled the length of those gorgeous locks. He was unique and gorgeous, and everything about him hit Judah as perfect. He'd been on this earth a long time and met many interesting individuals, and not one could hold a candle to this beauty.

Sam leaned over Judah to get a closer look at the young man, and Judah wanted to tell him to back off but controlled himself by focusing on the young man and brushing the beautiful black hair out of his face. His eyes were closed, so he did not know the color, but he assumed they would be as impressive as every other part of him. He found his hair captivating and ached to run his fingers through it again.

He'd never been a fan of long hair on men until now. This man, with his handsome long hair, was in a league all his own. Nothing could take away from the splendor of this man, not even the harsh injuries to his face and hands. The wounds looked sore, and Judah could tell by the smell and the healing that he'd use the whiskey as a purifying agent. It must have hurt like a bitch when the whiskey touched the open wounds, and he felt for this poor little man.

One of the guards handed Sam a small slip of paper. "He left an I.O.U., so he planned to reimburse you for the booze." He said, and Sam took the paper and read it out loud. On the bottom, he'd signed his name.

"Nash Rhodes." He said the name, and it touched something in Judah, and he repeated it several times to himself.

“That’s the name of the main attraction at that tent show I went to.” Koa blurted. “Nash Rhodes, psychic healer, medium extraordinaire, only he has the answers, and only he can bring you peace.” Koa finished with a chuckle. “Big billing for such a little lightweight.” Judah turned to look at Koa, not liking that he was mocking the helpless man on the sofa.

“He knew you were a wolf.” Sam reminded him, and Judah smiled. Koa could not argue.

“You think he’s legit?” Koa asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam answered honestly.

“I doubt that is his biggest concern right now. He’s hurt, he’s hiding, and he’s scared. Something happened to him, and until we know what it was, I think we should keep his identity and location quiet.” Judah offered, and fortunately, everyone agreed.

The doctor and Henrik arrived, and Judah was hard-pressed to move from the edge of the sofa and allow the doctor to get close. He didn’t question the importance of the man lying there drunk and unconscious. This man is his beloved. Nash Rhodes was sent here for him. Fate brought them together, and Judah would do everything in his power to keep him safe and protected from whoever was tormenting him.

Henrik walked up to stand between Sam and Judah while the doctor cleaned Nash’s wounds and dressed them. The young man did not wake, attesting to both how exhausted he was and how much liquor he consumed.

It was probably best that he sleeps through this, and by morning, he may be feeling better. Judah had met Henrik earlier in the day and found him to be a solid, powerful, and well-rounded leader. But he didn’t realize that he also had the ability to sense connections.

“He’s important to you, Judah?” Henrik asked, apparently picking up on the interest and angst coming off Judah.

He nodded and then looked at Sam. “Your trespasser is my beloved.”

He turned his gaze to Nash and the doctor and then continued. “I recognized him when I entered the stockroom, and it was definite when I picked him up after he passed out. His scent was intoxicating, and I was driven to protect him. There is no doubt he is my beloved.”

“Congratulations, it’s about time. You’ve been alone a long time, Judah.” Sam smiled and patted Judah on the shoulder. “I agree we need to keep his whereabouts secret until we know why he is so scared.

“Do you know anything about him apart from his connection to the tent show?” Henrik asked Sam and Judah.

“Nothing yet, but I have a call into Remi, and he’s doing a background on Nash and the others involved with the tent show,” Sam responded, and Judah appreciated his assistance. Remi Toulouse was the director of intelligence for the Coven and was very good at his job. Judah had no doubt he would get a complete dossier by morning.

“If I or any of my men can be of assistance to you, don’t hesitate to ask,” Henrik told them.

“Thank you, Henrik,” Sam answered, and Judah nodded, extending his gratitude.

“Are you going to take him to the Coven?”

“No, I think it would frighten him too much to wake up in the midst of a vampire coven,” Judah answered frankly and then asked. “I’d like to book a room here and allow him to get used to me before taking him to coven grounds and the chateau.”

“Anything you need is yours,” Henrik responded without pause. “Take one of the larger suites on the fourth floor.”

“Thank you, sir.” Judah was overwhelmed by their kindness and support.

“No problem.”

The doctor finished, and apart from the visible injuries, he also reported that the young man was seriously underweight and showed signs of previous abuse. The information was hard to hear, and Judah felt himself reacting as the anger surged to the surface. “Whoever laid hands on him will never do so again.” He stated through gritted teeth he had waited too long for this little one to come to him, and nothing and no one would ever touch him in anger again.

“He’s here now, and you will keep him safe,” Sam assured, and they were the words he needed to hear, allowing him to rein in his baser instincts and control his anger. He had nowhere to exorcize the fury he was feeling on his beloved’s behalf, given he knew so little about him. “The time will come when you will retaliate and get revenge for what he has gone through, but for now, he needs you calm, and he needs you completely present.”

“Yes, and I will give him what he needs,” Judah responded and took a deep breath, internalizing the scent of his beloved, and allowed it to settle his anger and frustration.

The doctor gave Judah more bandages and antiseptic and suggested that he get the young man to eat when he wakes up. With that, Judah thanked everyone present, picked his beloved up into his arms once again, and headed to the fourth floor.

He got a few awkward stares from the staff, but no one questioned why he was carrying a man through the lobby. Sam gave him the passcode and the number of the suite on the fourth floor. He was anxious to finally have the man alone, safe, and secure in a room that he could easily guard.

The suite was large, with a king bed in the primary bedroom and a twin in an adjacent room, along with a seating area and a small kitchen. It would serve them and their needs until Judah could arrange to bring Nash to the Coven. He laid him on the king’s bed and removed his boots and the heavy coat he was wearing. He was wearing only a thin cotton t-shirt, and Judah’s heart tightened at the sight of his ribs showing through and the frailty of his body.

Judah was very careful moving him and getting him comfortable beneath the thick covers of the plush bed. Once he was tucked in and set for the night, he stepped out of the room and called Master Cabot.

CHAPTER THREE

Nash's memory was foggy when he woke up lying in the middle of a large opulent bed in a room he had no memory of entering. He was still dressed, but his shoes and coat were missing. His eyes were heavy, so he closed them and just relaxed for a minute longer. He felt no danger or urgency, so wherever he was, it wasn't a bad place. It had the aura of a hotel room with many layers of living and emotions, but none were dominant or oppressive.

"You're in a suite on the fourth floor of the Indigo Hotel in Eastport." The voice was soft yet deep and authoritative, but not in a bad way. Whoever they were, they were seated right next to the bed, and Nash wondered idly how long they'd sat there watching him. Nash cracked open one eye and looked over at the man seated there.

He was sitting right next to the bed and was holding Nash's hand. He hadn't noticed at first, but now that he was becoming fully awake, he could feel the strength and calm in the man's touch. It was as if he were sharing these with Nash, giving him his strength and his calm; he could feel it building in his heart and in his mind.

Nash tried to read him like he did everyone, but he couldn't touch this man's mind. He knew he was paranormal, but he couldn't decipher what he was. There was a block that never existed before stopping him from getting too close to the man's mind.

"I'm a vampire." He said as if knowing what Nash was searching for. "My name is Judah Helm, and I belong to the Mission Coven under the leadership of Master Emmanuel Cabot." Nash turned to regard him, fulling, taking in his eyes. First, they looked sharp and focused and also war-weary. He was not a young man, although he looked no more than thirty or thirty-five. Nash sensed a lot of life attached to this man.

"My name is Nash Rhodes." He didn't want to say any more than that, even though there was something in him pushing to be transparent with this imposing figure of a man.

He was a soldier of some sort, which was obvious by his manners and his size and the way he seemed to take in everything with a glance.

“Who are you running from Nash?” He wanted to pull his hand away and shut down, but he also wanted to tell him everything to unload and ask him to please make it right. Judah, what a nice name, old and wise, and it fit him wholly. “You can trust me. Look into your heart, and you’ll know that you can trust me.”

Nash didn’t trust anyone, and there wasn’t anyone ever who didn’t try to use him in some way. Even his mother set him up as a curiosity in order to get money and sympathy. After she died in a car accident, it was his stepfather Arthur who continued the practice but added the tent show or freak show as Nash described it. No one had his interests at heart, and now this man, a stranger, asks Nash to trust him.

“Why am I here? Why didn’t you call the police?”

“You were drunk, injured, and scared. It was decided that you were not a danger, and you left an I.O.U. for the liquor you drank.” The corner of Judah’s mouth raised slightly. It wasn’t a smile, but it was close.

“It was also obvious that you were running from someone or something. We didn’t want to further complicate your life with the police, so I brought you up here to sober up and to have a chance to explain yourself.” Judah fell silent and held Nash with those piercing dark eyes that demanded he speak. Nash tried to look away, but his gaze came right back to the handsome, stoic man by his bed.

“I can’t read you. Why can’t I read you?” Nash said without realizing he was outing himself, but then Judah said something unexpected.

“I can’t read you either. It has to do with our connection. I’ll explain it later.”

“You know about me?”

“I know you were part of that tent show and that you were billed as a psychic medium and healer.” Nash felt his

stomach tighten at the mention of the tent show.

“Just a medium, not a healer. Arthur added that to make the show more like the old-time tent show and to fleece as many people as possible. I never claimed to be a healer, and I never healed anyone at the show.” Nash wanted him to know that although he was part of the scam, he wasn’t perpetrating the scam. “Arthur would fake the healing with plants he put in the audience. It was all theater, and Arthur ran that aspect of the show.”

“What was your part of the show?” It could have sounded accusatory, but when Judah said the judgment was not there, it sounded more curious. Nash found he did not take his usual offense at being questioned about his gift.

“I am a medium I connect people with loved ones who have passed or people they wish to speak with. I’m not a hundred percent, but things usually play out to the benefit of the attendee.” Nash tried to be as vague as possible, still not comfortable sharing too much even with this very compelling man.

“Arthur takes advantage of you?” Was it a question, was it a statement Nash wasn’t sure?

“Arthur was my legal guardian, but I’m over eighteen, and I have a right to leave.” Nash hoped that was enough of an answer.

“How are you feeling?” Judah changed the subject and, while still holding Nash’s hand, leaned over the edge of the bed, drawing much closer and capturing Nash’s gaze once again. He was entralling. He placed his other hand on Nash’s forehead, checking for a fever.

“My head hurts, but that’s probably due to the whiskey.” Judah reached over and picked up a glass of water and a couple of pills and helped Nash get them down. He didn’t even consider refusing, which was really not like him, but again, this guy was something else.

“That will help the headache, and as soon as you feel better, I will order breakfast for you. It is important that you

eat and hydrate.” Nash nodded, readily agreeing to everything this man had to say.

“Thank you for helping me.” He said as Judah tucked him back in and once again took his hand, holding it firmly in his.

Judah wanted to say so much to this man, but his hesitancy and distrust were heavy and thick. He had to take it slow and earn his trust first before presenting too many things for his consideration. He did not object to Judah holding his hand and seemed eager for the comfort it afforded him. That was the pull doing its work, and although he probably didn’t understand, he did not resist, so that was in Judah’s favor.

“Rest, sweetheart, and we will talk later.” He could see that Nash was tired and didn’t want to push him unnecessarily. The truth would come out in due time. It always did. There was no rush as long as Nash was protected and kept safe from the dangers in his life.

Nash closed his eyes and was soon fast asleep, which was also a testament to his ease at being in Judah’s company. He did not fear him and, on some level, trusted him but was not ready to bare his soul as yet. Judah understood his reluctance to share too much with a man he did not know.

As a legal adult, his stepfather would have no power over him, and the guardianship should be null and void. Nash seems more than ready to walk away from Arthur and the tent show. He wondered what kind of indignities Nash had been forced to suffer as the headliner for that man’s insufferable tent show. Perhaps it would be better if he never found out.

Judah sat and held Nash’s hand and studied the sleeping man for several hours and then carefully rose and moved to the outer room to take a call from Remi. He was eager to get whatever information the man had gathered. The need to know more about his beloved was literally burning through him.

“I won’t bore you with the basics.” He began. “I’ll send you the complete report, but there are a few things I thought you should be aware of immediately.” Judah braced

himself because knowing his beloved lived a hard life and actually hearing the details were two very different things.

“Arthur Tate has contacted the police and reported Nash Rhodes as a missing person. He claims his stepson, Nash Rhodes, has disappeared and also claims that Nash has emotional disorders that make him a danger to himself.” Tate was going to use the guardianship and a supposed disability to try and keep Nash under his thumb.

“They’re saying he’s probably in Eastport since he was on foot when he left the farmhouse the family was renting south of town.” Remi fell silent for a moment and then continued. “They’re also claiming he self-harms.”

“They’re attempting to get him back but also covering for any injuries he displays. What a bunch of bastards.” Judah could not hold back his disgust.

“It’s only Arthur. All the others are hired on scene. No one comes with them. It’s just Arthur and Nash. His mother was also part of the shtick until she died six years ago in an auto accident in southern Minnesota.” Remi informed, and Judah was surprised.

“An entire tent show, and it’s just the two of them?”

“Arthur hires a few guys to put up the tent and assist with the acts at each stop and then lets them go when he leaves. It’s cheap labor.” Remi explained further. “But I think you should get your beloved to the Coven as soon as possible before the cops come knocking.”

“I agree we will be leaving now.” Judah did not comment further and closed the call. He looked back over his shoulder at the delicate figure asleep in the other room, and his heart tightened at the beauty of the man. His hair and his light blue eyes were striking and unusual, but it was the depth of his voice that made Judah sweat. His tone, even in a whisper, was both sexy and soothing in equal measure.

He put in a call to the Coven and let them know he was heading home with his beloved and also informed the Master of the circumstances. Nash was in danger of discovery the

longer he remained at the hotel, so it was time to go. Judah wrapped him in one of the blankets and scooped him up into his arms once again. He felt immense satisfaction having his beloved in his arms. Nash fit perfectly against him, and Judah would gladly carry him forever if need be.

Nash stirred slightly and mumbled Judah's name but otherwise did not wake up, which was fortunate. Judah cuddled him close and headed out of the suite to the elevator. It was early morning, and the sun had not yet begun to rise, so there were few people in the hall apart from the staff, and no one paid him any mind as he took the elevator to the underground garage where he'd parked the previous day.

His SUV was not far from the elevator, and he hurried over, unlocking the vehicle as he approached. Again, the area was clear, not that it mattered. He'd simply clear the minds of anyone who tried to interfere, be they human or shifter. His beloved was of the utmost importance, and Judah would do anything to keep him safe and anonymous.

He slipped him into the passenger side of the vehicle and secured him before rounding the front and seating himself behind the wheel. Judah looked over at the precious man beside him and couldn't believe that this was really happening to him.

So many years and then finding his little man drunk in the basement of a hotel. Fate was creative in her matchmaking but also perceptive of the needs and wants of both parties. He looked forward to learning more about Nash and his hopes and dreams. Judah reached over and laid his hand on top of Nash's, enjoying the contact and the security of having the man so close.

Nash began to wake and looked around, then riveted Judah with a stare that demanded an explanation. He was small and utterly vulnerable, and yet he had a strength that pushed through, and Judah was impressed. His beloved had many facets.

"Where are we going?" He asked, his voice as sexy as ever, even in its hushed tones.

“My place on Old Mission Peninsula. Are you familiar with the area?” Judah decided to take it in steps and simply answer his questions.

“I’ve heard of it.” He tentatively replied. “The Cabot Vineyard is located there.”

“And the Mission Coven,” Judah added.

He glanced over at Judah, uncertainty clearly in his gaze, and then he appeared to remember what they had talked about earlier. “You’re a vampire.”

“Yes.”

“Why did we leave the hotel?”

“Your stepfather filed a missing person’s report on you. He also claims you have emotional disorders and are a danger to yourself.” Judah saw the expression explode across Nash’s face. It was indignant anger at its fiercest. “I thought you would be safer at the Coven,” Judah added before the explosion went off.

“Emotional disorder!” Nash yelled and then turned away and then turned back, ready to do battle. “That lying sack of shit. How dare he try to insinuate that I’m unable to care for myself. I’ve been caring for myself my entire life. I’m eighteen, and I don’t care what he says or does; I am not going back. He can get the hell off my back and start making his own money.”

Judah took his hand and raised it to his lips, kissing it softly. “I guarantee you will never go back there, and Arthur Tate will never harm you again. You have my pledge and my promise.” Judah kissed his hand again and received a questioning look and then a soft smile for his effort.

“Thank you, Judah. I’m not sure why you’re helping me, but I’m awfully glad that you are.” Judah turned to him with a smile, recognizing the trust that was growing between them. He was still cautious, but each interaction was more relaxed than the last. Nash was getting used to him and accepting their connection.

“I’ve run away many times over the years, but he always found me and brought me back. This time will be different.” The joy and relief were evident in his tone, and it warmed Judah’s heart.

“This time will be very different, I guarantee it,” Judah assured him. “I have quarters on the third floor of the Chateau along with other soldiers. You will be safe there. Master Cabot knows that you’re coming and looks forward to making your acquaintance.” Judah made idle conversation, seeking to put him at ease. He was still holding his hand, and Nash was reciprocating. The contact appeared to comfort him as much as it pleased Judah.

“Why can’t I read you?” Nash asked as they turned into the drive that would lead to the Chateau. He didn’t have a lot of time before they reached the Chateau, so Judah didn’t want to get into the specifics.

“It’s Fate, my love.” He said and pulled into the garage located behind the Chateau and gave direct access to the interior and upper levels. The place was well thought out and constructed but also maintained the beauty and logic of the former mission.

Nash continued to stare at him, taking in every feature, every air and expression. He was trying so hard to break through. “I can’t read you like I can read others, but I can feel you.” He broke the silence that had taken over since parking and turning off the engine. “I have an awareness of you that I have never experienced before.”

“As an older vampire, I find it quite easy to read most people, especially humans, but I cannot touch your mind. I can register your feelings. I know if you are stressed or fearful, emotions come through clearly, but I cannot get into your thoughts.” Judah explained his own limitations, although he knew the reason why.

“It’s Fate?” Nash repeated Judah’s words with furrowed brows.

“You and I are meant to be, and this is Fate’s way of keeping us on a level playing field. Neither has unnatural

power over the other.” Judah made the statement and then proceeded to exit the vehicle. He wanted to continue this conversation in a location more comfortable, for it was going to take time.

Nash remained in the vehicle for a couple of seconds before he, too, stepped out, wrapping the thin blanket around him. Judah placed his boots in front of him, and Nash slipped them on. Judah stayed close in case Nash needed assistance or stumbled. He was moving slowly but steadily. They made it to the elevator, and once inside, Nash turned to him.

“You recognized me in the basement; you know me.” Nash was more astute than Judah had given him credit. Even in his alcohol stupor, he had felt a connection that was coming back to him now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nash believed he was doing the right thing, staying with Judah and following his lead. He always paid attention to his instincts, and currently, they were telling him Judah could be trusted. Still, eighteen years of being abused, neglected, and betrayed was hard to get past. There remained a part of him that was waiting for this to go south and for Judah to drop him flat.

The things he was referring to without actually saying implied a connection which Nash was somewhat familiar with. His reference to Fate brought back past interactions he had with paranormal beings. It was something very serious, a soul connection they revered and was never spoken of idly.

He'd felt something when Judah had entered the basement stockroom. Even though his mind was clouded with whiskey, his presence had been powerful and refreshing. A new life and new beginning rang in his heart, and he had a vision of a future where he smiled and smiled often. He was afraid to believe because high hopes always brought crushing despair. But everything seemed to be pointing toward a relationship that was bonded, which was something specific to paranormal beings and something that was sacred. Could this be real? Could it be his?

"I recognized you. At first, I wasn't sure, but when I touched you, I knew you. You filled me with a light and a warmth that was irresistible, and my heart nearly pounded out of my chest. You are my beloved." Judah said it loud and clear and reached over, taking Nash's hand as the elevator opened on the third floor.

"I know what a mate and a beloved are. I've seen them in the minds of others. I understand what you are saying to me, but still, how can this be?" Nash asked, knowing that there was no way for Judah to answer that.

From what he understood, it was a Fated, predestined pairing, and it was also believed that the two would come together when they needed each other the most. That part of

the legend was spot on because Nash needed Judah more than anything else in this world.

“Let’s get inside, and I’ll order some breakfast, and we can talk.” Judah put his arm around him and guided him to a door at the end of a long, wide hall. The Chateau was impressive, as was the grounds that he observed on the drive up. Nash felt strange being at the Coven but also felt safe. There was a peacefulness that was hard to describe.

The air was not oppressive or troubling in the least, and Nash was a good judge of atmosphere. He could read a crowd just by the scent they exuded. There were times he’d wanted to run after meeting the crowd that was waiting, but they paid their ticket price, and like a good dancing bear, Nash had to perform. He gave them their money worth regardless of his feelings, and there were nights he would have preferred to be anywhere other than that blasted tent.

There were nights when tragic people showed up, and Nash would relive their tragedy with them and try to present it and the victims in a way that was not totally heartbreaking. He kept it honest, but there was a limit to the amount of sadness a person must endure, and Nash tried to lessen the blow whenever he could.

It also took a toll on him, living these events so many and night after night. There were days when he could hardly get out of bed, but he was never allowed to rest, always on, always prepared to perform for Arthur’s private guests and additional paying customers. He wasn’t treated like a human, just a tool for Arthur to use and exploit.

“I don’t have any emotional disorders. I am perfectly sane and a functional human being.” Nash felt the need to make that clarification just in case there was any lingering doubt.

“I know,” Judah responded as he opened the door to his quarters and guided Nash inside. It was large and open, and strangely, Nash felt completely at home with the browns and creams that dominated the room. Judah had said he hadn’t lived there long, but it was nicely decorated and looked lived

in with a warmth that was specifically Judah. Nash was very comfortable.

The place was open and airy with a flow-through from entry to the living room to the dining room to the kitchen and then a hallway, which he assumed led to bedrooms. It was tidy and organized, and Nash loved organization and space.

“I’ve been working in the field for the past few decades. The Coven has interests far beyond the boundaries of the Coven proper, and I saw to those interests. Master Cabot called me back a few weeks ago and promoted me to Commander, and I now oversee the security forces of the Coven. This space is new to me, but I’ve tried to make it home.” Judah told him while opening the shades and brightening up the room.

The sun had completely risen and shown warmly across the vineyard, which was visible from the large picture windows in the living room. Judah then led him into the guest room that had an attached bath, and Nash slipped the blanket from his shoulders and placed it at the foot of the bed.

“Why don’t you shower, and I’ll find you a change of clothes. You’ll feel better once you freshen up.” Judah reached out and cupped the side of his face and looked down at him, studying his expression. “How are you feeling? Does anything hurt? Do you need anything?”

“I’m feeling surprisingly well considering the night that I had.” Nash was not hungover, and his wounds were not aching like they had been.

“Be careful of your injuries. I’ll check them when you’re finished and rebandage them if it is needed.” Judah bent and placed a soft kiss on Nash’s lips and the touch was thrilling and stirred something deep in Nash that he didn’t even know existed. He felt a true relationship and a rapport between them. It was something wonderful, and he knew that it was wonderful.

Judah entering his life was unexpected, and he was not someone Nash would have thought would save him. He’s a

soldier with the Mission Coven, and Nash sensed that he was an old soul.

A man, a vampire that had lived several lifetimes and had seen everything there was to see in this world, was now looking at him with eyes that adored, and it was a heady feeling. Nash knew the same adoration was building in him, and every time he looked at Judah, his admiration deepened, and his desire grew.

Nash had never been the focus of anyone's attention or regard. He was a tool to be used by those close to him and by those purchasing his services. He was never just Nash. He was always the psychic, the medium, the seer, and only as good as his last performance. But he felt different with Judah. He felt seen and understood, and it was a pleasant experience and something he wanted to hold onto.

Judah helped him get the water regulated in the shower and then left him with another kiss and a look that burned. Everything in Nash wanted to ask him to stay, but he let him leave, and once he was gone and the door was closed, Nash felt like kicking himself for not being brave enough to ask.

The shower was relaxing and rejuvenating, and he probably stayed in too long, but it felt so good. His wounds had all but healed, leaving only a few scars that would fade in time. He felt better than he'd felt in years, with a strong body and a clear mind and a man at his side who seemed sincere.

When he left the bathroom, he saw the clothing Judah had found for him and laid carefully on the bed. Jeans, a pullover, socks, a comb, a toothbrush, and various other personal items. He was thorough and thoughtful, and Nash could not stop marveling at the blessing that had entered his life.

Just as that thought took form, he was struck with the ever-intruding question of what if he was wrong? What if Judah was nice and caring for a reason? What if he proved no different than every other taker in his life? Intrusive thoughts could be brutal.

The pressure of the negativity that overtook him brought him down to sit on the edge of the bed and consider all the ways that Judah and this Coven could hurt him. Just as the joy was being completely sucked out of him, there came a knock on his door, and Judah entered without waiting.

He had changed and was wearing jeans that fit him to perfection and a long-sleeved t-shirt. His hair was still wet from his shower, and he smelled fresh and wonderful. The expression he wore was tight, and the worry he was experiencing seemed to roll off him. Nash was flooded with guilt for having caused the man any distress. Judah sat down next to Nash on the edge of the bed and put his arm around him, pulling him close to his side. He also pressed a kiss to his temple, which felt warm and comforting as usual. Their connection made everything seem alright.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, his tone soft and deep, making Nash’s skin tingle with excitement. “I can feel your anxiety and sadness.” He turned Nash around to face him and looked deep into his eyes. Nash tried to hide his fear, not wanting to further upset Judah, but it was impossible. “Talk to me, sweetheart. What’s troubling you?”

Nash did not respond right away. It took a few seconds for him to say what he wanted to say without offending. “I’ve never known anyone like you, and I’m afraid to believe that you’re real and true and not like all the others who have passed through my life.” Judah gently held Nash’s chin, keeping them face to face, but Nash dropped his gaze, not able to hold Judah’s penetrating dark eyes that seemed to see everything.

“The fact that you are asking yourself these questions tells me that you feel what I am feeling. That you are trusting me as I trust you, the understanding and acceptance you are feeling has you confused, but your heart is telling you that it is okay. Don’t fight it, sweetheart. Reach out with your heart and your mind. Reach out to me and know that what I am and what I present to you is genuine and real.” Judah leaned in and punctuated his statement with a kiss, not a quick peck but rather a slow, sensuous contact that communicated volumes.

Nash leaned into the embrace and let his hands skim the warm, hard muscles of Judah's chest and abdomen. He was built strong and solid, his body a masterpiece of virility. Nash couldn't help himself. His tactile nature took over. He wanted to touch this man and feel his heart and spirit so alive and strong; it was a marvelous encounter. Judah ended the kiss slowly while pulling Nash into his arms, holding him tight and secure against his chest for a few minutes.

Nash loved the feeling of being held and the scent of this amazing man as it filled his mind. This was special and important. Everything inside of Nash was clamoring for him to open and accept what was so generously being offered.

"I love the way you smell and the way your touch eases my fear and confusion. I know that what you have shared with me is real. I do believe that Fate has had a hand in our coming together, and I thank her for the assist." The time to be coy, fear, and standoffish was over. He did not doubt this man, and all games and misgivings needed to end.

He felt Judah chuckle softly and squeeze him tighter. "Your touch is equally remarkable, my love." They sat like that for a few more minutes, and then Judah suggested they move to the dining room. He'd had breakfast delivered, and as soon as Nash entered the outer room, the smell of bacon and eggs, fresh bread, and coffee filled his senses. He hadn't eaten for a couple of days. Arthur didn't see regular meals as a necessity for anyone apart from himself.

"Sit, and I'll get your coffee." Judah paused and looked back at Nash, who was taking a seat at the dining table. "You do drink coffee?" He clarified, and Nash nodded eagerly. Judah returned with coffee, along with cream and sugar, and then took a seat across from Nash. "Go ahead and eat my love." He urged, and Nash tucked into the meal with gusto. He finished the first plate, and instantly Judah refilled it without asking, and Nash tucked into his second plate. It was nice being able to eat his fill and not being limited by the controls of others.

"When did you last eat?" Judah dropped the subtle question and then added it for clarification. "I carried you, and

I felt your ribs and your slight frame. You do not eat enough or regularly.” Nash drank some of his coffee and then looked up at Judah across the table. He was studying Nash not intrusively but with concern.

Nash decided to share he was tired of hiding from everyone. He wanted the truth with Judah. “Food is expensive.” That was his first response. “Arthur and my mother would tell me that any time I said I was hungry. I began to provide for myself when possible and accepted whatever people happened to give me. I usually ate well during a show, with people giving me gifts, which was usually food for connecting them with loved ones. During periods of no-shows, eating was slight and sporadic.”

“You were their headliner and the reason anyone showed up. Weren’t they afraid of you growing too weak and frail to perform?” Judah asked a good question, one that Nash had asked himself.

“They believed my powers were stronger when I was half starved. I saw no indication of that being correct, but they allowed themselves to believe so they didn’t feel guilty and could justify their behavior.” Nash finished his second plate, and when Judah rose to get him more, he stopped him. “Breakfast was delicious and thank you.”

“Please don’t thank me for something so basic.” Judah sat down and poured them both another cup of coffee. “You will never go hungry again; you have my promise.”

They spoke on several subjects, all related to life at the Coven and the winery. Nash wanted to just feel normal, and discussing simple things felt good. Judah received a call on his cell, and he stepped away from the table to answer, but he did not leave the room. Nash appreciated that he was not trying to hide anything from him. When he closed the call, he shared the information with Nash. It was refreshing to be kept in the loop and to be considered worthy of inclusion. Life with Arthur was nothing but darkness and secrets.

“That was Henrik Vaughn. He owns the Indigo Hotel, and he’s the Alpha of the Bay Harbor Wolf Pack.” Judah

clarified. “I assume you’re aware of the pack since you called out a couple members in the basement last night.”

“I met some pack members at the tent show. They were open and honest, although they didn’t realize I knew what they were. They didn’t hang around once Arthur showed up. They seemed uncomfortable with him nearby, but I didn’t get a good read on why.” Nash remembered the two families that had come asking for information about a loved one who had disappeared. Nash was, unfortunately, unable to contact the loved ones and the families; both of them left when Arthur took to the stage. Judah nodded, and it looked to Nash like maybe he knew why.

“The police showed up at the Indigo this morning. They questioned a few customers and staff, but no one had seen or heard of you. They did a walkthrough of the public areas and didn’t push to be allowed into private areas. According to Henrik, the police didn’t appear to be taking this overly seriously since you are an adult, and they have been getting a strange vibe from your stepfather.” Judah paused and suggested they move to the living room and get comfortable. Nash had the feeling that Judah had something more to say, and he hoped it was all good news.

They sat together on the sofa in front of the window that gave such a splendid view of the vineyard. It was a colorful and relaxing vista, and Nash wanted to just sit there and soak in the beauty.

Nash hadn’t known much beauty in his life. There was no time for such silly things when there was a dollar to be made. They rented the cheapest motels or flop houses and set up their tent in out-of-the-way locations on the edge of society. The only thing Arthur spent money on was his Vegas vacations, and everything else was bargain basement and worse.

The Chateau was amazing, and Nash could feel the imprint of the previous occupants in the air and in the stonework. The monks had left a positive, uplifting energy in the air. Their spirits were not present, but their energy remained and made the place peaceful and pleasing.

“I like your home. It’s pleasant with an atmosphere that is relaxing.” He commented, and Judah moved a little closer until their thighs were touching, and he slipped his arm across Nash’s shoulders in a move that was becoming familiar and very welcome.

“The Coven has always held an underlying sense of peace and tranquility probably from centuries ago when it functioned as a Mission,” Judah remarked on the observation.

“It’s the monks.” Nash clarified. “They’re not here, but their energy is still present, absorbed in the wood and stone. It’s a testament to your Master that the influence of the holy men has not been suppressed or tarnished. He has maintained this land as clean and honorable. Nothing dark or sinister can survive here for very long. The light and peace are too strong.” Nash let his thoughts ramble, and Judah listened. “I haven’t had to guard myself against anything here, and that’s rare.”

“What do you guard yourself against? What have you been exposed to?” Judah pulled him a little closer, and Nash felt protected and felt a freedom to speak candidly.

“Some of the places Arthur has rented for us have been awful and just crawling with sadness and despair. In the beginning, I had to just endure, but as I matured, I learned how to block the bad elements.” Nash took a deep breath and leaned against Judah, enjoying the sensation of strength that he exuded.

“I have spent years in a cocoon of my own making because the terrible things began to pile up, and they all seemed to want a piece of me.” He shuddered at the thought and remembered the struggle he went through just to stay sane and whole.

“How old were you when you learned to block the bad things?”

“Eight, and I was being terrorized by a wraith that I picked up when Arthur and my mother decided to camp out next to an old graveyard. I thought the thing was going to kill me. It wouldn’t stop and wouldn’t let go.” Nash remembered the pain and the exhaustion like it was yesterday.

“I met a woman at one of our shows who was like me. She saw what had hold of me and told me how to block things from attaching. She also showed me how to get rid of the wraith.” Nash reached up to the collar of his shirt and pulled out a silver chain, and on it was a large silver pendant bearing the markings of peace and protection. “She gave me this. It made the wraith leave. They don’t like silver. They can’t function around it, so I have never taken this off.”

“I’m glad there was someone who looked out for you, and I am sorry that you had to go through such things.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Judah was stunned by what his innocent love had to suffer from an early age; being left to deal with such horrors on his own was heartbreaking to hear. He held him close, hoping to channel a sense of safety and home. Nash leaned into him, and that was more than he expected and everything that he wanted. He was slowly looking to him for the support he needed.

“You are no longer alone, Nash. I will be your strength and your support no matter what happens. I’m an old vampire, although, like all vampires, I do not age. I understand that you’ve spent your life depending upon yourself and no one else, but know that I am here, and I will always be here for you.” Judah tried to convey his support and his understanding.

“Your life and your experiences are not unfamiliar as I have been a soldier in the Master’s army for centuries, and I have witnessed most of what life can throw at you. Lean on me, Nash. Together, we can overcome all obstacles.” Judah was not used to having to sell himself to a love interest, but he was also prepared to do whatever he had to do to win the heart of his beloved.

Nash was a complicated little man, and Judah was honored to have been given such a deep and complicated man for his very own. His vulnerabilities were clear, and he did not hide his pain as well as he thought he did. His gift had set him up for exploitation from people on both sides of the veil, and Judah would make sure that ended.

“Do you wish to continue doing the work that you do, meeting people, contacting their past loved ones, and being a conduit to the other side, or is this simply something that you had no choice in.” Judah needed to know where his heart was before making any statements or suggestions.

“I hate it.” He stated very clearly and with a force that left no room for misunderstanding. “I never want to be a part of another tent show or exhibition ever again. I don’t mind helping people, but I absolutely refuse to perform for money ever again.”

“Your life is your own, my love.” Judah declared and pulled him in for a kiss, this one on the lips and filled with promise and a pledge to support and protect. The kiss went on for several minutes, both engaging in the discovery, each lost in the sensations that burned to the core and ignited a love and desire that was unmatched and beyond compare. It was Fate’s promise fulfilled.

“I’d like for you to stay here with me. I know this is fast, and you don’t really know me, but I need you here with me. It’s the way of the paranormal. Fated couples need to stay close, especially before bonding occurs.” Judah made his pitch to have him remain at the Coven. His intent was for Nash to never leave and to ultimately make his home there with Judah.

“I’d like that, thank you.” Nash stared up at him with those expressive eyes, and again Judah found himself melting under the beauty, and his need for this little man was growing to unimaginable proportions.

“There is someone I’d like for you to meet,” Judah told him and ran his fingers down the side of Nash’s face, reveling in his softness and beauty. “He’s a forest mage, and he’s bonded to one of the wolves you met last night. His name is Sacha Ivanov. He will be stopping by to speak with you about your stepfather.”

“What about him?”

“You mentioned that the wolf shifters didn’t stay after your stepfather took the stage, but you didn’t know why,” Judah stated, and Nash nodded.

“None of the paranormal beings remained once Arthur took over, and the reason is that he’s been tainted with dark magic. It could be a possession or a spell, but either way, he’s carrying around some dark stuff that could infect others.” Judah noticed that Nash’s blue eyes kept getting bigger the more he shared. His shock was apparent, and there was fear there as well.

“When did he pick up this darkness?” Nash asked.

“I don’t know.” Judah shook his head. “Do you remember any changes in his behavior at any specific time?”

“He’s always been mean and hateful even to my mother, but she was no prize herself, so they were just two hateful people going at each other.” Nash took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and then opened them and looked at Judah.

“I don’t remember anything of significance. Like I said, he’s always been awful.” He paused for a few more seconds and then added. “He has been paranoid the last few months more than usual.”

“When Sacha gets here, I’m sure together you can figure this out. It’s important that whatever is attached to Arthur not get close to you and that no remnants of it are left here in Eastport. Magic is difficult and unpredictable, and black magic is pure, deadly, and contagious.”

“When can we bond?” Nash asked out of nowhere and caught Judah unprepared for a proper answer. He stared at Nash for too long, and Nash began to smile and then laugh, and the sound was divine. It was so lovely. Judah had never heard anything so enchanting. He held his breath and pulled Nash back in for a tight hug, needing to have his beloved close and connected.

“Soon, my love, very soon.” He breathed in the heavy scent of Nash. This man had thoroughly wormed his way into Judah’s life and heart in under a few short hours. Life without him now would be impossible and unthinkable. His soldier’s instincts were telling him to hold tight and be aware, for there were things in the air that could harm his little one. They were things that sneak about and lie and deceive.

Arthur backhanded the young man next to him for no other reason than he was within striking distance. “Get the fuck out of my way. You’re useless to me.” He yelled at the man, who didn’t seem too concerned even after being hit.

“Keep it up, man, and the authorities are going to hear about what really goes on at those tent shows.” The man said

with plenty of swagger, making it clear he was not afraid of Arthur Tate.

Arthur stopped and turned back, glaring at the man with gritted teeth. "Are you threatening me?"

"Yeah, for sure, and don't ever raise your hand to me again because if you do, you'll be pulling back a stump." He pulled a six-inch blade from his pocket and ran it through his fingers. "I'm not your brow-beaten little stepson. You can't intimidate me, so don't try. My father was bigger and meaner than you ever thought of being, and I killed him, so don't think you're special."

"You're fired, get out of here." Arthur began to sputter and point at the door of their rented house.

"That's not how this works, Arthur." He walked over and got into his space. Arthur tried to step back, but he came up against the kitchen counter. "You and I have been a team for quite some time. You just weren't aware of it, or maybe you were."

He smiled and leaned closer, with his face a mere inch away from Arthur's. "You know me, you felt me, and you let me take over. Now I've found someone even darker than you, and he has no limits." Arthur was visibly shaking, and the man whose name he now remembered, Neo, no last name, just Neo, was looking at him with a sickly smile.

"I want Nash, and you're going to get him for me." Arthur began nodding rapidly, seeking to appease whatever demon had taken Neo.

"Whatever you want." He said and continued to nod.

"Good, good." Neo then slapped him across the face, knocking Arthur to the side and nearly to the floor, but he caught himself on the counter. "Find him! You have till dawn tomorrow to bring him to me, or I will bury you where I buried my father." He laughed hard as he watched Arthur struggle to his feet and run from the farmhouse. The sound continued to boom through the house and yard as he continued to run.

“Word is that Arthur Tate is badgering the police to find his stepson and is threatening to hire outside investigators,” Koa reported to Alpha Henrik upon receiving the report from the police. The Pack had two members serving on the Eastport Police Department who kept them abreast of issues that may impact the Pack or the Coven.

“Put surveillance on Tate and monitor all of his contacts. If he makes a move not in our best interests, contact Derek, and he will take it from there.” Henrik ordered and then added. “Make sure Sam sees the report and is kept informed.”

“I sent Sam the report,” Koa stated. “Judah has Nash Rhodes in hiding at the Coven, so he’s more than safe. The problem is that we can’t find Arthur Tate. He has disappeared.”

“The police don’t know his whereabouts?” Henrik questioned.

“No, he has gone underground, so to say, which is never a good thing.”

Judah received the police report from Sam, and it thoroughly pissed him off. Sam assured him that everything was in hand and that Arthur Tate had no claim on Nash Rhodes. The guardianship ended when Nash turned eighteen.

They were searching for Arthur, who had suddenly decided to disappear and would let Judah know as soon as he was located. Judah appreciated that no one was taking this lightly.

“Stay close to your beloved and enjoy your time together, and I’ll give you a call when I know more,” Sam said and then closed the call.

If the situation called for eliminating Arthur Tate, Judah would not hesitate to take him out. The life and safety of his beloved trumped all other concerns in his mind. There was a growing urge in his mind to find the man and end him regardless of his next moves.

Arthur Tate had terrorized his beloved, abused and humiliated him for years, and for that, he has earned an ugly

death. Judah had experience and training as an assassin for the Mission Coven and would gladly put those skills to work for his beloved.

He didn't share the current report with Nash, believing that he had too much to deal with already and the Coven and Pack were well able to deal with Arthur and his investigators. Nash had mentioned bonding, and Judah had managed to divert the conversation away, and then, thankfully, Sacha arrived.

Nash stayed close to Judah even as Sacha presented no threat. Judah kept his arm around him, recognizing this beloved needed the feeling of safety and grounding their connection afforded.

Sacha wore his cape that signified his status and power within the community of Mage, and like Nash, he had a power that radiated, although Sacha's was more ethereal and air, whereas Nash was more earthy and thick. Nash's power was of this world, and Sacha's was of the next.

They sat together for a while, getting to know each other, and then Judah excused himself, wanting them to be able to talk and share among themselves. "I'm going to check on the status of your situation with Tate and the police." He used it as an excuse to leave. Nash seemed uncertain about having him leave but then relented, knowing that he was safe and Judah was not far away.

"Okay," he said, his voice shaking just a little, but he controlled it and smiled up at Judah.

"I won't be far; if you call for me, I will hear you," Judah said and bent to place a possessive kiss on those sweet, expressive lips. His beloved tasted like paradise and bliss, and Judah would never get enough. Nash held tight to him and then nodded and stepped back.

"I'll be okay," He said, "because I have you here." he touched his heart, and once again, everything in Judah melted at this little man's feet.

“And I carry you here, my love.” Judah touched his own heart. “Forever.” Judah tore himself away, leaving Nash in Sacha’s capable hands.

“I’m afraid I may be getting too dependent upon Judah, but he makes me feel whole and safe and so many other things that I just want to have him with me always. I never felt that way about anyone before. I never trusted anyone before; Judah has become my rock in just a few hours of knowing him.” Nash let his feelings flow, having tentatively read Sacha, and found him nothing but sunshine and lightness.

Sacha assured him that Judah was in his life for a reason and to never hesitate to lean on him. “He is your beloved, and he will always be at your side.” The man was pure goodness, as was the myth of the Mage. Nash had never met one before, but he never doubted they existed. Years ago, he felt the faint trail of Mage magic at a tent show in the forest. It was unmistakable with its purity and power.

Sacha was pretty much what he’d expected, with internal and external signs of power and an intensity that was fierce. “I walked the area where the tent show was set up to ascertain if any evil had seeped into the ground or surrounding area. We were also concerned that it may have been attached to someone who attended.”

“You can tell if evil is attached to someone?” Nash was impressed.

“Yes, it leaves a specific tail if it jumps from one person to another.”

“How would you know who was infected?”

“Each person has an aura that is theirs specifically, and I can read auras.” Sacha was being extremely patient with him and his questions, but he decided that maybe he needed to tone it down.

“I don’t mind you asking questions; please feel free to ask me anything.” Sacha, being the magic that he was, easily picked up on his reluctance to offend. Nash gave a quick nod and a smile.

“What do you know about my stepfather?” He would start there since he wanted to know what was enthralling him and how dangerous it was.

“The energy that has attached itself to him is dark, just as the shifters had reported. It isn’t present in the area of the tent show, so it’s a concentrated force like that of a demon. As far as I know, it’s still attached to your stepfather unless it jumped after the tent show was packed up last night.” Sacha explained everything in a manner Nash easily understood. He wasn’t familiar with magic or such powers, but he knew spirits, good and bad, and he knew the demonic.

“Has it touched me? Am I tainted by the association I had with Arthur?” Nash wanted to know because he had sensed nothing while that thing was apparently riding Arthur. “I never felt the darkness that you speak of or what the shifters described. I was with Arthur daily and never saw him as any different than his usual hateful self.”

“I don’t know what its ultimate intent was, but it took great pains in staying hidden from you,” Sacha explained. “It probably sensed your power and knew you could have dealt with it. It probably feared you.”

Nash shook his head. “I can help spirits to pass over, and I can speak to the dead if they are willing, but I have never had the power to take on a demon. I’ve sensed and recognized them in people, but I’ve never engaged. I refer them to someone more skilled. I really don’t think it feared me.”

CHAPTER SIX

Judah met with Master Emmanuel regarding the situation surrounding his beloved. He was aware of the meeting with Sacha and agreed that his influence could be valuable to young Nash. “Come and sit.” The Master directed as soon as Judah arrived. The Master’s office was large and opulent but also practical and efficient. It was on the top floor of the chateau adjacent to his quarters and afforded a fantastic view of the vineyards for miles.

“It would be best to keep your beloved here at the Coven until the issue with his stepfather is resolved. He is best protected here, and with fouled magic in the air, you don’t want to take any chances.” Master Emmanuel urged Judah to be careful and to take all available precautions.

“He’s content here and has stated that he’s never been to a place so peaceful and light. He gives credit to the holy men of old.” Judah commented and noticed Master Emmanuel raise a speculative eyebrow at his statement. “Their spirits do not remain, but their energy is here embedded in the earth and stone.” He seemed relieved that spirits were not walking his halls, and it gave Judah a chuckle.

“I give you full power and authority to deal with anyone threatening your beloved or your bond. Handle the situation as you see fit, and we are here to help you in any way that you may require.” Master Cabot made the clear statement, giving him the power to handle this without seeking further approval. He just received a very rare blanket consent.

“Thank you, sir.” Judah finished and headed back to his quarters, eager to see his beloved and appease the ever-present need to make sure he was safe and well. Nash was with Sacha, so he knew he was safe, but there remained that nagging fear that something could happen to him, that something might take him away. He’d waited too long for his beloved, and with the threats hanging over him, Judah constantly feared the worst unless he was by his side.

It's the price you pay for such a deep connection; it's the price you pay for love. He didn't deny that what he was feeling was love and a devotion that sunk to his very core. This young man was his focus, his center, his life, and his love, and no one, living or dead, would ever be allowed to fuck with that.

"Tell me about your power," Sacha asked him. "Not just the sensing of energies but how it began and what you see and how you interact with these energies."

Nash preferred talking about Sacha, but he couldn't refuse to answer, given Sacha had shared his abilities with Nash. Mage power was so much more interesting than a medium, or at least Nash thought so.

"I don't know where my ability came from. My mother didn't have it, and she never talked about any other family. My father was an unknown. I like to think maybe he was a musician because I was born in Nashville. That's where my name came from." Nash coughed, feeling suddenly uneasy.

"It's okay." Sacha soothed. "My community wanted to throw me away after my father died and my mother ran away. A lot of people have had rough roads. You are not alone."

"I know, and thank you." Nash glanced up at him for a moment and then dropped his gaze back to his hands that were knotted in his lap. "Early on, when I was very young, I could see them quite clearly, and then around seven or eight, they started to get vague. I think it was fear that was masking them since I didn't like having them around or feeling their emotions." He paused again, not wanting to get into too much detail but wanting to give him the truth.

"Once I learned how to control what got in and what didn't, then I began to see them clearly again. I wasn't as vulnerable and could block the bad things. I see whatever they want me to see, either full body or misty or just a sense of their presence. I can hear actual words, full conversations, or simple emotions, whatever they want me to hear." He finished and looked up at Sacha to see an old man standing next to where

he was seated. He stared at the man for a moment before the man smiled and began to communicate.

Sacha looked to his left, where Nash's attention was focused, and then back at Nash. "What is it? What do you see?"

"An old man, very old. He smiled at me, and he smiled at you. He's happy; he says that you have become a fine Keeper, and he's proud of the man that you are. He asks about the young foxes, are they well?" Nash kept relaying what the man was telling him.

"They are well and were returned to their families. The Bay Harbor Wolf Pack keeps watch over them." Sacha responded emotionally.

"Good, he said, good. Yes, his name is Yves, and he tells me that he loves you and he is always close by when you need him." Nash enjoyed talking to this man. He was kind and loving in a way that made even Nash feel important and cared for.

"He's gone." Nash turned his attention to Sacha, who looked both stunned and happy. "He was a full body. I could see him and hear him." Nash clarified based on what they had been discussing previously.

"That was my grandfather, Yves Ivanov. He died saving those two fox shifters and saving me." Sacha told him, and the love he had for that man was clear in his face and his words.

"He wanted you to know that he is in a good place and that he's looking out for you."

"Thank you, Nash.

Judah entered his quarters and heard Nash and Sacha finishing up, so he went ahead and entered the living room, walking over to Nash and placing a very-needed kiss on his plump lips. It had been too long since he had the taste, and he ached for so much more.

Sacha left, and now he had Nash all to himself again, and he craved their time together, which he found funny and

strange. He never craved anything in his life apart from vengeance and victory, depending upon the situation and the battle. Emotional needs were never on his radar until the minute that Nash, young, alone, and drunk, entered his life.

“You seem settled and happy.” He observed. “Was it a good visit?” He knew it was, but he wanted Nash to tell him about it. They sat together near the window while Nash explained in an animated fashion all they had discussed.

“Yves was here?” He knew of his beloved’s abilities, but to hear of his contact with Sacha’s grandfather was rather moving. He remembered the kind old man who was a fixture in the forest for many years.

“He stays close to Sacha,” Nash explained.

“Interesting,” Judah commented, thinking about the bond between Sacha and his grandfather that spanned even death.

“Sacha didn’t see any lingering effects from the essence that inhabits my stepfather. It confused me why I didn’t pick up on its presence, but he explained that the thing was probably hiding from me.” Judah put his arm around him and pulled him up close, sensing that he was feeling frustrated.

“It’s a demon, and those things have the power to hide, so don’t beat yourself up for not seeing it. It did not want you to see, and as you said, Arthur is a bastard on a good day, so demon-enhanced Arthur was not that different.” Judah brought him out of his funk and received a soft smile for his effort.

“I’m so glad to be away from him and everything to do with the tent show. I am free for the first time, and I love the feeling. I ran away so many times just to feel free for a little while.” Nash leaned into Judah’s embrace and turned his head to place a tentative kiss on the underside of Judah’s chin. It was a light touch but reverberated across his sensitive flesh, lighting delicious fires along the way.

“You have changed my life, Judah; you make me feel whole and right and normal. I crave being near you, and your presence soothes and relaxes me in a way nothing else ever

has. I'm growing very attached to you, and if you don't want that, it would probably be a good idea for you to run ... now." With that said Nash tightened his grip on Judah's shirt, where he held onto it beneath his suit jacket. "Please don't go." He added softer and with an air of desperation.

Judah picked him up and cradled him in his lap and in his arms. "I will never leave you, my love. I heard Master Cabot say to his beloved Taylor, 'You are everything that I want and all that I need,' I feel the same and understand those words now down to my very soul. You are my beloved Nash, Fate's gift to me and my destiny." Judah made sure to get his feelings and expectations across clearly.

"You want to keep me forever?" Nash asked while continuing to plant light kisses on Judah's neck and jaw.

"Forever, my love."

"I want you, Judah." That was all he needed to say, and Judah stood with Nash in his arms and carried him to the primary bedroom. He wanted his beloved in his room among his things, comfortable and satisfied.

Judah sat Nash down on the thick comforter and placed a pillow under his head before dropping a kiss on his lips. "I love it when you kiss me, Judah." He whispered as his eyes traveled Judah's face and his hands cupped the sides of his face. "I've not been kissed often or really felt attraction to anyone before. There was no time or place in my life for tenderness or love. My eyes, my hair, and my gaunt figure turned people off or often scared them away. They said I was freaky, but when you look at me, I don't feel freaky; I feel seen and ..." He trailed off, and Judah finished the sentence for him.

"Loved, you feel loved because that is what I feel for you. You can say it, sweetheart, because it is true. I love you, and in time, I hope you will love me, too." Judah saw no reason to hold back or play half-measures. This was his beloved, and he would always keep the truth between them.

He didn't respond but rather pulled Judah down for a kiss, which he dominated, and Judah let him lead. The finesse

was missing, but the eagerness and need were overflowing. There was no mistaking Nash's desire, and Judah was taking it all in. "Anything you want, baby, I'm yours." He whispered when Nash trailed frantic, desperate kisses across his jaw and threaded his fingers through Judah's hair.

Judah pulled off his jacket and tossed it aside, as well as his tie. The demand to strip was upon him. Nash was in control for the moment, and he was pulling at Judah's clothing. With Nash's previous admission that he had little experience with kissing, Judah assumed he had little experience in other areas as well. He would have to go at Nash's pace, giving what he wanted and alerting him to problems or discomfort.

Nash began unbuttoning Judah's shirt and pulling it from the waistband of his pants. Judah released his belt and unbuttoned his pants. The enthusiasm in Nash's eyes as he pulled the shirt from Judah's shoulders was impatient and hungry, and Judah was reveling in it.

Judah took hold of the hem of Nash's t-shirt and pulled it up and off, baring his slender body to Judah's gaze. He needed to eat better, and Judah was already seeing to that, but regardless, there was nothing that could take away from the sheer beauty that was his beloved. Nash was gorgeous, and he would always be gorgeous because his allure came from within.

Nash managed to get Judah's shirt off, tossed it aside, and immediately began running his hands over Judah's bare chest and arms. "Your body is amazing." He said and continued to touch him as Judah soaked in the sensations he was eliciting.

"So is yours, my love." Judah began raining kisses on Nash's chest and abdomen, and Nash started smoothing the muscles of Judah's back. Judah was beginning to recognize that Nash was a tactile lover. The kisses went lower until he was at level with the waist of Nash's jeans. Nash had his eyes closed, and his fingers were tunneling through Judah's hair and caressing his scalp. The touch of their skin was thrilling,

and Judah wanted to explore every inch of this beautiful man's body.

Judah lowered the zipper and spread the halves apart, baring Nash's hardening cock beneath. He was quivering under his touch, and his reaction was delicious. Judah loved the deep breaths and tight sighs that accompanied every kiss Judah placed on his heated flesh. "You taste so good." Judah breathed the words against Nash's cock.

He then grabbed the waist of his jeans and pulled them down and off, leaving his beloved completely naked apart from his sock, which Judah quickly disposed of. Even his feet were beautiful, long and slender and sensitive to the touch.

"I want to see you, Judah. I want to touch you." Nash moaned the words softly and ran his hands across Judah's shoulders.

"You will, my love, but it is your turn first. I want to excite you and show you the heights of euphoria that are possible." He was making some tall promises, but the feelings were leading him to believe he could do it all, and who was he to doubt Fate.

"Euphoria." He said and then smiled at Judah. "I want to taste euphoria."

"You will." Judah quickly stripped and got several appreciative looks from his beloved. It was nice to know that he liked what he saw. Nash's body was an absolute feast for his eyes. There were signs of previous abuse scars, mostly on his legs, which must have been a preferred location by his abusers. Judah ran the palm of his hand up and down his thighs and calves, feeling the puckered flesh and creases, and it all made him love this man even more. It was a life of pain and terror, and still, he came out of it as a kind and honest adult. His character was impeccable, and those bastards could not break him.

Nash felt like he was flying as all the sensations converged and blew his mind. Judah was out of this world amazing, and every touch was sending thrills that spanned his entire body. Nash felt salacious, tingling all the way to his

toes. “You make my body tremble, Judah. I’m so hard it hurts.”

“It’s the best kind of hurt, baby.” Judah was doing things with his mouth and hands, and Nash didn’t want him to ever stop. The buildup to the promised euphoria was well on the rise. Judah took him into his mouth and started to stroke and apply pressure that pushed for completion but also pulled back just when he thought he’d lose it. This was a tease and a promise, and Nash was about to burst out of his skin.

“I’m coming to Judah.” He warned just as he lost it and exploded. Judah continued to stroke him fast and hard, taking it all in, and then he felt it. It was just a prick, but it resonated along his nerves. Sweet and lovely was the feeling. Judah had tasted him. He had drank from him, and it was wonderful. “That felt so amazing.” His words did not do justice to the sensation that rocked through him, but it was all his addled brain could form.

Judah was doing things that, even after the euphoria began to settle, had Nash tightened with sensation and responding uncontrollably. His head rolled back and forth on the pillow, and his eyes closed tight.

“I want to claim you sweetheart.” Judah’s tone was deep and breathless, and Nash could feel his fingers plunging inside, stretching and loosening him and the feeling was electrifying, as was the anticipation.

Judah crawled up, looming and looking down at him like he was a delicious morsel to be devoured. Nash looked back, begging for him to claim him. “Make me yours, Judah.” Judah took his lips in a kiss that was unlike any other he’d received. It was breathtaking and burned through him, branding him with a passion that was all-consuming. Just when he thought he could not feel anymore, he plunged inside, stretching Nash and filling him full.

Nash held him, gripping his shoulders and hanging on for the ride of his life. The rapid rhythm of filling and withdrawing, hitting every nerve and setting fires along the way. Judah was panting and gritting his teeth, building

momentum and slamming inside, and then he plunged deep and stilled. The moment was explosive as he growled and came hot seed filling Nash, and then he struck.

Judah's face changed, becoming hard lines and angles, and his eye turned a flashing red as he sunk his teeth into the tender, sweet flesh of Nash's throat and drank deeply. Nash marveled at the sensations that chased through him. Colors and lights danced on the edges of his vision, and his mind was suddenly filled with all things Judah. His hopes, fears, and emotions welled up and poured over Nash, bringing them close and bonding their hearts and minds. They were as one.

Judah held Nash tightly, feeling his body quiver and buck as the bond snapped into place. The taste of his beloved was full and fresh, rejuvenated and renewed in a way no other ever had. This was the meaning of connection, the true knowing and loving of another; this was his beloved, and their lives were just beginning.

He finished and licked the wound until it was healed into a perfect scar, signifying their bond. Nash would forever be, from this moment forward, the beloved of Commander Judah Helm, and Judah would forever be the beloved of the extraordinarily gorgeous Nash Rhodes.

Judah slowly eased out of his lover's tight embrace and stretched out beside him, gathering him up to his side and peppering kisses to the side of his face and shoulder. Nash rolled to face him, and his expression was one he'd remember forever. It was peaceful, happy, and adoring. Everything in Judah melted once more.

"We are bonded, my love." He told him, and Nash's smile grew wider.

"We are one," Nash said in a whisper as if it were some amazing secret.

"Yes, we are one." Nash reached up and ran the pads of his fingers down the side of Judah's face and then smoothed his hair back from his face. He would never tire of Nash's touch, even if he lived to be a thousand.

Judah pushed Nash's long, silky hair back behind his shoulder, marveling at its softness and gloss. "Your hair is so beautiful, my love." He commented.

"Not many would agree with you," Nash remarked. "It's been called odd, scary, or freaky but never beautiful."

"In my eyes, everything about you is beautiful," Judah said and then kissed his forehead.

"In your eyes, I can live and grow and be happy." He responded with a depth of feeling that had Judah wrapping him in his arms and kissing him hard and purposefully, placing his mark once again on Fate's gift.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Arthur had eluded the wolf pack, and the coven. Neither could find him when the demon was with him and even now, the essence of the great one keeps him concealed. He missed the power of the demon and longed for his return. He would do anything to have him back. Arthur had a plan for Nash: a way that he could lure him out, and when he handed him over, the demon would leave Neo and return to him. He knew that if he didn't deliver soon, Neo would take care of it himself, and Arthur would be cut out of the process and the spoils.

He'd spent too much time taking care of that kid and his mother to let him get away now. He even killed that useless woman just to get total control over Nash. Too many months were spent getting him ready for his new reality, and Arthur would not miss out on his share.

The plan and outcome were made clear to him months ago when the demon came upon him. He would be given a life of power and influence as long as he did as he was told, but now, he had to prove himself all over again after letting Nash escape.

Apart from his ability to make money off his freaky abilities and looks, Arthur always hated that kid and his ridiculous powers. Soon, the kid would be gone, and in his place, a being that was truly deserving. Arthur had a plan, and not even Nash's new friends would save him from what was to be his true destiny and final ending.

He ducked into the shadows and made his way back to his car, parked inside an abandoned garage. He made sure to leave enough of a trail to be certain that his pursuers found it and followed. He laughed, thinking of his foolproof plan that lay ahead. He'd put together the perfect trap so he would not fail his master this time. He would not be dismissed or denied when the fruition of their efforts finally came forth.

After a nice dinner, Judah suggested they take a walk in the vineyard. "It's lovely in the evening, and the smell is extraordinary." He described in a deep breath.

“You don’t have to sell it.” Nash laughed. “You had me at; let’s take a walk.”

“Good to know my beloved is a simple soul,” Judah stated and cupped Nash’s face in his hands and bent to deliver a possessive kiss that lingered and promised so much more to come later.

“All I require is you, Judah.” He responded solemnly. “Everything else is just extra.”

“You say the sweetest things, my love.” Judah teased while also basking in the adoration of his beloved.

“All true and all about you.” Judah kissed him again, and Nash kissed him back. “I love our bond. I feel so close to you.” Nash looked into his eyes, and Judah could feel the emotion pouring off his little beloved.

Judah was freshly amazed at the depth of feeling this little human could pull from him. “We are one, my love.” He said it again. The bond was growing with every minute they spent together. Judah could feel the words Nash was saying and feel the emotion that was attached to each one. He didn’t deserve this amazing little man, but he would fight to the death anyone who tried to take Nash from him.

“I’ll get your coat.” Judah took the long black coat from the closet by the front door and helped Nash put it on. Nash adjusted it and plunged his hands into both pockets. It was then that a pained and stricken look took over his beloved’s countenance.

“What’s wrong?” he asked and took a step closer.

“It’s gone.” The look on his face became even more dire, and Judah was compelled to try and do something. His beloved should not be upset.

“What’s gone, sweetheart?”

“My book, my journal. It’s a small book. I keep it here in my pocket. He plunged his hand back into the pocket as if hoping to find it. It has affirmations in it, and I write my thoughts and feelings and just things I want to write down. It helped me center and stay grounded in bad times. I have to

have it. I can't lose it, Judah." He was growing more agitated by the minute, and his words began to ramble in several directions.

"When did you last see it?"

"I had it when I ran away and hid in the Indigo stockroom. I had it when I entered the stockroom. I read a few passages and added a few thoughts before I got totally plastered." He took a shaky breath. "It's probably in the stockroom. We have to go back and find it, please. I can't lose it."

"I'll call the Indigo and have them look for it. Maybe they already have it." He offered.

Nash gripped Judah's hands and held tight. "Please, can we go to the Indigo? I can't lose it, Judah."

"I can deny you nothing, my love," Judah spoke honestly. "We'll go to the Indigo and find your journal."

"Thank you, Judah," Nash stated as they headed out and down the hallway to the elevator.

"I sure hope we find my journal. I don't know what I'll do if I lose it. The thought of others reading my innermost thoughts is so upsetting." Nash moved closer to Judah, and Judah wrapped his arm around him.

"We'll find it, my love, don't worry." Judah was prepared to move heaven and earth to return that book to his beloved.

"The wolves have located Arthur Tate." Koa contacted Sam at the Indigo.

"Where is he?"

"We followed the trail of dark magic he was leaving through town and out to the old warehouse district by the river. He's in one of the old buildings there. I'm not sure what he's doing, but the magic marker is thick around him. Javier and I are keeping watch." Koa finished and waited for further direction.

“I’ll call Judah, and we will meet you there,” Sam stated.

“We’re about twenty yards out from the blue building with the storage containers out front.”

“We’ll meet you there, thanks.” He said and closed the call and then immediately put in a call to Judah.

Thankfully, the journal was found in the corner where Nash had been seated. Somehow, it had fallen between two crates and was unnoticed. Nash picked it up, and the relief was powerful and profound. Judah was also glad that the item that meant so much to Nash was back in his possession. Nash went through it briefly as if reacquainting himself with the item before tucking it back into his pocket.

“Thank you for bringing me here, Judah.” He walked over to Judah and wrapped him in his arms for a hug, which Judah reciprocated.

“Not a problem, sweetheart. I’m glad you found it and have it back in your care.”

“Me too.” He let the last word drag out on a heartfelt sigh. “I started this book about five years ago. I found that if I wrote things down, they didn’t stay in my head and fester. It helped me process things and to keep my focus on the future and my sense of self intact. I would be mortified if anyone ever read this little journal.” He pressed his face against Judah’s shoulder.

“Hopefully, there will come a time when you will no longer need it,” Judah commented as they stood holding one another.

“I haven’t needed it since I met you. I wouldn’t have known it was gone if I hadn’t put my coat on.” His words, once again spoken so lightly, landed directly on Judah’s heart.

The moment was suddenly disturbed by Judah’s cell phone. He pulled it from his pocket and answered immediately. “They found him, Judah,” Sam stated straight away. “Meet me in the bar.”

“I’m on my way.”

Nash looked up at him expectantly after Judah closed the call. “They found Arthur?” he asked, and Judah gave a curt nod.

“I want you to stay here at the hotel until I return.” He cupped Nash’s face in his hands and pulled him closer while tilting Nash’s face up to his. He looked down into those expressive light blue eyes and wanted to give this man the world.

“I’m going to finish this today, and you will walk free of the heaviness and ties that have held you back. You have my promise.” He punctuated that pledge with another kiss.

“Just stay safe, Judah, and come back to me,” Nash told him with a tremble in his voice.

“I’ll always come back to you, baby, always.”

Judah met Sam at the Black Dog, and they headed out to the old warehouse district. Nash was made comfortable in Sam’s office and instructed to wait and not leave the hotel. Judah recognized his angst but chalked it up to separating so soon after their bond. With a firm assurance that he would return as soon as possible, Judah left.

They found Koa and Javier crouched down with them and observed the warehouse. It was in poor condition, with part of the roof having caved in, but Koa said the magic they followed was accumulating inside the decaying structure and not moving.

Sam had put in a call to the Coven, and two guards arrived to lend an assist. The five of them split up and approached the warehouse from all sides. Judah took the side door while Sam took the front entrance. The other came in from the other side and back.

Judah saw the setup as soon as he entered. The candlelight was illuminating the central area of the old warehouse. There was debris everywhere except in the center, where Arthur stood at what appeared to be a makeshift altar. The scene was macabre, and the man looked wild and feverish.

“Fantastic.” He shouted when he saw them approaching. “You think you can protect Nash?” He laughed. “That hopeless pathetic child will destroy you just as he is about to destroy himself. That soft heart of his was always his weakest point, and I leaned on it heavily.” He laughed again and tossed a handful of what looked like glitter onto the candle flames, resulting in a surge that lasted a few seconds.

“His soft heart will be his death and will be the death of everyone stupid enough to get close to him.” The guards who came in the back rushed him and took Arthur to the ground and then picked him up and held him restrained but on his feet. The one guard grabbed Arthur by the hair and pulled his head back, forcing him to look at Judah as he approached.

Arthur started that insidious laughter once again. “You’re too late. You were too late before you ever got here. My plan is working to perfection, and he will be so pleased.” Arthur kept going, chanting and shouting his victory. “There is nothing you can do.” Arthur looked directly at Judah, who then reached out and snapped his neck, killing him on the spot.

“There’s one thing that I can do,” Judah replied flatly. The guards dropped his body to the ground.

“The man had a lot of words but not a lot to say. So much for his big plans.” Koa commented. “The magic seems to be getting weaker.”

“Did the demon leave him?” Javier asked, and Sacha, who had just entered the building, answered.

“The demon wasn’t here.” He said as he walked up to the man’s lifeless body and looked down. “It left him yesterday.” That was not what Judah wanted to hear.

“Where is it?” Javier was the first to ask, and all attention was riveted on Sacha.

“I can read it much clearer now that its original vessel is dead.” Sacha paused and focused for a few minutes before speaking. His tone was tight with panic as he turned to look at Judah.

“It entered the man who worked for him, Neo.” He paused and tilted his head as if getting more information from the universe. “He wants Nash; Nash is the prize. Neo is on the Deadlands. He waits.”

Nash sat in Sam’s office and played a few games on the phone Judah had given him and waited. He finally could not sit still any longer, so he left the office and walked through the bar and out into the lobby. The Indigo was quite a showpiece of hotel excellence. There wasn’t anything missing, and nothing was done halfway. The Pack must be very proud of this achievement, he was thinking when he took a seat and watched the many people walking back and forth. Judah had given him a couple hundred dollars before he left, just in case he needed anything. He really didn’t need anything but did buy a bottle of designer water from the machine. He could feel his beloved on the fringes of his awareness. His emotions were disciplined and tight, betraying nothing that was happening. Judah was a soldier, so he was probably an expert at control.

When his phone rang, it surprised him, and he eagerly pulled it out and saw that it was a call from a number he didn’t recognize. Curiosity forced him to answer, believing that it had to have something to do with Judah since it was Judah who gave him the phone.

“Hello.” He said and waited.

“Judah needs you, Nash.”

“Who is this?”

“He’s in the forest north of town, private land that borders the Federal Forest. It’s important. Judah may not survive.” The call cut out, and Nash began to panic, knowing that half of him resisted the truth of what just happened, and the other half feared not doing as he was told.

He left the hotel and hailed a cab that took him to the north edge of town near the forest area the caller had spoken of. The driver was aware of the area and private land and warned him that it was dangerous due to the dilapidated home and barn that was on the property. Nash thanked him, jumped from the vehicle, and took off through the woods. He tried to

connect with Judah, but their bond was cloudy, like something was blocking him from getting through.

Nash could feel the negative forces that were radiating from an area ahead of him, and he assumed it was the private land the caller had described. His instincts were telling him to turn around and run, but his worry for Judah kept him moving forward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Judah was terrified for his beloved and wished he'd never left him at the hotel. His fear of having Nash near Arthur backfired and left him vulnerable to the demon. He was racing to the place Sacha had referred to as the Deadlands. Everyone knew the area, and everyone stayed away from it because of the powerful spiritual energy that existed there. It was negative and always hungry; his poor little beloved would be overwhelmed by the onslaught of energy focused on him.

“Don't worry, Judah, we will get there. This thing is cocky. It won't do anything to Nash until you are there. It wants to torture you.” Sam was making sense, but all Judah could feel was panic and fear, both his and Nash's. He reached out, but the beast was clouding their connection. He couldn't contact Nash, but he could feel his upset and his confusion.

When he called the hotel, Ari, a coven member who worked the front desk, told him that Nash had left the hotel. His heart sank, and his mind exploded, and all he could think of was getting to the north sector of the woods as fast as he could. He and Sam drove as far as they could and then took off toward the old farmstead as fast as they could. The guards and the wolves followed.

He came to an abrupt halt when he cleared the woods and entered the area of the farmhouse and barn. They were thoroughly dilapidated, and their aura was that of darkness and a craving hunger. It was ghastly and disgusting, and his fear for his beloved ratcheted up to the stratosphere.

“Nash, Nash, where are you, sweetheart?” He yelled, and Sam stood beside him, scanning the area, tuning in to the danger, the sounds, and the feel.

“There by the barn.” Sam alerted and pointed out the man walking toward them. Judah began jogging in that direction with Sam behind him, and he could feel that the wolves and the two guards were standing back, waiting, moving cautiously, and fanning out from side to side.

He didn't recognize the man, who he assumed was Neo, but he did feel the taint and filth of the thing that was possessing the man. Unlike Arthur, who must have been prepared for the possession, this man was obviously breaking down as his body was not strong enough to house the demon for very long. They all came to a stop, with their separation being about ten feet.

"Yes, as you can see, Neo here was not up to the challenge of containing a beast like me for long. Thankfully, I have your beloved, who will be the ultimate house for my powerful spirit. He will have to die, of course, just like Neo had to die, but don't fret over the man he was deserving of his end. If you dig over there by the well, you will find the remains of his father, who he killed several years ago." The thing chuckled and looked around.

"Very nice thank you for bringing so many offerings." He looked at the men following Judah and nodded, pleased at the outcome. "The spirits here will be very grateful to me, and the power they will bestow is beyond imagination. Arthur's plan worked better than I gave him credit. I suppose I should have stayed with him, but he was becoming tedious, and Neo here had a heart so dark I could not ignore it. This man was delicious, but he's now coming apart, so it is time for me to join my new vessel." Parts of Neo's face began to peel off and fall to the ground, along with pieces of his hands. The rest was only being held in place by his clothing.

Judah made a move toward Neo when Nash came from behind the barn and walked as if in a trance toward them. "You can subdue this vessel easy enough, but you will never touch me, and I will be in your sweet beloved before you know, and then what? Are you prepared to kill your own beloved?" The thing turned and looked back at Nash, who was clearly trying to fight the control that thing had on him but was not succeeding.

"Come closer." It taunted, and Nash kept walking. Judah was prepared to forfeit himself for his lover and moved closer to the rapidly deteriorating Neo. The thing kept an eye

on both him and Nash as well as gauging the distance and movement of the other men.

“You can’t hurt me, vampire. I’m just a ghost and beyond your corporeal reach.” He laughed and extended his grisly hand toward Nash.

“I’m sorry, Judah.” Nash managed to verbalize a few words and then was struck silent by the beast. Judah made another move on Neo, and he sidestepped and laughed.

“You have no power that will affect me, vampire. Give it up and watch me consume what is yours.”

“He doesn’t, but I do.” Sacha was moving forward with Javier at his side. “I call you out, demon. Leave this vessel, show yourself, show yourself.” He shouted and took his staff and began moving it side to side, cutting and electrifying the air. “Show yourself.” He sliced the air with his staff, crackling the elements and shaking the ground. The thing in Neo finally looked concerned and attempted to turn on Sacha but did not anticipate the power of this particular Mage. He tried to fight, but Sacha increased his attack, and his staff continued to crackle the air, sending bolts of energy surging through the body the beast was inhabiting.

The energies around retreated, leaving the beast on his own, and then it happened. The tainted spirit inside Neo was pulled free and made flesh. The demon was now, to his utter surprise and horror, corporeal, a solid part of this world, and at that moment, Judah struck.

He grabbed the demon, ripped out his throat, and drove his fist through his chest, which was followed by an unearthly scream. The shock and pain crippled the evil specter, never having experienced such earthly pain. “No, stop. I have the ability to fulfill all your dreams.” It begged. “I can give you a life of power supremacy. I can give you the world.” It scrambled to make a deal, but Judah needed nothing from this beast.

“All I want is for you to be dead.” With that, he beheaded the demon with his bare hands. He stood and stepped back once the life and energy associated with the thing

had dissipated. Sam handed him a handkerchief, and he wiped the remains from his hands. The thing shriveled and turned to dust.

Judah ran to where Nash had collapsed and gathered him into his arms. “Are you okay, my love?” Nash held him and buried his face in Judah’s chest. He could feel the fear rolling off him as he held him, but he also felt his relief.

“I’m sorry, Judah.” He cried. “I should never have left the hotel, but I got a call, and they said you were in trouble.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart. I was fooled, too. Arthur had set himself up as a decoy to pull me away from you, and I fell for it. I should never have left you at the hotel.” He pulled him close and kissed him repeatedly.

“Take me home, Judah. I don’t like it here.” Nash again buried his face in Judah’s chest. He scooped him up into his arms, and Sam handed him the keys to his car.

“Attend to your beloved. We will take care of the cleanup.” Sam told him.

“Thank you.” He hurried back to where they’d parked the car, eager to get his sensitive little man away from the tainted magic and the dead lands.

Nash was so thankful for this man. He didn’t know much about Fate, but he firmly believed in it now. “I love you, Judah.” He said once they were back in his quarters at the Coven. “I wish I’d told you that earlier. I felt it, but I was afraid to say it, and then everything almost ended without me ever telling you how much you mean to me and what I feel for you.” Nash’s tone was pleading.

“Nothing ended, and nothing will ever take you from me,” Judah stated firmly and proceeded to strip Nash first his t-shirt and then his boots and jeans, and finally, he stood naked and needy in front of his beloved, the greatest man he has ever known. Judah picked him up and carried him to their bedroom, placing him gently on the bed and then quickly removing his own clothes. He joined Nash on the bed and stretched out, gathering him into his arms.

“I need you, sweetheart. I need to feel you and know that you are safe and well. I love you, Nash.” It was Judah’s turn to ramble and try to say everything he wanted to say. Nash smiled and pulled him close.

“You saved me from my drunken night at the Indigo, from Arthur, and from the darkness that wanted to consume me. You’re my champion and the love of my life.” Nash sighed and giggled and ate up Judah with his eyes. This man was his world.

Judah moved over Nash and separated his legs, positioning himself between his thighs. “You ready for me, baby?” He asked, and Nash was always ready and eager for this man.

“Yes, always, please make me yours again.”

“Mine.” He said and plunged inside, spreading and stretching Nash to accommodate. The thrill and the burn sent a sweet sensation through Nash and resulted in a full-body tremble.

“You make me so happy.” He mumbled as Judah picked up speed and began to hammer inside, building a sensation that expanded and excited. Nash held tight and rode the explosive feeling, sensing his own climax was upon him. He came hard, jerking and crying out as the pleasure swamped him. Judah followed, coming hard and filling Nash with his hot essence.

“Mine.” He growled and struck, biting down in the same spot, feeding and marking his beloved once again. Nash felt the pleasure swamp him once again and marveled at the intense beauty and delight. Judah pulled back and licked the wound closed, making the area even more sensitive and stirring feelings that were deep and only for Judah.

He settled beside Nash and wrapped him in his arms. “You make me happy too, baby. I’m happier than I’ve ever been.”

EPILOGUE

Nash settled in nicely at the Coven and found he had a penchant for cooking that he never knew he had. Judah arranged for a few classes, and Nash excelled and often helped out in the kitchen. He wanted to contribute more but did not understand wine or grapes, but he did like graphic art, so he joined the marketing team after completing his courses.

Judah insisted he didn't need to work and that Judah had a robust financial portfolio enough to take care of them both for centuries to come, but Nash wanted to contribute, and Judah could not say no.

"I've been so isolated my whole life I just want to try things." He told him, and Judah supported everything he wanted to try. Watching Nash come alive with every new discovery about himself made Judah smile with love and pride. He was happier than he's ever been.

Sacha cleansed the areas that were tainted by the demon but could do nothing regarding the dead lands. That place was a dark sucking hole of desperation, and nothing would ever change that. It was simply a place to avoid.

All evidence of Arthur, the tent shows, and his hired help was scrubbed from existence, police records disappeared, and minds were wiped. The Indigo installed cameras in the stockroom and at the service entrance.

Sam met with his uncle to discuss an expansion of the Coven. "The Indigo has become a focal point for us in a way that does not actually meet our needs." He began. "We need a stronghold in town, a place we control, and a place we congregate when help is needed. It is important that we not forever lean on the wolf pack when we have issues in town." He made his proposal, and Master Emmanuel saw the value in his suggestion.

"Find a viable business and grow it." He told Sam, who already had an establishment in mind.

“I have my eye on a large nightclub downtown, four floors plus a basement garage.” Sam presented.

“Make it happen.” The Master stated.

THE END

About The Author

B.A. Stretke



B.A. Stretke is a Gay Romance and fiction author who publishes through Dreamspinner Press, LLC, and Amazon.com.

B.A Stretke began writing as a hobby. He read his first Jane Austen novel as a teen and was instantly hooked. The age-old dream of being a novelist took hold. Now long into adulthood, and a few years as an editor under his belt, B.A. is a full-time writer.

B.A. spends his days reading, engaging in sarcasm, and plotting the next storyline, often leaving little head space for

much else. He loves hiking through the Northern Michigan woods he calls home, often finding inspiration for his books. Writing and finding that perfect cup of coffee occupy the rest of his time.

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