



CINCINNATI SHIFTERS  
VOL. 6

THE  
SUSPICIOUS  
MATE

B. A. STRETKE

The Suspicious Mate  
Cincinnati Shifters Vol.6

B.A. Stretke

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# CHAPTER ONE

“So, Cincinnati it is. A new beginning and a new life, hopefully.” He told himself and pulled off the interstate. It looked like any other large Midwest city he’d driven past during his fourteen-hour drive from North Dakota. He hoped the city held the promise that his cousin Mac had described when coaxing him to come. He made it sound so tempting that Kallan finally pulled the trigger and moved from his home in Dickinson, where he was born and raised to try his luck in Cincinnati.

Mac offered to let him live with him in his downtown apartment, but Kallan valued his privacy and his own space. He appreciated the offer but made sure to secure an apartment for himself before moving. Kallan was a planner and didn’t do things off the cuff like Mac. Mac was a lovely man, and Kallan valued his cousin above all others; he was a bit of a roughneck and didn’t bother to hide it. Mac was a heavy equipment driver and worked with the city crew. It was a good job with good pay.

“I set up an interview for you tomorrow afternoon at two with the boss, Pete McPherson. He supervises most of the city projects, and he’s looking for an office assistant.” Mac told him when Kallan had called him that morning, letting him know he would be getting to town in the late evening.

“I’ll be ready, thanks,” Kallan told him; he was not certain if the city crew was his goal, but he would certainly entertain an interview. He gave Mac another call as soon as he hit the city limits to let him know he’d arrived.

“I just got here.” He said while grabbing his bag and duffle from the trunk of his car. He parked in the underground parking area and headed up to the third floor to the apartment he’d rented. He left his other things in the car and planned to see if Mac would help him bring them upstairs tomorrow. The building was clean and secure, with a garage attendant and keypad entrances. It was located just outside the center city area, not in the hustle and bustle but still close to the action.

He stuck the key in the lock and swung the door open. It was partially furnished and would be sufficient until he could furnish it properly. Walking around, he felt a comfort and familiarity with the space and decided he could call this place home. It was a new beginning, probably the first of many. At twenty-three, he probably had many new life experiences that lay ahead of him, and this was to be his first foray into life in a new city.

Kallan was born and raised in Dickinson. His family lived there, although they were not a close bunch apart from him and Mac. Mac was older than him and had always looked out for him in their small town. When Mac decided to move to Cincinnati looking for a better job, it seemed random to Kallan, and he wondered why such a town as Cincinnati. Mac told him he researched many large towns when he was considering making a move, and Cincinnati was the town that called to him.

Now that Kallan was there and feeling the vibe of the place and the people, he understood the attraction. It wasn't anything obvious, just a feeling that he would fit in. He worked in the oil fields but not as a laborer. He worked in the office doing clerical and, after two years, decided there was no future there.

He had enough in savings to see him through until he found another job, and he hoped for something more challenging than data processing. The interview with Pete McPherson sounded a lot like his job with the oil company, but he would reserve judgment.

"I'll stop by in the morning with breakfast." Mac stated, and Kallan was very grateful. "Is there anything you need tonight, anything I can do for you?" Mac was a great guy, and Kallan was glad he had him in his life.

"No, I'm going to get comfortable and get some rest; it was a long drive."

"I'll see you in the morning then."

"See you then."

Noa stood at the door and carefully vetted each person as they came before him. Ames, the other doorman/bouncer, was taking a break since his mate stopped by. They were such a cute couple, and Ames, the consummate bachelor and usual belle of the ball, was now focused and loyal to one man. He had eyes for no one else, and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for that little man of his. Several of the guys had now found their mates, but Noa did not delude himself with the hopes that he would be next.

His parents had not been a fated couple, and neither were his grandparents. No one in Noa's immediate family had found their mates, so he was certain that shifters just weren't meant to bond. The Zephyr Club made up for any hardship he might be feeling in the constant flow of available men, handsome, willing, and oh-so eager. His needs were met, and his desires were stated on a daily.

Working the door allowed him first dibs on the most desirable of patrons. He was a grizzly shifter, so he was large and dominant, just what the gorgeous little twink who frequented the club were looking for. He was in a good place he had a job he loved and a pack of his own they were a hodgepodge of individuals but a more loyal group you would never find. He had nothing to complain about, certainly not the lack of a mate. His life was exactly as he wanted it, and he was not looking for any changes, especially not the responsibility and the limiting effect of having a Fated mate.

Noa heard the myths and legends of Fated mates and their power and allure, but even witnessing the apparent regard the couples had for one another within his pack had not convinced him of their worth. He didn't believe that feelings for another could be so overwhelming and the desire to be with them and only them could ever be real.

He wasn't implying that his pack mates were lying, only that they were deluded and making the relationship what they assumed it should be. But it was none of Noa's business. His motto was live and let live if they wanted the Fated mate experience. Who was he to tell them it was a myth.

Everyone has the right to carve out their own life and to seek their own satisfaction, whether it be reality-based or not. With that said, Noa was in the mood for a little satisfaction himself. Perhaps one of the beauties he was letting inside would be up for some entertainment.

“Go ahead and take a break, Noa.” His Alpha, Cross Mercer, came up to stand beside him. “You’ve been at the door for hours. I’ll take over until Ames returns.” Cross smiled, knowing that Ames was with his mate and there was no guarantee that he would return before closing.

“He does get caught up in that little man.” Noa chuckled.

“Mates have that effect on you.” Cross spoke knowingly, but Noa did not comment, just nodded, and moved toward the bar. He scanned the area seeing several possibilities that could take care of the itch he was feeling.

He took the beer Parc handed to him and sat down with his back to the bar, and took in the room. Cross had slowly eased the strict leather aspect of the Club over the last few months in a desire to appeal to more than just the leather crowd. Seeing the packed floor and the activity filling every corner at near closing time was evidence that it was a wise decision. Club Zephyr was still known primarily as a leather club, but it was getting out that it wasn’t a deal breaker if you weren’t wearing leather.

There was still a code to get inside, and unfortunately, not everyone made the cut. The look, sex appeal, class, and, yes, beauty played a part as well and gave a person access. The look was most important in Noa’s experience. It was the first impression and was usually a good indicator as to whether the person would fit into the atmosphere of the Zephyr. Being gorgeous and discerning but also ready to party with the right partner was Noa’s opinion of a good customer.

“See anyone to your liking?” Zeke came up and took a seat next to him.

“Lots to choose from, but nothing stands out.” Noa shot him a lighthearted smile. “How about you?” Zeke was a



bit of a dark horse, always working and keeping a low profile when it came to the customer end of the business. He handled the security measures, cameras, monitors, background checks when necessary, and anything else that fell under the surveillance umbrella, so he spent his time behind closed doors. But he got plenty of action, usually in his office, which was adjacent to the surveillance room.

“I’ve been watching the one over there standing with the tall blonde. He seems shy but also expectant I can work with that.” Noa turned and looked at him and chuckled.

“You like them, shy? I never knew that I thought you like them on the fem side.”

“Oh, I do, but shy is attractive and puts me in complete control.” Noa had to agree, and the shy man was giving Zeke a lot of attention. He noticed Zeke noticing him, and he was more than a little interested.

“I think your shy man is ready for introductions.” Noa kidded.

“Yes, he is.” Zeke got up and started moving toward the skittish man, and it wasn’t long before they disappeared into the back of Zeke’s office. Well, one of them was going to have a good time, and it wasn’t Noa. He continued to observe the room, but no one caught his fancy. After an hour, he headed back to the door to relieve Cross since Ames was still occupied elsewhere.

“No luck?” Cross offered with a smile.

“Not tonight.” Noa responded good-naturedly. “I might as well man the door for all the action I’m attracting.”

“Tomorrow is another day.” Cross reminded him.

“I haven’t given up on today yet.” He joked as he looked down the line that was still present outside the door.

“Then I will wish you luck.” He said with a pat on his shoulder before turning toward the main room and motioning to Lowell, who was doing a masterful job of working the room and keeping people engaged. He used to be even better before he found his beloved. Lowell was one of the most popular in

the pack, and people used to line up just for a chance with the man, but now he had eyes for only one man, and no one else interested him. Still, there were those who gave it a try only to be shut down immediately.

With Cross, Parc, Ames, Cade, and Lowell all bonded, it left only himself, Hofer, and Zeke still active and making use of the Club favors. They might have to look at hiring other paranormals to keep the clientele happy if more of them end up bonding. Noa knew that he would never tie himself to another. What a recipe for disaster and disappointment that would be.

Just the thought of being tied down in such a way made him anxious and irritated. He enjoyed playing the field, and he planned to do it for many years to come and maybe forever. He couldn't even imagine being satisfied with one man every day of every week every month of every year for the rest of his life. Again, the thought sent a chill down his spine. He might settle down someday, but it won't be with a Fated mate because, in his mind, they don't exist.

It was a surprise when he noticed his friend Mac standing in line. Mac was human, but one of Noa's closest friends. They met at a monster truck show a year ago and have been friends ever since. Mac was just a good guy with a good heart, and Noa enjoyed his company. It was unusual for Mac to show up at Zephyr on a weekday. It was normally Saturday when he'd stop by to soak up the ambiance, as he called it.

Mac worked Tuesday through Saturday, so he rarely went out during the week and definitely not out late, but here he was in line at eleven-thirty in the evening. Noa waved him forward and let him inside, to the distinct displeasure of several patrons standing in line. "Keep it up, and none of you will get inside." Noa warned, and everyone quieted down.

"Come on in." He grabbed Mac by the shoulder and pulled him up the stairs and inside the first set of doors to the Club. "I didn't expect to see you tonight."

"I wanted to talk to you if you have some time," Mac explained.

“Go to the bar, and I’ll meet you there shortly.” He told him, and Mac nodded and headed to the bar while Noa shot off a request for a break to Lowell. It wasn’t long before Parc relieved him, and Noa went to meet Mac at the bar. He smiled when he saw Mac with his back to the room, studying his beer and passing the time with Autry, Cross’ mate. Noa slid in beside him and ordered a beer.

“What can I do for you Mac?” Noa took a long swig of his beer and waited for an answer. Mac’s phone began to buzz, and he answered the call and then laid the phone on the bar.

“Remember I told you about my cousin Kallan?” He began, and honestly, Noa could not remember them discussing a cousin. Noa shook his head and took another swig of his beer.

“He’s the one I’ve been trying to convince to move here to Cincinnati. He worked in the oil fields in North Dakota but was growing tired of that industry and was looking for something else.” Noa was starting to remember and began to nod his head.

“Yes, now I recall you said there wasn’t much in North Dakota where he lives apart from the jobs in oil, so you suggested he move here.”

“He’s here.” Mac smiled. “He arrived a few hours ago.”

“That’s great; it’s always nice to have family close by.” Noa patted him on the back and ordered another beer.

“He’s new in town, obviously, and I was wondering if you might ask him out.” That stopped Noa in his tracks, and he swung around to stare at Mac. “You haven’t been going out much lately, and I know you will like Kallan.” Noa wasn’t sure what to say, but he in no way wanted to date Mac’s cousin. Mac’s a great guy, but his cousin was from a small town in the plains and worked the oil fields, not someone Noa was even the least bit interested in.

“The day I have to start dating your baby cousin from North Dakota is the day I stop dating. I’m not going out much

because I haven't found anyone I'm interested in, not because I can't get a date. I'm not desperate enough to date your baby cousin." Noa was blunt and truthful.

"Kallan is a very sweet man and has a killer personality." Mac was trying to sell it hard, but everything he said just drove Noa's total lack of interest in the guy a little deeper.

"Not interested, Mac, I like my men small, sexy, sophisticated, and handsome as hell, and I remember you saying that you and Kallan looked a lot alike. You are not my type Mac; I love you like a brother, but I would never date you, man." Noa downed his beer.

"We looked alike when we were both younger; we look nothing alike now," Mac stated, but Noa was shaking his head.

"Not happening. I don't have time for pity dates. If Kallan is looking for action, have him go to the Underground Lounge. It's a dark club, and they don't pay attention to looks as much as the other clubs." He knew he was being an asshole, but Mac just wasn't getting the message. Mac reached over and took his phone off the bar and tucked it back into his pocket, and it was then that it dawned on Noa.

"Was Kallan listening." Mac nodded and then looked away. "Well, it's better that he hears the truth; Cincinnati is a tough town, socially speaking." Noa patted Mac on the shoulder, feeling guilty for having insulted the guy's cousin. "Why don't you bring Kallan around when I'm working, and I'll make sure you both get inside. I'm not promising anything, but maybe he'll find someone who's not too picky."

"God, you're a snob, Noa." Mac commented and ordered another beer. "You're a good friend, but I would never want to be in a relationship with you."

"Why not?"

"Because you're a snob, Noa." Autry answered for him and then continued down the bar filling orders.

"Exactly." Mac agreed, and Noa did not understand what they were talking about. He was a perfect partner and

very highly sought after. He could have any man in the place. He just wasn't interested in what was currently on display. He was hit on five times just while he sat there talking with Mac men loved him.

## CHAPTER TWO

Wow, that was a right kick in the teeth when Mac said he was going to call and for him to listen in. He thought it had something to do with the interview he had set up for the morning. Turns out it was a platform for his friend Noa to rip Kallan to shreds. Who the fuck said he wanted to date him anyway? Kallan knew he was in good shape and decent looking and had never had a problem finding his own dates? Noa could go straight to hell.

Mac was such a sweetheart that it was impossible to be mad at him, even if Kallan was trying very hard to be upset. When Noa really started in on him regarding his looks and demeanor, Mac closed the call so Kallan could only imagine the level of insults that followed.

How a lovely man like Mac could end up with someone the caliber of Noa as a friend was a mystery, but Mac was a very patient and kind man, so this Noa character probably took advantage of him. Kallan doubted Noa had any real friends apart from Mac men like Noa usually had to go it alone because no one could stand to be around them. Those were a few of the things Kallan wished he could have said to Noa if only Mac hadn't closed the call and would have handed the phone over to the guy. Kallan was half tempted to call back and ask for Noa.

After about a half-hour, his phone rang, and it was Mac. Kallan let it ring a few times before answering, not sure if he was ready to hear that it was a misunderstanding and that Noa was really a nice guy, but you had to get to know him first. Mac was a softy of the first order, and Kallan would have him no other way.

"I'm sorry about that, Kallan." He began in earnest. "Noa was having a bad day, and please don't judge him too harshly. He's not that big of an asshole in reality."

"He was a pretty big asshole, and even if he is only half that bad, he is still awful. I wouldn't go out with him if he

were the last man in Cincinnati.” Kallan pointed out, and Mac started to laugh.

“I just wanted you two to meet. I thought you’d get along, but obviously, I was wrong, really, really wrong.” Mac laughed again when Kallan barked out an incredulous “Wrong, really, what made you think that?”

“It was the way he slathered on the insults, and you followed up with gutting him. Hell, maybe you two are meant for each other.” Mac laughed again, enjoying the banter and the fact that Kallan never held a grudge, at least not where he was concerned.

“I love you, Mac. You are my favorite cousin, but please, no more attempting to set me up.” Kallan implored as nicely as possible.

“No promises, but I’ll try to resist.” Mac continued to chuckle.

“See you in the morning.” Kallan told him, and they said their goodnights.

Noa at the Zephyr Club had some rather distasteful opinions about people, and although Kallan did not know the man, he found himself silently seething at the insults and quelling hurt feelings. It was absurd that he was feeling anything at all since the man meant absolutely nothing to him.

He recalled the deep character of his voice and the way the sound skittered across Kallan’s senses, making him shiver with sensations. The sound was erotic and gave Kallan all kinds of impure thoughts until the nature of his words started to hit home. There is nothing sexy about put-downs and insults, and all sexy thoughts and feelings ended right there. Kallan pushed the obnoxious man from his mind and decided to shower and go to bed. He needed to be up early for breakfast with Mac.

Unfortunately, Kallan found that obnoxious man appearing repeatedly in his dreams throughout the night, although he was in shadow and obscured by mist. He didn’t

know what the irritating man looked like, but in the dreams, he was overbearing and rude beyond measure.

He was also attractive as hell, so the dreams were good and bad at the same time and caused him to wake repeatedly throughout the night. Kallan decided he would have to meet this man in order to put him and his rude behavior out of his mind and out of his life.

Noa was at the door preparing to close up, and the memory of his behavior toward Mac's cousin would not leave his mind. An hour before closing, he gave those still in line the message that no one else would be allowed inside and then stepped into the foyer and locked the large glass doors.

They were disappointed as usual, but Noa was glad the evening was winding down. He'd let people in over the past hour that were marginal at best, and some should not have entered at all. It was so obvious that his mind was not on the job that Cross paid him a visit in order to assess the problem. He gave him a half-assed explanation and promised to get his focus back on the job. The man on the phone was riding him so hard, and he didn't know why.

He held no responsibility for the feelings of the man on the phone. It was unfortunate that Mac had the call open when he was going on his tirade about his lack of interest, but it wasn't his fault. Again, he held no responsibility for this man, and yet he couldn't get him out of his head. He would have to find some way of apologizing, and then maybe he could put the sense of guilt and shame to rest.

Mac had left shortly after the incident and didn't seem upset, just disappointed that he couldn't make a love match with Noa and his cousin Kallan. Noa shook his head and chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

Mac was a great guy but fell far short in the looks department with a gruff demeanor and hands the size of a catcher's mitt and a body that was equal parts muscle and misuse,. He did not tick any boxes for Noa. He did solidly tick the friend box, and was a kinder and more loyal friend Noa



had never known. But with that said, if Kallan looked anything like Mac, he was not someone Noa wanted to date.

Yeah, sure, he probably had a great personality, but Noa was not interested in personalities or relationships of that nature. He didn't do long-term or deep connections when it came to meeting his physical needs. There were no boyfriends in Noa's past or present, and he didn't see any happening in his future, not for a long while. Mac wanted something from Noa that he was incapable of giving, and that was all there was to it, so why was he having such a hard time forgetting.

"I was surprised to see Mac here tonight. He usually stops by on Saturdays." Parc commented as he wiped down the bar in preparation for the Club closing. The last of the patrons were being slowly shepherded toward the door, and cleanup was about to begin.

"He wanted to set me up with his cousin, who is new to town and doesn't know anyone." Noa felt like a total heel. Parc stopped what he was doing and stared at Noa in a way that indicated he knew that Noa handled it badly.

"It didn't go well?" He asked, and Noa took a seat at the bar and glanced off to the side at nothing. He just couldn't hold Parc's gaze any longer.

"I made an ass of myself." He admitted. "Mac is okay. He's not holding it against me, but his cousin Kallan overheard some of the things I said, and I know it must have hurt him."

"His cousin was here?"

"No, Mac had him on the phone on speaker. I didn't realize it until it was too late." Noa couldn't get a grip on why he was feeling so damned bad over this. He should be able to forget it like every other faux pas he has committed.

"No offense, but social issues like this don't usually bother you. You have a sharp tongue and tend to speak your mind, and you've never considered that a problem before." Parc leaned his forearms on the bar and contemplated his next words. "Is it Mac? Are you afraid you may have damaged

your friendship by insulting his cousin?" Noa was shaking his head.

"No, Mac and I are good. He knows me and wouldn't end a friendship over this, but he probably will keep his cousin away from me. He's protective by nature, and I got the impression that Kallan means a lot to him. I wish I'd handled this differently." He could have just offered to take Kallan for coffee, and at least he may have gotten another friend out of the deal, but no, he had to be all cocky and arrogant.

"Is it repairable?"

"I can't image that it is. I said some pretty horrid things I doubt Kallan would be of a mind to forgive and forget." He noticed Parc nodding his head in agreement.

"It seems to be affecting you, so finding Kallan and apologizing, even if he doesn't accept it, will go far in allowing you to move on." He knew Parc was right, but putting himself out there like that was not an attractive prospect.

"I know that is the right thing to do, but it is not my preference." Noa gave him a crooked smile and then looked away.

"If Kallan is anything like Mac, it won't be that hard." Parc conjectured. That was a nice thought, but Noa doubted it would be easy.

Kallan was up and ready when Mac knocked on his door. "Come on in." He said and ushered Mac into the living room of his small yet adequate apartment. Mac smiled as he took a quick look around.

"Nice little place." He said and gave his cousin a one-armed hug. "It's good to see you again, Kallan."

"It's good to see you to Mac." Kallan suggested the coffee shop he noticed next door for their breakfast, and they were soon on their way.

Once seated with coffee and a small variety of donuts, Mac began again with apologies for last night. "I really thought the two of you might hit it off. You're both

independent and hard-working and easy to be around.” He rattled off things that made Noa sound less the asshole of last night and more simply misunderstood. Kallan nodded silently as he let his cousin rid himself of the guilt that he was feeling for having set Kallan up for such a painful encounter.

Then Mac made the request that had Kallan stopping and staring because it was outrageous. Kallan started shaking his head before Mac even finished his pitch. “Not going to happen, Mac. No way, no way, forget it.”

“He called me last night after he got off work, and he is really sorry, Kallan.” Mac kept pressing, always seeing the best in people and assuming that everyone had good intentions, but that was not how Kallan was seeing it. “Like I told you last night, Noa had a really bad day, and it just got the best of him. He’s not a bad guy; he just lets his mouth get away from him sometimes.” Mac paused to take a sip of his coffee and a bite of his donut. “He isn’t cruel for no reason and doesn’t deliberately hurt people. Last night was unfortunate, and I’m so sorry I had you on speaker.”

“He doesn’t need to apologize. I don’t know the man, and your apology was enough.” Kallan did not want to meet Noa face to face, and he saw no need to.

“He feels really bad and wants the chance to make it right with you.” Mac continued with his plea. Kallan kept shaking his head even though he knew Mac would win in the end; he always did because he had those puppy dog eyes that made it impossible to deny him the small favor of listening to his friend’s apology.

“Okay, but I still think the guy is an asshole, regardless of his need to apologize.” Mac was about to respond, but Kallan stopped him and continued. “I’ve met a lot of assholes working in the Dakota oil fields, so I know an asshole when I hear one, and your friend Noa is bonafide, died-in-the-wool asshole.”

Mac smiled, confident that he’d won and not at all offended by Kallan calling out the character of his friend.

“He’s a good and loyal friend.” That was all he had to say. He did not refute that Noa was an asshole.

“So how are we going to make this apology?” Kallan asked.

“You and I are going to the Club tonight. Noa is a bouncer and works the main door, so he will let us in. You don’t have to stay long, but who knows, you might like it.” Mac finished his donut and took another sip of his coffee. They talked, and Mac prepared him for his interview and, before parting, let Kallan know he would pick him up at eight and drive him to the Club.

Kallan wasn’t exactly keen on going to the Club, but he wanted to get the apology over with. “I probably won’t stay long. I hear it’s some sort of leather club, and I’m not into fetishes.”

“Don’t knock it till you tried it,” Mac said with a chuckle.

## CHAPTER THREE

Noa waited impatiently at the door, anxious for Mac and his cousin to arrive. The desire to apologize to Kallan came on him with such urgency that it confused him, but his bear seemed to understand. His bear, who usually cared very little about Noa's social life, was demanding he make an apology and ask for forgiveness regarding the voice on the phone.

He kept watching for Mac, not knowing what Kallan looked like, although he apparently looked a little like Mac. Finally, he saw him about halfway down the line but couldn't discern which of the men standing near him could be Kallan. No one looked particularly similar to Mac. The man on his right was the same coloring and about the same size; it was probably him.

With that thought, Noa began to feel justified in his rather harsh judgment of Kallan sight unseen. That guy was not Club Zephyr material nothing interesting or new there. His entire look was tired and common. Mac at least had a sparkle in his eyes that always set him apart from the common, even if his look was more corner pub. Mac's cousin was definitely nothing to write home about, but he did deserve an apology regardless.

"You've rejected a lot of people tonight." Ames, who was manning the door with him, commented. "Why so strict it's still early, and a couple of those people looked like they could have been fun."

"We have a standard to maintain." He shot back, knowing that Ames was speaking the truth. Noa was feeling particularly unpleasant tonight and was taking it out on the patrons, but he would never admit that to anyone.

"Why are you in such a mood?" Ames snapped at him and allowed the next three people inside without Noa's approval.

"Mac and his cousin Kallan are here." He indicated down the line, Ames glanced over and saw Mac. Ames

grinned and nodded.

“Time to say you’re sorry.” He teased.

“I have to for Mac, but if that’s his cousin next to him, I think my original call as to the desirability of that man was spot on.” Ames glanced over again and noticed the average-looking gentleman standing next to him.

“Average, I’d say.” He told him. “But who cares? Just say what you have to and then move on with your life.” Ames was always to the point.

“On a normal night, he would not make the cut. I’d send him on his average boring way.” Noa was acting like a child, and he knew he had to shape up before Mac and his cousin reached the head of the line. He shook himself out and cracked his knuckles while Ames looked on amused. “I’m ready.” He said, although there was a bit of a strain in his tone.

“I’ve never known you to get so worked up about anyone, especially someone so average.” Ames grinned again, enjoying Noa’s discomfort.

“I’m not worked up. I just don’t like apologies, especially when I was not wrong; I was just insulting.” Ames barked a laugh.

“Just insulting ... well, that’s nothing to worry about then. Just insulting ... nothing serious.” Ames continued to laugh, and Noa tried to ignore him.

“That’s him by the door, the blonde with the hard brown eyes. He’s not as foreboding as he appears.” Mac pointed out Noa to Kallan, and he found himself impressed despite his best efforts not to be. Noa was an extremely handsome man, and unfortunately, he seemed to know it. With the muscles, the height, the jawline, and the perfect hair and face, Noa was a flawless specimen of manliness.

He also clearly expected the same perfection in the men he chose to date or rather went home with since Mac told him that Noa rarely dated and took a hard line against relationships. It was probably best that he be a one-and-done kind of guy, for perfection was a difficult standard to maintain

and could take a damaging toll on a person's mental health. Any boyfriend would probably find themselves lacking sooner rather than later.

Kallan watched as Noa turned away two people that, in Kallan's opinion, were handsome and sharply dressed but apparently didn't measure up to the Noa Benson meter of attractiveness. "What was wrong with those guys?" He asked Mac, and they watched as the two left the line and headed down the street, looking a bit miffed by the snub.

"Not sure." He said after scrutinizing the couple for a few seconds. "Maybe they're a couple, and he's supposed to only let in single people."

"That's a bit of a stretch." Kallan shook his head and realized that the longer he stood in line watching Noa work, the less he liked the guy. "If we weren't invited by your friend and just showed up here hoping to get in, I doubt very much either of us would make the cut." Mac smiled that endearing smirk and nodded his agreement.

"No way I'd get in, but you might." Mac laughed.

"I've seen the people he's turned away, and I would not get passed the doors any easier than you." Kallan crossed his arms on his chest and glanced away from the doors, thoroughly disgusted by the behavior on display.

"I'm not asking you to marry him," Mac said and caused Kallan to chuckle. "I just would like you two to get along ... a little ... enough that maybe we could all hang out from time to time. That's all I'm asking."

"Okay." Kallan relented. "I'm just still sore from the insults, and it might take me a day or two to get over it, but I will. I can't promise that I'll ever want to hang with that asshole, but I'll try ... for you, I'll try." That brought another smile to Mac's face, and he patted Kallan's back vigorously.

"You'll come to like him. He's not as bad as he appears." Kallan didn't comment simply nodded as he was not convinced but didn't want to fight with Mac. As they drew closer to the head of the line, Kallan noticed Noa watching

Mac and checking out the people around him, probably wondering which dolt was him. Just to make it a little more difficult on the man, Kallan stepped back from Mac, putting just a little distance between them.

He saw Noa zero in on the gentleman standing in front of him, and the look on Noa's face was contemptuous at best. This guy was irredeemable. He didn't care how hard Mac tried to soften Noa's horrid attitude. It wasn't going to fly. Mac stepped up to Noa, who, in his favor, greeted him with a smile and a hug.

"Good to see you, man." He said and patted Mac's shoulder. He then glanced around, quickly settling his gaze on the man standing in front of Kallan.

Noa was feeling pretty confident that his planned apology would go off without issue. Kallan looked like someone who was not unfamiliar with unkind assessments, to put it gently. An apology was probably unusual for him, but to be honest, Noa did regret his behavior neither Mac nor Kallan deserved his cruel words. He reached out his hand, eager to get the apology over with.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Kallan." Noa told him but was left with his hand hanging in space as the man simply stared at him and stepped back. Noa thought for a moment that Kallan was going to make a scene, but then Mac started to laugh.

"That's not Kallan." He said and reached back and grabbed someone's arm, and pulled them forward. "You were nearly lost in the crowd. Hope you weren't trying to slip away." He said to the man under his breath, but Noa heard him. He then turned and looked at Noa. "This is Kallan."

Noa was gobsmacked. He hadn't noticed this man in the crowd, but here he stood, and Noa was, for the first time in his life, at a loss for words. Kallan was the most stunningly beautiful man Noa had ever laid eyes upon. He'd seen and had a lot of handsome men, but they all paled into obscurity in comparison to this outrageously gorgeous individual. Kallan



was nothing like the man he'd been expecting. He didn't know what to say. A mere apology suddenly seemed so inadequate.

Thankfully Ames recognized his dismay and suggested they all go inside. Noa held the door as Mac and Kallan walked in, and the moment Kallan walked past him, the air changed. It was electrified, and his awareness sharpened. Noa's bear surged to the surface, and in that moment, Kallan turned and looked at him square in the eyes.

Noa knew his eyes were betraying the presence of his beast, but he could not push it down fast enough. He saw surprise in Kallan's brilliant steel blue eyes, but the human did not react. He saw the wildness in their depths, but he didn't look away.

Noa's flashing animalistic focus did not scare him,. Rather there was interest there, and Noa smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Kallan." He said and reached out his hand. Kallan shifted his gaze from Noa's eyes to his hand, and after a few seconds of hesitation, he took the offered hand and nodded but did not speak. The moment Noa made physical contact with Kallan, his awareness spiked, and everything in him became laser-focused on this one man.

"Why don't you take Kallan and get a table while I get us all drinks," Noa spoke to Mac while never taking his eyes off Kallan. He slowly released Kallan's hand and watched them move out into the main room and take a seat at a table along the front wall. It was a good location, quieter and illuminated by a wall sconce. Noa leaned over the bar, and Parc was there with a sly smile.

"That's Kallan?" He asked while getting the drinks poured.

"That's Kallan." Noa responded, a little shell shocked by the way things were turning out.

"Not the troll you expected, then?" Parc teased and handed him the drinks.

"He's breathtaking," Noa whispered while shaking his head. "I really fucked this one up, Parc." He dropped his gaze

to the drinks on the tray, unable to maintain Parc's expression of sympathy.

“Apologize as planned and see where it gets you.” Noa nodded curtly and then headed to the table. As he approached, he noticed Mac and his cousin were deep in conversation, and Noa had a hunch they were discussing him, and it was probably not complimentary.

Noa couldn't stop staring at Kallan. He was beyond good looking. He actually was stunning with a face that was perfect square jaw, pert nose, lips lush and red, and his hair black as the night. It was straight and swept across his forehead, just touching his perfectly shaped brows of the same color.

He stood about five foot eight inches and had the slim, muscled body of a fashion model. Noa felt his heart beating faster the closer he got to their table. He managed to tear his eyes from Kallan and looked over at Mac, who was his usual relaxed, fun-loving self.

Mac had no idea the panic that was encompassing Noa. He needed to fix this and get on Kallan's good side, and why was his bear going fucking nuts all of a sudden. He pushed him down hard, not wanting to accidentally expose his inner self, at least not yet.

Kallan looked at him, and his eyes were absolutely mesmerizing. Noa wanted to stare into them for hours. He set the drinks down and took a seat between them at the small round table. He had Mac to his left and Kallan to his right. There were a few warm-up comments about business and weather, and then Noa got down to the purpose of the visit. He needed to get this out and present himself as a better man to Mac's baby cousin.

“I'm embarrassed and ashamed of my behavior during our first contact. I didn't know you were on the phone and could hear me, but that is no justification for the hurtful and unwarranted things that I said. I won't make excuses, for there are none that are adequate. I only ask that you try to look past the man of that moment and give me a chance to show you

that I am much better than that.” His mind was swirling with what to say and how to say it, but nothing seemed right, and even as he spoke, he could feel the words were not right.

“I’m sorry, truly sorry, and would like a second chance to make a first impression.” He said the basics and hoped Kallan was feeling charitable enough to extend a modicum of forgiveness. He took a sip of his drink and then sat there silently and waited.

“You didn’t know I was listening, so that is in your favor. I would have a hard time dismissing the comments if I thought you knew that I was listening. Such conduct would not be forgivable in my mind.” His words were tearing Noa apart. He wanted to hear understanding but was only hearing categorization of his actions, which could very well lead to no allowance for his behavior. Kallan was so handsome, and he smelled like hot chocolate, rich and smooth. Noa wanted so desperately to touch him again.

“I say we put it behind us and accept that you and I will never be particularly attracted to one another, but we can still get along.” Kallan ended with a smile and reached his hand out to Noa. The first part of his sentence was perfect, but the ending left Noa oddly upset, and his bear was once again attempting to take over. This had never happened to him before. His bear was rarely interested in anything other than a good fight.

Noa looked at Kallan’s hand and took it in his holding it and experiencing again the lovely vibration the touch elicited. He wanted Kallan more than he’d ever wanted anyone, but the roadblocks were many. “Let us put the unpleasantness behind us.” He agreed but did not repeat the other part of that sentence.

Mac laughed and slapped the table. “I knew you two would get along eventually.” He abruptly pushed away from the table and stood. “I’ll get us another drink.” He was gone, and Noa still had not released Kallan’s hand. He noticed Kallan staring at their hands, but he was not pulling away, so that was something, at least. Then the moment came when he

had to let go or risk looking strange, but it was a slow sliding release because he so badly wanted to stay connected.

“I apologize for Mac. I know he probably browbeat you into this, and although I appreciate your words, you don’t have to be friends with me.” Noa was suddenly shocked out of his belief that things were going well. He began to subtly panic as Kallan continued. “I heard you on the phone, and I know that you and I are lightyears away from each other in terms of interests and desires. I’m not a go-getter or pretty boy or out for a good time. I like to read books, watch tv, and enjoy doing basic renovations. I drink very rarely, and honestly, I will probably never return to this establishment. It’s not who I am.”

Noa didn’t know what to say, which had been his plight this entire evening. Noa stared into those dark blue eyes knowing that his next words needed to be perfect. “I’d like to be your friend Kallan. If you’re anything like your cousin Mac, your friendship is solid and valuable. We may be different in some ways, but that does not negate the possibility of friendship.” He watched Kallan consider what he’d said quietly, taking in every aspect of the man who sat before him.

“I don’t see a lot of hope for us, but if Mac likes you, then you can’t be all bad.” Kallan laughed and glanced around the room while taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly.

“I’m not all bad.” Noa stated as Kallan smiled gently, and doubt clouded his expression. Noa breathed in the sweet chocolate scent that filled the air between them. Nothing had ever smelled so good. Mac returned at that moment, handed out the drinks, and sat down.

“I’m so glad we worked that out. I hated that the two of my favorite people weren’t getting along, and it was all my fault leaving the call open.” Mac shook his head and took a sip of his drink.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Both Noa and Kallan said at the same time.

“Okay, enough, no more talk of my abhorrent behavior. Kallan agreed to let it go and be friends, so we start fresh from

this point.” Noa pushed the positives that were gleaned from the meeting and ignored the less-than-positive.

“Friends.” Mac toasted, and they all joined in.

“How was your interview?” Noa asked, wanting to look interested in Kallan, which he most certainly was. “Mac said you were scheduled to meet with someone from his company.”

“It went well enough, but I don’t think I’m what Pete McPherson is looking for,” Kallan responded in a friendly tone that Noa really liked.

“He wants a personal assistant, and I’m not prepared to be at his beck and call all hours of the day and night.” Kallan took a short sip of his drink. “I appreciate you setting it up for me, Mac, but that guy is extremely high maintenance.” Mac nodded his understanding.

“What sort of job are you looking for? Mac said you worked in the oil fields.” Noa had connections around town and thought he might be able to help him out.

“Not exactly in the fields, but I worked data processing and operated as an assistant to the field managers when called upon to do so. The oil business was all that was available in our small town.” Kallan spoke quietly, giving Noa the impression he didn’t like talking about himself.

“There’s plenty of data processing available, but maybe you should look into something else, something more in line with your desires.” Noa wanted Kallan to tell him more and tell him his desires, but Kallan just smiled softly. “What is your dream job?” He decided to be blunt and see if he got an answer.

He got an answer, but it was from Mac. “Kallan’s dream for as long as I can remember is to have his own antique/vintage/architectural salvage business. He has storage units back home packed full of the stuff but as yet has not taken the plunge into actually starting a business.” Kallan gave Mac the side eye, which he casually ignored.

“I’m sure he will when he feels the time is right. Nothing beats planning when starting a business.” Noa felt compelled to support Kallan and was happily greeted with a genuine smile for his effort. “Cincinnati would be a good place to start your business when you’re ready. There are a few antique shops around, but there’s room for more, especially if you include salvage art pieces.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Kallan had entered the Club with the full intention of accepting Noa's apology but then making it clear there was no room for any further relationship between them. Now somehow, he'd agreed to be friends and accept this man into his life. Noa was charming and seemed genuine, but Kallan would not open himself up to an obvious operator like Noa Bentley.

He would admit that the guy was extremely attractive, and given different circumstances, Kallan wouldn't mind getting to know him better. But what he saw so far did not endear him to the large man. Noa was huge over six-five for sure, and maybe more it was hard to tell. There was also something about his eyes that was mesmerizing, like there was something beneath it all fighting to get out. It was hard to describe but added a wild excitement to his good looks.

His interest in Kallan's job search and goals seemed genuine and also thoughtful. He didn't try to tell him what he needed but rather supported the things he said, or, rather Mac said. Mac had a habit of running off at the mouth when silence would have been Kallan's preference, but he did it with the best of intentions, so it was impossible to be mad at the man.

Kallan found himself glancing down to the tabletop at Noa's hand, large, muscled, and capable. He held that hand twice tonight, and he desperately wanted to hold it again. The touch was calling to him, and he had to concentrate on resisting the urge. Noa mentioned antique shops in the Cincinnati area, and although Kallan knew what was coming next from Mac and he was too slow to stop him.

"Why don't you let Noa show you around and take you to a few of the shops to give you a chance to evaluate the competition?" Mac made the suggestion effortlessly as Kallan sat there and started to squirm.

"I think Noa made himself clear that hanging out with your baby cousin was not high on his things to do." Kallan tried to pass it off with a laugh, but Noa was not amused.

“I’d love to show you around Kallan. I’m off tomorrow. How about I pick you up early, say nine, and we start with breakfast, my treat for all the trouble I’ve caused.” Noa steamed ahead and set up a date. Kallan was nodding and agreeing before he realized what he was doing. “All I need is your address and phone number.”

Kallan handed Noa his phone, and within seconds, they had each other’s numbers, and Mac was rattling off Kallan’s address which Noa was putting into this phone. Kallan was not sure what was happening, but it seemed that getting rid of Noa was not going to be as easy as he thought.

“This isn’t necessary, Noa. You owe me nothing.” Kallan tried a last-ditch effort, but Noa and Mac were both shaking their heads.

“I want to do it.” Noa was emphatic. “I’ll pick you up at nine o’clock sharp, so be ready. Now I have to get back to work. You guys enjoy yourselves, and I am so glad to have met you properly, Kallan.” Noa stood and reached out his hand, and Kallan eagerly took it. Holding it, he experienced again the same sense of calm and a feeling of being connected in some weird way to this man. He liked the man’s touch and the warmth that went with it. Maybe he was right when he told him that he wasn’t all bad.

“I knew you two would eventually get along.” Mac began taking his bows, but Kallan kept shaking his head.

“You railroaded him into this, and if it turns out to be the worse date in the history of dating, I will make you pay in many ways for a very long time, and I will bring it up constantly. Just remember I warned you.” Kallan riveted him with a steely glare as they both finished their drinks and stood up. “I’m going to head out but feel free to stay. I can catch a ride share or a cab.” Kallan told him, but Mac was ready to go as well.

“No, I can drive you. I’m heading out too, unlike you two; I have to work in the morning.” He chuckled when Kallan gave him a playful punch in the upper arm. “You’re



going to have fun, and you're going to like him, so relax and enjoy."

"Yeah, sure, just remember my threat." Kallan told him as they made their way out the exit door, which was just a couple feet left of the main doors. He couldn't help himself and looked back over his shoulder at Noa and found the man staring at him. When their eyes met, Noa smiled, and Kallan returned the gesture. "Maybe I will grow to like him." He commented as he turned and left with Mac.

"How did it go?" Ames asked once Noa was back to work. Noa smiled and nodded and didn't know quite how to describe the wonderfully light feeling he was experiencing. He had things in hand, and they had a date scheduled, and Kallan wasn't dismissing him outright, so life was very good at the moment.

"It went quite well, and I'm rather surprised at my reaction, to be honest." Noa let two men inside and rejected the third for not putting in any effort.

"Why's that?" Ames continued the conversation.

"I've never felt so anxious around anyone before, and anxious isn't even the right word. It was almost an urgency that I fix the rift between us and get the relationship back to acceptable." Noa struggled with an explanation.

"But it was never acceptable. You went straight from hello to being an asshole in seconds flat." Ames laughed and let another person inside but then put up the velvet rope, and he and Noa leaned back. Lowell had informed them the place was filled and no one else would be entering until some left.

"That's true, so let me say it went from him having zero interest in me to having a modicum of interest." Noa chuckled and crossed his arm on his chest. "He's twisting me up, Ames, in a way that has me questioning my motives." Ames moved to lean his shoulder against the pillar and gave Noa his complete attention.

"I have never cared for anything messy or difficult when it comes to a relationship; I've always kept them shallow

and basic. I make no promises, and I expect no drama, just limited time enjoyment for both parties, and then move on.” Noa paused for a moment to think and then continued.

“Kallan is different. I felt it the moment our eyes met, and when we touched, it was captivating. The thought of him not liking me or being upset with me began to boil my blood, and I needed to settle things and get on a good footing. I needed him to like me, and I have never needed anyone in all my one-hundred and eighty years. I have needed no one.” Noa felt overwhelmed and blessed in equal measure where Kallan was concerned.

Ames stared at him for a few seconds and then started asking a few pointed questions. “What does he smell like?”

“Rich, dark hot chocolate, my favorite smell in the world.” Noa closed his eyes and licked his lips.

“Did your bear like him?” Ames was looking strange, like he knew what was happening but was leading Noa to the truth rather than just flat-out telling him.

“I could hardly keep him under control. He persisted in pushing forward, and twice I know he showed up in my eyes and expression before I could subdue him, but Kallan didn’t comment.” Noa looked at Ames speculatively. “Why all these questions?”

“Do you feel like you’re about to crawl out of your skin, and do you have the urge to go after Kallan just to be near him again?” Ames stepped up his to rapid fire. Noa didn’t verbally respond but did nod his head because he felt all of those things.

“You know what it means, Noa. Just think about it.” Ames stated and then fell silent and waited.

“No, no, it can’t be that. I don’t believe in that. It’s not real.” Noa was vigorously shaking his head. “No such thing. This is just basic carnal interest, and once I bed him, I’ll probably never think of him again.”

“If you bed him be careful. You may not believe, but your bear is fully on board, and if you don’t control him, he

will bond with Kallan at the first opportunity.” Ames was talking crazy because there was no such thing as mates, and his bear was just out of sorts tonight.

“He’s not my mate,” Noa stated emphatically. “Mates don’t exist where I come from. Kallan is just a good-looking guy, and I intend to enjoy that good-looking guy.” Even as he spoke, he felt a sense of disloyalty, but he wasn’t being disloyal to anyone. It didn’t make sense what he was feeling. It just wasn’t making any sense.

“No one in your family ever met their mate?” Ames seemed incredulous. Noa shook his head. “So, you don’t believe that Liam is my Fated mate?”

“I believe that you and Liam have an intense connection, but Fated is not in my vocabulary.” Noa was careful with his words, not wanting to offend his good friend.

“I’m going to tell you something, and I want you to listen and remember.” Ames began, and Noa gave him his undivided attention. “Kallan is your Fated mate. Fight it all you want, but your bear will not allow you to walk away under any circumstances. As the days go by, the need to be near him to take care of him and protect him will grow to a level that will blow your mind.” Noa started shaking his head, but Ames did not slow down.

“Nothing settles your mind or calms your heart. Accept Kallan, and you will do anything, be anything, go anywhere to make him happy. His happiness will become like a beautiful drug. Your life is no longer just your own Noa. You have a mate, and Fate will not be denied.” Ames paused, and Noa broke in.

“That sounds absolutely horrible.”

“The feelings you get, the perfection that enters your life is worth it all, and remember your mate feels the same things as you. Even human mates succumb to the pull and cannot stay away from their shifter mates. It’s a love that is honest, pure, and forever.” Ames finished and leaned back against the wall allowing Noa to process the information. He then slowly turned his head and caught Noa’s gaze once again,

and added. “How hard did you work to make sure tonight wasn’t simply goodbye?”

“I did everything in my power to keep him talking and to arrange another date. I didn’t want to part with him without committing to another time to get together. As soon as he agreed, I excused myself to go back to work because I was afraid if I stayed too long, he might try to back out.” Noa answered honestly and included his intent. “The thought of goodbye filled me with panic.”

“He’s your mate Noa.” Noa didn’t respond as they were told by Lowell to let more patrons inside, and they were suddenly back to work sorting the interesting from the not.

Kallan and Mac made their way to the sidewalk and started down the block to where Mac had parked. “He was a lot nicer and easier to get along with than I had expected,” Kallan commented as they walked.

“He can pop off sometimes, but overall, he’s a decent fellow. Thanks for agreeing to let him show you around town tomorrow. I think he wants to make up for his bad beginning.” Mac added for further explanation. “It sure would be nice if you two got together. Having my two closest friends in a relationship would be great.” He smiled wistfully.

Kallan barked a laugh and stuck his hands into his jacket pockets. “Don’t start sending out wedding invitations just yet. There is plenty of time for this relationship, as you call it, to go speeding downhill.” Just then, a group of approximately four guys came up on them from behind, rushing passed, and one seemed to deliberately slam into Kallan’s right side. He would have fallen if Mac hadn’t caught him.

The guy stopped and turned, eyeing Kallan darkly from head to toe before he ran off to catch up with the others who were already well down the block. Kallan regained his footing and watched the back of the man as he sprinted away. “That guy gave me the fucking creeps.”

“Yeah, it would be wise to stay away from that bunch and others like them. They’re some sort of gang wannabees

who are trying to form a presence on this side of town.” Mac looked concerned and held Kallan back for a few seconds before they continued on their way to the parking lot. “The police are cracking down on them, from what I read. They’ve stepped up patrols, but it takes time.”

“Somehow, that does not fill me with confidence. If this police force is anything like the guys back home, then any real change is unlikely.” Kallan remarked.

“I’ve heard good things about the force here, so hopefully they can get the job done, but in the meantime, watch out for the grays as they are called.”

“Why are they called the grays?”

“They tend to wear gray skull caps, and the name formed from there. I don’t know if they refer to themselves as such, but society calls them the grays.”

“You’ve done a lot of research on this bunch?” Kallan noted.

“I like to know who I’m dealing with and who to avoid. Luckily they tend to keep to the dark alleys and back lots. It’s unusual for them to be on a main street like this.”

“I’ll watch out, and I will definitely stay out of dark alleys.” Kallan grinned and patted his cousin on the shoulder. Thankfully they parked in a lot that was well-lit and public. Mac dropped him out front of his apartment building and asked him to call tomorrow if he wanted to meet for dinner.

“You will probably have dinner with Noa, but in the event that you don’t, give me a call.” Kallan shook his head at Mac’s silly smirk and agreed to call. He hurried up to his apartment on the third floor, feeling the need to get off the street now that he was aware of the criminal element working the streets.

The guy who bumped into him left him tense and ill at ease. His scent was harsh, like a wet dog, and his eyes were calculating. Noa had a wildness in his gaze that left Kallan feeling excited, but the look in the gray’s eyes was different. It

was felt evil and cruel. Kallan stifled a shiver that went up his spine at the memory of that stare.

He was quickly in his apartment with the door locked and then closed all his curtains. He took a deep breath and slipped off his jacket, still feeling a little tense but was beginning to relax now that he was safe in his own space. He made himself a cup of coffee and sat on his sofa with his tablet, planning to check out the job situation a little further and submit some applications.

After a few minutes of searching, Kallan gave up because his thoughts were filled with constant visions of Noa, along with nagging concerns over the creepy gang Mac had told him about. That guy who ran into him left an impression a disturbing, unnerving impression. His eyes had been so hateful, and the color rather gross. They were small, yellow eyes that were shot through with streaks of red. He sincerely hoped he never came in contact with that guy or that group again.

Mac was a fairly big guy and could handle himself in most situations, and even he stepped back from that group. That was enough to put Kallan on edge at the time, and still, he felt a shadow of dread at having met that man's yellow gaze. He closed his tablet and shifted his mind back to Noa, remembering when the surprise of the night came, and he earnestly pushed for a future date.

Noa was very good looking, but the problem was that he knew it and used it to get what he wanted. Kallan was familiar with the type, but still, he fell for this guy's line and was now obliged to go out with him tomorrow. Still, he promised to show him around the local antique shops and indicated that there was also an architectural salvage company in the area.

He seemed understanding and supportive of Kallan's goals, although that might have been all for show, but he sounded sincere at the time. He'd find out tomorrow. It was getting late, so Kallan turned out the lights and headed to his bedroom.

He had rented the apartment partially furnished, and that would do for now, but he hoped to soon ship some of his things from home to help make the place really his own. Maybe he would find something tomorrow that would help with his apartment design. Passing the large picture window in the living room, he pulled back the side of the curtain and looked out onto the dark street below.

To his shock, he saw a man on the street who appeared to be looking up at him, and he looked like the creep who had bumped into him earlier. Shocked and more than a little scared, he dropped the curtain and flattened his back against the wall, suddenly feeling too scared to move. Kallan hyperventilated for a few seconds before reaching over and killing the light.

It couldn't be him. He it was crazy, he told himself, and finally, he gathered the courage to take another peak but only moved the curtain by a minuscule amount, just enough for one eye to see down to the street. There was no one there. The street was vacant.

With a sigh of relief, he dropped the curtain but remained standing with his back to the wall. The room was dark, and the curtains were all drawn, but still, he feared that he could be seen, so he made his way along the wall to the door needing to make sure it was locked and the deadbolt was in place.

Still not feeling completely secure, he looked around and found a straight-back wooden chair in the kitchen and jammed it under the doorknob. He stood there for a few minutes and then pulled the chair from the living room out and pushed it up against the door next to the wooden chair. He surveyed his work and decided there wasn't much else he could do.

Once in his bedroom, he locked the door and pulled the heavy dresser over in front of it. He was thoroughly spooked, and after securing both doors, he sat down on the bed in the darkened room and began to consider returning home to North Dakota. He wasn't certain that the man was who he thought he was, but the fear in his gut would not let him go. His nerves

were strung so tight that he suddenly leaped from the bed when his phone began to ring. Out of breath and with his heart racing, he answered without checking who was calling.

“Hello.” He panted.

“Are you okay?” The voice was very familiar and so welcome. He met the guy once, and suddenly Noa’s voice was all Kallan needed to start to calm and center himself. Noa was one of a kind, for sure. He was a man who could thoroughly piss you off one moment and be your shining knight in the next.

“Yes, I’m okay.” He said, but the halting nature of his words left his statement rather suspect.

“You’re scared; what’s scaring you? Are you in danger?” Noa was talking fast and sounded genuinely concerned. “I’m coming over.”

“No, no, I’m fine, really.” Kallan had to get hold of himself, or he may end up looking ridiculous. “I thought I heard something, but it was nothing.” He lied, hoping to put an end to the questioning.

“Whatever it was, it scared you. I can hear it in your voice. I’ve only known you a short while, but you don’t strike me as reactive or irrational.” Noa complimented him, and he liked it. The calm that he felt the moment Noa spoke continued to grow as the conversation continued. “Tell me what you heard.”

Kallan paused, considering what to say without sounding reactive and irrational, the two things Noa said he wasn’t. “I thought someone followed me home, but there is no one there now. I only saw him for a second, and I must have been mistaken. It startled me, but now I’m calmer and rational thought is returning.” He forced a laugh.

“Who was it?” Noa wasn’t letting go.

“I don’t know, probably no one. I’m tired, and it was most likely just a play of light and shadow. I’m fine.” Kallan tried to explain it away, and then a thought struck him.



“Why did you call?” Kallan wasn’t accusing or angry, just curious.

“I wanted to make sure we were still on for morning, and I wanted to hear your voice again.” Noa chuckled.

“I’m still on for morning if you are.”

“Definitely, and since there are quite a few shops, I want you to see, we’ll hit the top five first and then decide on the others over lunch.” Noa had an air of uncertainty about him, as if he worried Kallan would back out. Kallan found it rather endearing for such a confident man.

“Sound good to me. I’ll leave it in your hands, and I look forward to seeing some of the town.” Kallan was finding his spirits rising and was experiencing a feeling of peace which brought a flood of relief.

“I’ll see you at nine then.” Noa reiterated.

“I’ll see you then.”

“If you have any problems tonight or anything concerning arises, call me.” Noa made the offer and punctuated it with a seriousness that Kallan could feel. “Do you want me to come over and check the area?”

“No, I’m fine, really.” Kallan forced a certainty into his tone. “I’ll see you in the morning.” With that, he closed the call and felt a wave of sadness at losing his connection to Noa. It was stupid, but as soon as he hung up, a slight shadow of fear returned, and he moved over to his bedroom window and looked out carefully to keep himself concealed but saw nothing, only the empty street below.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Was there a problem? Is he okay?” Both Parc and Cross were leaning on the bar observing Noa as he made his call. He’d felt something was wrong, and his bear began to react, causing Cross to grab him and hustle him away from the door and over to the bar.

Between Cross and Parc, they calmed him, and he was able to suppress his animal. Noa explained about Kallan, and they suggested he call rather than race over to the guy’s apartment and make a scene.

“He was scared. I could hear it so clearly and not just spooked. He was really frightened.” Noa raked his fingers roughly through his hair, clearly frustrated that Kallan had not told him the entire truth. He was holding back for fear of looking helpless, or it might have been simple embarrassment. “I’m going over to his place and do a search of the area. He said he thought someone had followed him home but then said he was mistaken. I won’t be satisfied unless I take a look for myself.”

He looked over at his friends, who were eyeing him with a grin. He smiled and nodded his head. “Yeah, yeah, I’m pretty sure he’s my mate.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty sure, too. Now go see to his safety. You won’t rest until you do.” Cross gave him the rest of the night off, and Noa was appreciative. The need to go check on Kallan was crawling up his spine and filling him with anxiety. He ran to his truck that was parked in the back lot and, once there, changed out of his tight, black, see-through t-shirt into a nice black Henley.

Concern for Kallan remained as he made his way across town to Kallan’s apartment complex. The mere thought of someone following that young man and daring to frighten him made Noa’s blood boil. If there was someone outside giving Kallan grief, he would make sure the man never bothered anyone again. His anger kept growing the closer he got to Kallan’s apartment.

By the time he arrived, Noa was ready for anything and hoping to take care of whatever problem dared to enter Kallan's environment. There was street parking available, so he parked just down from the building and got out. He stood for a few minutes, just taking in the area and focusing on any unusual scents or moods in the air. The first thing that hit him was jackal and then a subtle smell of wolf, but jackal was the prominent scent. It still hung in the air, so the beast had been there recently.

He looked up at the building and wondered which windows belonged to Kallan. He said he looked out the window down onto the street below, and his apartment was on the third floor, so his place was one of the banks of windows on the third floor facing the street. All the windows were dark, so he assumed Kallan had turned in for the night.

Noa walked the front of the building and around the back, checking adjacent properties and any hiding places but found no one hanging around. The smell of jackal remained, although it was growing fainter as the minutes passed. If there was a jackal sniffing around his mate, there would be hell to pay.

The fact that he thought of Kallan as his mate gave him pause for a moment but also made him smile. He wasn't sure what to expect because a mate was not someone he ever thought would enter his life, but the experience so far was quite pleasant.

Part of him still fought the idea that such a spiritual union was real, but the bigger part of him was elated that such a union existed, and Fate, something he never believed in, sent him someone so special and made just for him. He brought his focus back to the job at hand when he saw movement by the trees on the far side of the building.

He approached quickly before the man could escape and grabbed him by the coat collar, hauling him backward and nearly off his feet. He was a local who was involved in petty crime, nothing too damaging. Noa didn't know him but knew of him and had seen him around the strip.

“What are you doing here?” Noa held him and gave him a shake when he didn’t answer immediately. “Don’t make me get rough with you. Just answer my question.”

“I was heading home. I live near the rail yard. I was just cutting through this alley. I wasn’t doing anything.” The lies were rolling off him, but Noa didn’t care all he wanted was information regarding the jackal scent. This man was wolf scruffy and weak but still stronger and more dangerous than a human.

“Don’t lie to me.” He shook him again and began to shift to let the guy know Noa was prepared to take this further.

“Okay, okay, take it easy I wasn’t doing anything really, just checking for unlocked doors. I didn’t find any and was on my way home.” He was approaching the truth, but there was still information he was hiding.

“Do you work for the jackal?” Noa put it out there to see his reaction.

“What jackal?” Noa tightened his grip on the man’s collar, twisting and cutting off his air.

“Don’t play with me.” Noa got in his face and let him see his bear. Noa was a grizzly large angry grizzly who hadn’t been let out in a while and was more than ready to take a round or two out of a mangy wolf.

“I don’t work for him, but I know who you’re talking about. He was here earlier but left with his men. He runs with a few other jackals, and there was a wolf in the mix too. I don’t know why they were here. They just hung around out front for a few minutes and then took off. They didn’t stay or cause any problems.” He was telling the truth, so Noa released him and pushed him away.

“Do you know his name?”

The wolf shook his head and stepped back, careful and calculated. He was preparing to run, and Noa didn’t care. “He’s part of that gang, the grays.” He said this and then took off and was quickly out of sight.

That was news Noa was not pleased to hear. The grays had grown from a few rogue jackals committing small crimes around town to an organized group of angry shifters gaining power and pushing their influence. Jackals still ruled the gang and were in the majority, but there were other shifters involved, such as wolves and cougars.

These were animals that would normally never associate with jackals, so the union was surprising. It was assumed that they wouldn't last and that the group would end up eating its own, but unfortunately, that hasn't been the case. It might be time to actually take a long look at this group and decide if their existence ran contrary to the greater good of the shifter world.

Noa knew one thing for sure, if any of them started sniffing around his mate, they would not be long for this world. Kallan was precious and innocent, and Noa would protect him to his last breath. He no longer denied their connection and felt stupid for even trying. Kallan belonged to him, and the growing possessiveness of both him and his bear made it clear they would not be satisfied until Kallan was bonded and their union secured.

Noa finished his sweep of the area and then returned to his truck, where he sat for several hours just waiting and watching. The jackals did not return, and by four, he decided to head home to get some sleep before picking Kallan up at nine. He drove away slowly, taking in the entire area, and saw nothing to cause alarm. His gut was telling him to be vigilant where his mate was concerned, so he would look into the actions of the grays and keep a close eye on Kallan.

Kallan got up early since he barely slept; it seemed unnecessary to remain in bed. The man on the street and the call from Noa played on his mind all night long. The handsome man was front and center most of the night when that creep with the yellow eyes wasn't interfering. Kallan checked out his windows several times during the night but never saw him again, thank goodness. By morning Noa was dominating his thoughts, and the creep had all but disappeared.

It was nearing nine o'clock when he finished getting ready. It took a while as he kept changing clothes, trying to find the outfit that suited the day and the event and also made him look drop-dead gorgeous. He gave up pretending he wasn't attracted to Noa and decided he was an adult and would give whatever he got from Mr. Noa. If he became difficult and insulting, then Kallan would give it right back, but if he remained the interested and concerned man of last evening, then all possibilities were on the table.

He was pacing the floor at ten to nine when his phone rang. He checked it immediately, hoping that it wasn't Noa canceling their plans. With a smile, he answered. "Hello, Mac." He said and rolled his eyes. His cousin checking up on him as usual.

"Noa, there yet?"

"Not yet; it isn't nine."

"I hope you have a good time today. I have a feeling that you and Noa were meant for each other." Mac began, but Kallan cut him off.

"None of that 'meant for each other' talk. This is one date, and considering his track record, I'm not holding out for much more." Kallan continued his guise of disinterest when talking to Mac because he didn't want him to run off and tell Noa that he thought he was gorgeous.

When Mac got an idea in his head, he would refuse to let it go, like convincing Kallan to move to Cincinnati. It took him a couple of years of selling the place to him, but Kallan finally caved and moved. Now he has it in his head that Kallan and Noa would be great friends. If Kallan gave him the slightest inkling that he was truly interested, then Mac would never let it go, and that could lead to embarrassment.

"Well, have a good time and keep an open mind when it comes to Noa. He might not turn out to be the love of your life, but he could be a great friend." Mac signed off after Kallan started to groan uncomfortably. "Okay, I'll stop." He chuckled, and Kallan closed the call.

At that moment, there was a knock on his door, and he rushed over to open it, forgetting that he'd planned to play it cool today. Noa stood there with a smile and a twinkle in those dark eyes, and Kallan's heart expanded, so pleased that he was there. "Good morning." He said and stepped back, indicating that Noa should step inside, so he did. He wasn't sure what he was doing, but for some reason, he wanted Noa in his space. He wanted him to see his place.

Noa walked to the large window in the living room and pushed the curtain aside, and looked down to the street below. "Is this the window you saw the strange guy out on the street?" He asked, remembering what they talked about last night.

"Yes, but I think I was making monsters where there weren't any." Kallan dismissed.

"Maybe you should stay with Mac for a few nights." He suggested.

"I'm not running from my home because I think I saw something that scared me. It was late and dark, and my mind was not my friend." Kallan laughed nervously.

"Don't ever discount your gut feelings. Always follow what your base instincts tell you to do." Noa was deadly serious. Kallan nodded and felt a little on edge, knowing that Noa took the things he described so seriously and did not try to dismiss his discomfort. "If you see that man again, call me, and I'll sort it out, good or bad."

"Okay." Kallan was impressed that he would offer his help in such a way. If Kallan was reactionary, Noa was running the risk that he could be thoroughly inconvenienced with nonsense calls. "But I doubt I will see him again."

"Call me," Noa stated.

"I will." Kallan relented.

"You ready?" Noa smiled, and his good humor was back in place as he reached out and put his arm around Kallan's shoulders.

“I’m ready.” Kallan let the arm remain and walked in step with Noa as they made their way out to Noa’s large black truck. It wasn’t new but was well cared for, and the chrome accents glistened in the sunlight. Noa assisted him into the seat and buckled him in even though Kallan was certain he could have managed on his own.

The attention was nice, and he did enjoy Noa’s hands. His touch was almost hypnotic in the way it made Kallan feel. He couldn’t explain it, but being near Noa gave him a sense of peace and a belief that nothing could ever hurt him.

Noa was solid, capable, and ready to help, and Kallan wanted to believe that it was all genuine and not simply a play to be accepted. The moment that thought came to mind, he dismissed it. Noa’s behavior was true and not just a show. He knew what fake concern looked like, and Noa was not fake. The longer he was in the man’s presence, the more he liked him, and not just because he was handsome as hell. Kallan realized that Noa was so much more than the asshole he met on the phone.

“There’s a nice breakfast place out on Findlay.” Noa broke the silence. “Then we can hit the antique shop in the Market. From there we’ll go downtown and take in the shops there. The salvage business is closer to the rail yard, so we’ll do that last.”

“Sounds good.” Kallan turned and smiled at Noa, who returned the expression and also reached over and took Kallan’s hand holding it in his as he made his way through town. The move was natural, and Kallan had no problem with it. He could very well be setting himself up for a big letdown when Noa tired of him, which considering his track record, was the most likely outcome.

He was a very eligible man of means and nice looking, and yet he did not have a steady boyfriend and, according to Mac, has never maintained a relationship beyond a couple dates. But Mac claimed it was only because Noa hadn’t met the right man.



Kallan, at twenty-three, had been around the block a few times and knew men like Noa did not keep anyone long-term. Commitment was a dirty word in Noa's world, and Kallan needed to keep that fact front and center as he enjoyed the man but would not and could not fall for him.

They pulled into the restaurant and parked, and once again, Noa helped him from the truck and held his hand as they entered and took a seat near the front windows. He was not trying to hide and, socially speaking, didn't appear to be afraid of anything. Kallan liked his manner of confidence and conviction. Everything the man did pulled Kallan closer to him even as he tried to remain realistic. The meal arrived along with some fantastic coffee, so Kallan decided it was time to further break the ice.

"How long have you lived in Cincinnati? Do you have family here?" He began.

"I moved here from Colorado almost two years ago for a job offer that didn't work out, but I found a place at Club Zephyr with Cross Mercer that I liked and suited me." He spoke casually, relaying basic information, but Kallan got the impression there was more to the story. "My parents had me late in life, and unfortunately, I don't have many relatives remaining apart from a few cousins that still reside in Colorado."

"How old were you when you lost your parents?" Kallan suddenly felt sad for him.

"Mom died when I was still a baby, and Dad died just a few years ago." Noa finished his breakfast and began on his second cup of coffee.

"What about you? What brought you to Cincinnati apart from Mac's incessant needling." Noa smiled, and Kallan laughed.

"Davidson didn't have a lot to offer, and working for the oil company was proving to be a dead end as far as my position was concerned." There was a long story there, but Kallan wasn't ready to share it with Noa.

“Mac told me you worked data entry and were in an office most of the time. It seems that would afford a chance to move up, unlike some blue color placements.” Noa was seeing through him, but still, he hesitated to tell the whole truth.

“Mac and I have been close our whole lives. He’s looked out for me since I was a baby, so sometimes I don’t tell him everything so as to not upset him or make him feel he needs to do something.” There that was truthful but vague, and Noa would probably not be interested in the drama, so they won’t pursue it further, or at least that was what Kallan thought.

Noa set his coffee down and pinned Kallan with a stare that said he was not going to be satisfied with that vague answer. “What didn’t you tell him?”

“Just stupid work drama, nothing you need to be concerned about.” Kallan tried to brush it off, but the stare did not let up, and the silence was pressing hard.

## CHAPTER SIX

Noa waited, feeling that Kallan's resistance was weakening. He wanted to know why he left North Dakota and why he didn't tell Mac the truth. It was none of his business, but still, he wanted to know. He wanted to know everything about this young man, especially what would prompt him to quit his job and move several states away.

"I was also a personal assistant for two of the field managers. It was an as-needed aspect of my job, and I would, from time to time, accompany one or both to worksites." Noa watched as Kallan began to squirm and look around the restaurant, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of their conversation.

"What happened?" Noa asked softly and reached over and placed his hand over Kallan's.

"Doesn't matter; it's over now." He forced a half smile he wasn't feeling and glanced down at their hands.

"It does matter." Noa pressed.

"They made unprofessional requests that I was not interested in fulfilling." Kallan made himself clear without going into detail. "They made it clear that I would have no chance of advancement unless I was willing to play along. They were careful in their word use and made sure there were no witnesses. I put up with their innuendos and threats for about a year and then quit and moved here." Kallan picked up his coffee and finished it.

"Bastards." Noa erupted, and Kallan laughed, breaking the serious nature of the exchange.

"Absolutely, bastards." Kallan agreed. Noa wished he could get the names of the two men, but it was unlikely that Kallan would supply them, so he didn't push further. He would talk to Mac and see if he knew their names.

"I'm glad you moved here." Noa threw in and then suggested they head to the first shop, which was not far from

the restaurant. Noa took Kallan's hand, and he did not object.

The shops were amazing, and Kallan had the best time. Noa was somewhat knowledgeable when it came to antiques in general and vintage. He was patient as Kallan made his way around, taking his time analyzing every piece and learning everything he could about a few particular pieces. Noa watched and learned Kallan's preferences in furniture and glassware and assisted in helping him find those pieces. It was a fun and educational morning.

Kallan found a vintage, oak, marble-top hall table he knew would look great by his door, and Noa carried it for him and made sure it was wrapped and secured in the bed of his truck. He was having fun with this man and was looking forward to the rest of the day.

They stopped at a roadside stand and ate their lunch in the park. It was lovely, and Noa kept him entertained with stories about Cincinnati, its history, and notable events. The man was quite well-read on the area, and Kallan felt well-informed by the end of their day. He didn't bring up the grays or get into Kallan's fears. They just enjoyed their time together.

When they got back to Kallan's apartment, it was nearing six o'clock, and he planned on inviting Noa to stay for dinner. He wanted to get to know him better. Having spent the day with him, Kallan realized he really did like him. Noa carried the little marble top table for him as they made their way to Kallan's third-floor apartment. He was nervous about asking him to stay for dinner, not wanting to make the wrong impression or to look too needy. But all that was of no concern once they stood in front of his door.

Noa pushed Kallan behind him and set the table down against the wall. "Stay there." He told him and approached the door slowly. It was open, and it was clear the lock had been forced. All the fear from last night came rushing back onto Kallan, and he could feel his body shaking as he stood back and watched Noa push the door open.

He'd been in town, but two days, and already he was a statistic. It made his heart sink, and all his hopes of a new beginning faded away. Noa stepped into the apartment, and Kallan waited. There was no sound, and after a few minutes, Noa came out and let him know the apartment was empty. No one was there, but the place had been ransacked.

"It's a right mess. Whoever they were, they were more interested in destruction than theft." He held his hand out to Kallan, who took it and moved forward as if in a dream. "Prepare yourself," Noa warned, and Kallan closed his eyes for a second and then stepped inside.

It was hard for him to concentrate on any one thing at first since the room was literally torn apart. The sofa and chair had their cushions shredded and upholstery torn from the frame. The one picture on the wall in the living room was smashed and torn apart. The tablet that he left on the end table was in pieces on the floor. It looked as if it had been repeatedly stomped on. The end table was also destroyed. His clothing from the bedroom was torn to pieces and littered throughout the living room and kitchen.

He noticed that he was becoming lightheaded, and for lack of a place to sit down, he leaned into Noa, who immediately wrapped his arm around him and held him snug to his side. "Who would do this to me, Noa?" He asked, his voice just above a whisper.

"Random crime of opportunity." Noa attempted to ease his fears, but Kallan remembered the man from last night, the one who followed him home.

"Luckily, I only had a few things from my suitcase in the apartment. I left most of my things in my car in the garage. I'm glad I put off bringing it upstairs." He caught himself on the edge of tears, and Noa must have sensed as much because instantly, he was wrapped in two strong arms and pressed to a massive and amazing chest.

"We'll make the necessary calls, and then you will spend the night at my place. I have a home just outside of town, a nice quiet place where you can relax and regroup. I'll

help you, Kallan, and so will my friends. You'll be okay, I promise." Noa was being so tender it was bringing more tears to Kallan's eyes. The man he was sure he'd come to hate was the man currently holding him up and keeping him sane.

"This isn't your problem, Noa; I can't ask you to get involved." Kallan didn't want to take advantage of Noa's kindness. He'd call Mac, and somehow, they'd get through this.

"I'm not leaving. This is my problem too because we are friends. Whether you like me or not, I consider you a friend." Noa was adamant, and when Kallan tried to speak, he cut him off. "I'm helping you, so get used to it." He then handed Kallan his phone. "Make your calls. The sooner the cops check this out, the sooner we may get some answers."

The police were thorough but did not come up with anything useful. The video of the hallway showed two individuals who appeared to be male forcefully entering Kallan's apartment. They were wearing long hoodies, the kind that hang down mid-thigh, and jeans. It was impossible to discern any features. They were also wearing gloves, so they were prepared and indicated the break-in was not just off the cuff but was probably planned.

Kallan sat in the hallway on a folding chair that Noa got from his truck and made his calls to the landlord and the insurance company, and found himself passed from one person to another until finally he was finished for now at least. Noa stayed close but also paid attention to the actions of the officers who were now leaving but asked that Kallan find somewhere else to stay for a few days.

"He's staying with me." Noa stepped up and offered the officer his phone number and address in the event they made any progress on the case or needed more from Kallan. It was nice having Noa there, taking the lead and giving him the time and space to collect himself. Noa was the man he needed right now, and he was glad he was there.

Noa kept an eye on Kallan but also stayed watchful of what the police were doing and saying inside the apartment.

He put in a call to Parc and let him know what had taken place and that he had scented jackals in the apartment. He asked Parc if he would have his mate, Officer Danny Atwater, look into what was taking place and provide any help or direction. Parc promised to get back with him in regard to any information or developments. He also asked Noa to stop by before heading home with his mate.

“We need to discuss the grays,” Parc said and then added. “It may be time to bring that group to an end.”

“I have Kallan with me.” Noa reminded.

“We’ll be careful what we say, and Cross will have Autry take him for a tour or a soft drink or something. We’ll handle it, don’t worry.” Noa agreed to stop before heading home.

He stepped back into the hallway and stood next to Kallan and placed his hand on his shoulder. Kallan then covered it with his own. He closed his eyes and released a desolate sigh that touched Noa’s heart and made him wish that he could have somehow spared his mate this misfortune. “Come, sweetheart.” He whispered and helped Kallan to his feet. “The police are finished, and they will secure the door. We can leave now.”

“Do they know who did this?” Noa hated the defeated tone of Kallan’s voice.

“Not yet, but they’ll figure it out. The cops here in Cincinnati are good at their jobs, and they will keep you informed.” Noa spoke calmly and reassuringly as they made their way down the hall to the stairway. Kallan didn’t comment simply nodded and kept his focus on the floor.

Noa held him throughout the walk to his truck parked out front and assisted in getting him seated and buckled. He could tell Kallan’s mind was elsewhere, which was understandable. He remained silent as Noa drove through town toward the club district, and when they were nearing the strip, Kallan looked around, recognizing the area, and then turned to regard Noa.

“Where are we going?” He asked, but not as if he were particularly concerned.

“I need to stop by work for a few minutes to speak with Cross, and then we’ll head home,” Noa told him, and Kallan nodded and then turned to look out the side window. Noa didn’t say any more than that, recognizing that Kallan was deep in thought.

He had a lot to think about. Having only moved to the city two days ago, he was probably considering leaving. That thought brought a tightness in Noa’s stomach and a slight panic to his mind. He would have to convince Kallan that the incident was not indicative of the entire town and population. They pulled into the back parking lot, and Noa rounded the truck to assist him, but Kallan was already out and shutting the door. Noa reached out his hand to him, and Kallan took it.

Their relationship was improving, and he was leaning on Noa, but he still had a lot of work to do. “Parc is the dark-haired bartender. You might remember him from when you and Mac were here.”

“I remember him,” Kallan responded.

“Well, his mate, or rather boyfriend, Danny Atwater, is a police officer here in Cincinnati. Parc said he would talk to Danny when he got off shift tonight and would let us know if there is any further information regarding your break-in. He will also be able to keep us up to date on what the police are doing.” Noa finished and opened the back door for Kallan and then followed him in.

Cross and Parc were in the main room, seated at the bar, when Noa arrived. He made introductions and explained what had taken place at the apartment, not going into specifics but making sure Cross and Parc understood that there were paranormal influences. Autry arrived at that moment and asked Kallan if he would like to take a tour of the club and get a drink to help calm his nerves. Kallan was on board which was a relief.

“You go ahead, sweetheart, and I’ll wait for you here. Have Autry show you some of the vintage leather goods in the



BDSM room.” He teased and got a lovely chuckle for his efforts. Kallan was coming back to himself again. Once he was off with Autry in another room, they got down to the real purpose of the meeting.

“I smelled jackal all through the place,” Noa stated.

“The grays,” Parc said with a shake of his head. “But why that part of town and why Kallan specifically?” Noa was wondering the same thing.

“He followed him the night he and Mac were here,” Noa told them. “Kallan thought he saw him outside later that evening. That’s why he was so scared. I checked the area, and it was reeking of Jackal. A derelict wolf shifter I found in the bushes identified the Jackal as a gray.”

“It’s time to put the squeeze on that gang before they decide to branch out onto the strip and other parts of town,” Cross stated.

“Are you planning on taking them out?” Parc asked, eager to be rid of the rogues. “Their violence is growing, and it has been rumored that they are branching out into murder.”

“We’re just going to knock them back for now and let them know the limits. I know you’d like to eliminate the threat, but I don’t want us to become the caretakers of Cincinnati. I want a quiet life here with my mate and my pack.” Cross clarified, and Parc agreed.

“I’ll have Zeke do a background on them and get a feel for their routine. From there, we’ll decide the best place and time to hit them.” Cross explained further. “In the meantime, stay close to your mate.” Noa had no problem with that directive.

“He’ll be staying with me until we get this worked out,” Noa informed.

“You’ve accepted the fact that he is your Fated mate?” Cross questioned, eyeing him speculatively.

“Yes, no doubt in my mind.” Noa felt a bit stupid for having questioned the reality of Fated Bonds now that he was face to face with his own. The connection continued to grow

stronger and deeper with each passing minute. It started out subtly but was now a raging need filling his heart and soul. No relationship ever felt like this, especially after only a handful of hours spent together.

“Were you in his apartment prior to the break-in?” Cross suddenly asked.

“Yes, when I picked him up this morning, he invited me in. I was only there a few minutes.”

“They went ahead with the destruction even with the scent of a powerful shifter in the space?” Parc commented. “They’re bold and dangerous,” Parc repeated his previous concerns.

“They’re fools.” Cross countered.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Kallan walked and listened as Autry showed him around the back rooms. It was interesting, and he would have enjoyed it more if he didn't have such heavy thoughts. It was hard to put aside the man from last night and the destruction of today and not draw a connection.

"I know you've had a hell of a day, and I'm sorry that your first days in the city have been scared by such violence." Autry clearly read his mood and said all the right things. He was a sweet young man.

"Most of the day was great." Kallan tried to smile. "Noa took me antiquing, and I had a wonderful time. It was when he dropped me home that the floor slid out from under me."

"Noa is a great guy, and he will help you any way that he can, so let him. It's not wrong to need a little support at a time like this." Autry was singing the man's praises, but it was not necessary since Kallan's opinion of the man had already begun to change.

"He's letting me stay with him." Kallan offered.

"He has a lovely place. It's a ranch style with a combination of stone and wood siding. He takes good care of it, and the yard is sprawling and landscaped. Plenty of plants and trees." Autry was still vigorously selling every aspect of the man, and it made Kallan smile. Noa had good friends, and it took a good man to have good friends.

Autry poured him a brandy from the bar in one of the private rooms. The room was lush and had plenty of flat surfaces, so Kallan just let his imagination run wild as to what the patrons did in that room. He took the brandy and drank it down in one go and set the glass back on the bar. "Thanks, that really hit the spot."

Autry chuckled and poured him another, but this one, he drank slower. They spent a few minutes talking about mundane things, weather, shopping, and restaurants, and it felt

good to talk about such things and pretend the world was normal once again. When they returned to the main room, Kallan had the distinct impression that important things had been discussed in his absence. It wasn't anything specific, but all three men looked solemn and intense.

As soon as Noa turned to him, his expression turned to a warm smile, and Kallan ate it up. He kept walking right into Noa's outstretched arms and wrapped his arms around Noa's waist. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world and yet was something he ordinarily would never do.

"So, what do you think of the place?" Cross asked light-heartedly as he reached out to Autry and pulled him in for a hug.

"Interesting." That was all Kallan felt comfortable saying.

"Autry wasn't sure about the place at first either." He laughed and kissed Autry's cheek. "But it grew on him, didn't it, baby?"

"Yes, it did, and so did the guy who runs the place." Autry smiled large.

"You say the sweetest things, baby."

Noa appreciated Autry getting Kallan's mind off his troubles for a few minutes, but now they were on their way to his place, and the silence in the truck was becoming oppressive. "We'll figure this out, Kallan. The bastards who wrecked your place will be found, and your life will get back to normal." He felt the need to reassure, although Kallan simply glanced over at him and nodded. "It will be okay, sweetheart."

"I've been thinking about going back home to Dickinson." He blurted, and Noa felt his heart sink. "I've only been here in Cincinnati for two days, so it's not like I've put down roots or even secured a job. I can go home and pick up where I left off pretty easily." Even as he was saying it, Noa could sense that he was not happy with the discussion. He

didn't want to leave, and that at least gave Noa hope he could convince him to stay.

“Is that really what you want to do?” Noa began. “You left for a reason, and I don't believe a break-in is enough to send you running back there.”

“I'm scared,” Kallan answered truthfully. Noa pulled into his driveway and cut the engine before reaching over and pulling Kallan to him. He then kissed him softly at first, gently gauging his acceptance, and then harder and deeper when Kallan began to reciprocate. The kiss was magnetic and powerful, drawing out everything Noa was feeling and setting fire to their soul. He plunged deep inside, tasting his mate and experiencing the special sweetness and touch of the man that was meant only for him.

The kiss went on for several minutes before breathing became an issue, and Noa slowly released him but still held him in his arms and rained kisses down the side of his face and across his jaw. Noa could not get enough of the fresh, sweet taste of his Fated mate.

Someday he planned to call home and let his cousins know that what they were told about mates was all bullshit. Just because the elders never met their mates doesn't mean that mates don't exist, and he is proof of that fact.

He decided he'd make that call sooner rather than later, considering some of his cousins were looking at finding a partner and settling down. Even he had thought about when he would choose someone and build a relationship. Thankfully Fate smiled on him and gave him the precious gift of Kallan Temple.

Kallan laid his head on Noa's chest and just composed himself for a few minutes. Noa smoothed his hair and rubbed his back, reveling in the trust and rapport they were developing. Finally, with a long, drawn-out sigh, Kallan pulled back and stared up at Noa.

“Why do I trust you so much? What is it about you that makes me relax and believe that everything will be fine?” He said this with just the mere shadow of a grin.

“We’re mates Kallan; you and I were meant to be together. It was written in the stars.” Noa smiled, and Kallan took it as sarcasm when in actuality, Noa was speaking the truth.

“Soul mates?” He asked.

“Deeper than that, we are Fated mates bonded body and soul.” Noa continued to speak truths, and Kallan continued to smile.

“I like the sound of that.” He said and slid from the truck just as Noa was rounding the front to meet him. He placed his arm across Kallan’s shoulders and led him inside. He wondered what Kallan would think of his home. He liked his home. It was large, with high ceilings and wide doors, and it suited him and his bear. He wasn’t much for decorating, but it was somewhat furnished.

He’d only lived there for two years, he justified to himself, and decorating and furnishing takes time. As he looked around, he wished he’d made more of an effort to have the place in order for his mate. The living room consisted of one sofa and a matching chair. The area really needed a throw rug or maybe an end table. Noa shook his head and pulled his thoughts back to his mate.

“I like your place minimal but stylish, and the pieces you have are quality pieces. Very nice, Noa.” Kallan complimented him, and Noa wasn’t sure if it was coming from a place of truth or manners. He decided it didn’t matter what his place looked like. As long as his mate was there, everything was perfect.

“It needs some work, but thank you all the same.” He gave him a one-armed hug and brought him to the kitchen, and sat him down at the counter. “Can I get you anything, coffee, water, juice, pop, beer?” Kallan raised his hand and laughed.

“I don’t need anything, Noa. I had a couple brandies at the Zephyr, so I’m okay.”

“Food, are you hungry? Can I fix you anything?”

“No, not hungry.” He watched Noa move around the kitchen and come and sit next to him. Noa loved the way his eyes followed him. Noa handed him a bottle of water.

“Just in case.” He said, and Kallan took the water but didn’t open it.

“I should call Mac and let him know what happened and where I’m staying,” Kallan announced, but then, after a moment, decided to wait. “If I call him now, he’ll be upset and come over and try to help, and there is nothing he can do right now. I’ll call him in the morning, and maybe he can help me salvage some things from the apartment.”

“I think that’s probably best.” Noa agreed. “Mac is a doer and would probably end up over at your apartment getting into trouble.” Noa also wanted to have Kallan to himself tonight, getting to know each other here in Noa’s home. He didn’t want to give that up, not even for his good friend Mac.

Kallan fell silent and closed his eyes. The emotion he was trying to control was intense. Noa could feel the roiling within him and sympathized with his mate. He rubbed his back in slow circles, and slowly, Kallan leaned toward him, and Noa took him into his arms once again. Kallan was finding peace with Noa as he should. Mates were there to comfort and support. Their connection was growing stronger, and Kallan’s feelings were coming through clearly.

He was feeling confused and disheartened, but also there was solace in being in Noa’s arms. Kallan was not hiding himself from Noa, and that sort of trust was always the hardest to achieve. He was comfortable enough that he could let go and show his feelings. Noa was stunned for a moment when he felt Kallan’s soft, warm lips press against the underside of his chin. This was Kallan making the first move, and Noa was there for it.

Noa moved slowly, lowering his head and capturing Kallan’s lips with his own. The kiss grew as they both became animated in their desire for more. Noa picked him up in his arms, and Kallan wrapped his legs around Noa’s waist. The

kiss continued with the heat and craving escalating. Noa wanted this man so badly he could hardly see straight.

He began walking toward the back of the house down the short all off the kitchen that led to the two bedrooms. One was Noa's, and the other one was unused. He decided on his bedroom without much deliberation on the subject. Kallan belonged with him in his room, especially in their current state of expectations.

Kallan did not resist when Noa opened his door and carried him inside and carefully sat down on the edge of the bed with Kallan now straddling his lap. The kiss continued, more heated by the minute, and Kallan's hands were everywhere in Noa's hair, caressing his cheeks and gripping his shoulders. His touch ignited Noa's needs to a fever pitch, and his bear was pushing him to take it all to bond with their willing mate.

Noa shifted and trailed his kiss down Kallan's throat, nuzzling and pressing him close. "I want you, Kallan." He said and pulled the collar of Kallan's shirt to the side and kissed his shoulder. He felt Kallan tremble and felt wet, open-mouthed kisses upon his shoulder and along the base of his throat. The feeling was out of this world erotic.

"Make love to me, Noa." Kallan couldn't be any clearer, and Noa could not be any more willing to provide for his needs.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Noa felt honor bound to make sure his mate was not simply reacting to the confusion and upset he was feeling.

"I'm old enough to know what I want, and I want you to make love to me." He said it strongly and clearly. Noa took him at his word and swung him to the left, lying him out on the large bed.

He was rewarded with a soft giggle that was like balm to his soul. He was on him in an instant, reviving the never-ending kiss exploring and learning every aspect of Kallan's sweet, sumptuous mouth. Noa felt a soft growl pass his lips as his animal side found its contentment.



He kissed Kallan from his lips to his navel, taking in the amazing warmth and softness of his lovely body. Kallan's shirt was gone along with his shoes, and Noa was currently working on the snaps of his jeans, eager to get beneath the heavy fabric to the hardness below. "Is this all for me, Kallan?" He whispered against the velvety softness of his belly.

"All for you, Noa, no one else." He responded breathlessly.

Noa loved the sound of that and doubled his efforts in removing the jeans, sliding them down Kallan's legs and revealing his toned and tan body beneath. He took good care of himself. He was healthy and strong. Noa kissed down each leg and then removed his socks. He paid special attention to the inside of his thighs, getting lovely gasps and groans for his effort.

"You're playing with me, Noa. I need you inside of me, stretching and filling me. I need you now." The trembling began again, and Kallan thrashed his head from side to side while reaching out to Noa. "I need you now."

Noa did not delay. He was ready and excited to give Kallan everything he was begging for. Noa slipped off his t-shirt and removed his jeans and briefs. He'd left Kallan's briefs on, but they were thin and very snug, so they left nothing to the imagination. His mate was hard and straining the fabric of those thin briefs leaving a slight wet spot where his cock had begun to leak.

The scent in the air was absolutely intoxicating, making Noa break a sweat as he observed the sensual and suggestive nature of his gorgeous mate. He moved from the end of the bed to straddle Kallan at the waist resting his large throbbing cock just below Kallan's chin. He strained to get at it taking a few swipes with his tongue, but Noa remained just out of reach.

"Do you want this, sweetheart?" He teased and stroked his leaking cock a few times while Kallan tried to reach for it. Noa took his arms and held them down gently with his knees.

He moved forward, touching Kallan's bottom lip with his cock coating his lip with his release. "Do you want this, sweetheart?" He asked again with a tantalizing grin.

Kallan licked his bottom lip while keeping his gaze focused on Noa, holding him in the grip of those steel blue eyes so fierce and passionate. "I want it; I want it right now." He started with a firmness that was both humorous and sexy. Noa moved forward abruptly, pressing his cock against Kallan's lips. He opened them immediately and took him inside, sucking hard and swirling his tongue, giving Noa a sudden burst of sensation that had him nearly coming.

He moved over him, balancing on his hand and elbow, and began feeding his cock to him, going in and pulling out as Kallan tried to hold on. Kallan was an amazing lover, eager and clever, and the effect of his mouth on Noa's tender flesh was outstanding. "Yes, baby, that's it so good, so very good." He began rambling, lost in the sensations Kallan was eliciting.

He was about to lose control, so he pulled back even though the experience was incredible. Noa wanted to come inside his mate and fill Kallan's tight channel with his seed, thus progressing the bond between them. Kallan protested, not wanting him to stop and reaching for Noa.

"I want to come inside you, baby, deep inside you." He clarified his intent, and Kallan relaxed and spread his legs for Noa.

"That's it, baby. Open for me." Noa kissed his way down to Kallan's hard cock and took it into his mouth, happily getting the exuberant response he'd expected. Kallan squealed tightly and buried his hands in Noa's hair. "Yes, show me how I make you feel, baby." Noa pushed and took him down his throat and began a tortuous rhythm of massaging and devouring and bringing his mate to the very edge.

He had three fingers inside Kallan, stretching and getting him ready. His channel was tight and slippery with the generous lube Noa applied. He didn't want there to be any negatives to their first time together, so he stretched and

worked the muscles while diverting Kallan's attention with an amazing blow job.

Kallan came filling his mouth and throat just as Noa finished preparing him for penetration. He jerked and screamed and made Noa's day. Knowing that he was pleasing his mate gave him a special sense of triumph. He popped off the end of Kallan's cock, licking and sensitizing the tender flesh. He then quickly lifted him and, aiming his cock at the prize, plunged deep inside his beautiful mate.

The minute he was inside, his control broke, and he began a punishing pace slapping inside, driving to the hilt before pulling out and slamming inside again. He felt driven to give and to take all that was possible. The heat and the need were overwhelming, and he felt his bear on the surface pushing for more pushing to complete the bond.

Noa was on the edge and plunged deep inside, holding as the climax enveloped him. Kallan gripped his arms, digging his nails into the flesh, and the feeling was delicious. The flash of pain and the breaking of the skin sent his bear and himself over the edge he was teetering upon, and Noa came hard. At that moment, he held his mate and sunk his teeth into the tender flesh of Kallan's shoulder, breaking the skin.

Kallan trembled, and Noa felt the heat of Kallan's second climax fill the space between them. Noa tasted his mate and then licked the wound until it healed, leaving a mating scar that would forever mark this man as the bear's mate. Their bond was complete. Noa was so overcome with the act and the fact that he'd bonded with Kallan that he didn't notice his bear was making an appearance.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kallan was struggling to catch his breath, and his heart was racing. Never had he been subjected to such a complete and overwhelming rush of sensations. The pleasure raged through him, setting everything on fire. The lovemaking had been monumental. He had a fleeting thought that Noa's ego was well deserved if this was the experience, he delivered to all his lovers.

His body felt like jelly, and his mind was filled with the aftermath of being well and truly fucked. The thought of Noa's other lovers came to him, and the thought was particularly distasteful. He could not imagine Noa being with anyone else, and that kind of possessiveness had never come over him before.

He lifted his hand and felt the mark on his shoulder, realizing then that Noa had bitten him. He also noticed the welts on Noa's arm and realized he'd marked him as well. There was no pain, only a titillating sensation when he touched the slight mark. It had added an exciting element to their lovemaking.

Noa lay atop him, using his arms to lessen the weight, and Kallan couldn't remember a more relaxing feeling of home and peace. They lay there like that for several minutes when Kallan noticed something strange. Noa's shoulders and neck were hairier than he remembered. The hair trailed down his back and his arms, and when Kallan turned to look at Noa's hand that lay next to him on the bed, it wasn't right. The nails were longer and sharp, and the joints more pronounced.

Kallan jumped, and in that second, Noa woke and pulled back to look down into Kallan's face. The things Kallan had seen were suddenly gone, the hair was gone, smooth muscles were visible, and his hands were normal, and his nails were cut short. The image he saw had been real; he was certain, and yet how could he explain it. He wasn't sleeping, and he wasn't delusional, so how could it be possible for it to be there and then gone in an instant.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Noa shifted his weight to Kallan’s side and gathered him into his arms. “Bad dream?”

“I don’t know ... I thought I saw something, but it was there, and then it was gone.” He tried to explain himself but was failing as he struggled for the right words.

“What did you see?” Noa asked and moved to balance himself on one elbow to look down at Kallan and to see him clearly. He continued to hold him rubbing his palm up and down Kallan’s arm in a relaxing motion.

“I was awake; I wasn’t sleeping.” He clarified, and Noa nodded. “You were covered in hair, your neck and shoulders and down your arms. It was wild, animalistic.” Kallan paused for a moment, searching Noa’s eyes for understanding, and what he saw looked like dread, and he didn’t understand it.

He touched Noa’s hand and ran his fingers across his nails. “Your hands were larger, and your nails were almost like claws.” He noticed Noa take a deep breath and release it slowly as he settled back down beside him. He then sat up and headed for the bathroom without comment.

Noa returned with a warm, wet washcloth and tenderly cleaned him up. The act was so unexpected and so sweet. Kallan had never experienced such care before. “Thank you.” He said, and Noa looked at him with a charming smile before turning and tossing the washcloth in the general direction of the bathroom.

Noa then slid back into bed beside Kallan and stretched out on his back. Kallan could sense that something was on his mind, but he never would have guessed what it was. The next few minutes were mind-blowing and thoroughly devastating. In the end, Kallan didn’t know what to believe.

“You’re telling me that you’re a shifter, a person who can turn into an animal at will.” Kallan tried to clarify. Noa nodded and looked unsure and a little sad. Kallan hated seeing him looking sad and wished he could get the smiling Noa back again, but some things needed to be cleared up first.

“I’m a bear shifter, a grizzly from Colorado. I’m not alone. There are other shifters in Cincinnati, quite a few, actually.” Noa spoke haltingly and kept coughing. This was obviously hard on him. “I know it sounds crazy, but just try and open your mind to the possibility of there being more in this world than simply humans.”

“What did I see?” Kallan again pressed for clarity.

“My bear pushing forward, wanting to be noticed,” Noa stated and then added. “I bonded with you when I bit your shoulder. It’s how paranormals seal the bond between mates. I should have waited and explained all of this first, but in the throes of our lovemaking, the need to mark and mate with you was too overwhelming.”

Kallan sat and listened to how mates were specific for paranormal beings and how they were discovered, and the perks that came with mating. It was inconceivable and bordered on ludicrous, but he sat and listened to every word.

“I’m your mate predestined by fate, written in the stars, meant to be together for all time?” Kallan struggled not to sound sarcastic, but it was hard. Noa must have sensed his mood because he only nodded and did not add further comment.

“That sounds wonderful.” He stated honestly. “A true lifetime bond filled with honor, faithfulness, and love is a dream come true for anyone.”

“You don’t believe me,” Noa uttered, somewhat dejected. “I should have handled this better. Cross had the same situation with Autry. He didn’t believe either at first; it took all of us shifting to make it real for him.” That information had Kallan sitting up and staring down at Noa, who was still stretched out beside him.

“You’re saying Cross Mercer is a shifter?”

“He’s a wolf shifter, and so is Parc. Cross is my Alpha. He leads the pack, and Parc is the Beta and second in command.” The more he explained, the more unsure and

confused Kallan became. His gut was telling him to believe Noa, but his rational mind was telling him to back away.

“This is a fantastical community you’re describing.” Kallan slid a few inches away from Noa but remained seated on the bed. “No one knows about the existence of these shifters?”

“It’s a carefully guarded secret. Only those humans with a special connection to a shifter are ever brought into the secret. We’ve been around since the beginning, and everyone has a vested interest in keeping that fact a secret. It’s not just shifters, although I believe shifters make up the majority of the paranormal. There are also vampires, mages, a variety of magics, Fae, and others.” Noa spoke as if what he was saying was no big deal and just information Kallan should have.

Kallan was beginning to feel as if he were losing Noa. He wasn’t making any sense, and Kallan didn’t know what to say or do. The thought that the man he’d come to trust and depend upon was actually crazy was a hard fact to accept, but here it was right in his face.

Noa turned and looked at him with those compelling deep brown eyes, and Kallan wanted to hold him and try to forget the madness that he had just shared. It was breaking Kallan’s heart.

“I know this is a lot to take in, and I should have presented it in a better way. It’s hard to believe, but I can prove it. I will shift for you but remember, I would never hurt you, no matter what my form. I know who you are and would never harm you.” Noa was about to say more when his cell phone rang. He picked it off the bedside table and, after looking at the screen, said he had to take it. “It’s Cross; maybe he has information on the grays or the break-in.” He said this and moved toward the door as he answered the call.

Kallan was relieved to have some space for a few moments. He could hear Noa talking in the outer hallway, and it sounded like he was walking to the living room. Kallan was suddenly struck by the desire to get out of there. He needed to leave and to figure this out somewhere away from Noa. It was

killing him to think that this beautiful, amazing man was not balanced and had delusional thoughts and beliefs.

He grabbed his clothing and ran for the bathroom. He locked the door and quickly dressed, but before squeezing out the bathroom window, he turned on the shower to make it look like he was in there. He hoped it would buy him enough time to get away and call a cab. Kallan planned to go to Mac's.

Noa saw the disbelief written all over Kallan's face. He was doing this so poorly, and the more he told him, the more the doubt and misgivings grew. Kallan was obviously trying to understand, but what Noa had to say was just too far outside normal acceptance. He should have waited for a better time. He would shift and show Kallan his bear, which would end any further doubt or disbelief. His only hope was that Kallan could handle it.

“Zeke did a background on the grays and found that the pseudo leader, a jackal that goes by the name Axel, has put out a call to disrupt human and paranormal associations. He instructed his men to engage in physical assault, harassment, and, as Parc had mentioned, also murder.” That had Noa tensing as fear for his mate enveloped him.

“Axel discovered the relationship between Kallan and you, and that's probably why Kallan's apartment was targeted.” Cross was getting angry, and the prior plan of not taking out the gang completely was probably now off the table. Cross would never risk the well-being of his human mate or the other humans who have joined the pack.

“What's the plan?” Noa knew there was a plan.

“Zeke has identified a vacant building near the rail yard that used to be a brewery about fifty years ago. It's run down but functional, and they've been operating out of there. They also have a place by the riverfront, an old disused motel where they sometimes hang out, but according to Zeke, the gang and specifically Axel frequents the old brewery location.” Noa was visualizing the areas and the best approach to both locations.



“They run by night and sleep during the day, so we hit them in the morning. Meet here at eight tomorrow.” Cross was not playing games.

“This mission is to eliminate, not just teach them, the error of their ways?” Noa asked just so he was clear. He wanted the threat to his mate eradicated.

“We eliminate them all. There is no place here for shifter scum like this bunch. We take them out now before they have time to get a foothold in this town. Based on the information Zeke has provided, it has become clear that if we don’t deal with the threat now, we will pay in the long run, and so may our mates.” Cross made his position crystal clear. “Speaking of mates, how is it going with Kallan?”

“He saw my bear edging to the surface, so I thought it would be a good time to talk about shifters and the paranormal world. Unfortunately, I’m pretty sure he thinks that I’m bonkers.”

“Show him your bear and take it from there,” Cross advised. “It will work out, I promise.”

“I plan to; I only hope he takes it well.”

“Autry endured trial by fire, and he handled it okay, so your Kallan will be fine.” Cross assured. They made arrangements for the morning, and Noa closed the call and returned to the bedroom. When he walked in, he saw the bathroom door closed and heard the shower running. He slipped on his underwear but didn’t get dressed in anticipation of shifting.

After about fifteen minutes, he approached the door and tested the handle, and it was locked. He called Kallan’s name, but there was no answer. He waited a couple more minutes before breaking the lock with his grip and opening the door.

Kallan ran from the yard keeping to the bushes and out onto the road, where he kept running until he made it about a block away. He then called for a cab to pick him up and take

him to Mac's place. He called him from the cab and told him he was on his way and would explain when he got there.

Kallan wanted to cry because leaving Noa was devastating. He ran away without a word, and that's not his usual behavior. He should have spoken to Noa and tried to help him. Running was making him feel as if he let the man down in some way. The further he got from Noa, the more acute he felt the loss and the pain as it continued to grow in his midsection and then fanned out throughout his body.

He couldn't comprehend the strange and intense feelings of loss and need that were overtaking his body, mind, and soul. He even thought he could feel the shock and disappointment that Noa was experiencing on finding him gone. He felt like a complete bastard for running out. When the cab pulled into Mac's drive, he almost asked him to turn around and take him back to Noa, but he resisted. He paid the driver and walked up to Mac's door, where he was waiting.

"Come in, tell me what's going on." He ushered Kallan inside and to the kitchen, where he sat him at the table and handed him a cup of coffee. He apparently wanted Kallan awake and alert since coffee was not usual for this hour. It was hot and comforting, so Kallan didn't care. He took a long sip and then sat there staring at Mac for a few minutes.

"What happened?" Mac prompted as he sat down next to him.

"I was at Noa's place. We ended up there after sightseeing, shopping, and dinner." Kallan began hesitantly, really not sure how to describe what had happened.

"Did he insult you again?" Mac looked pained when he said it.

Kallan shook his head. "No, he didn't insult me. He was amazing; actually, I couldn't have asked for a better companion. I had a wonderful time."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Noa told me some things that I found to be outrageous, and the sad part is he really believes the

outrageous things he told me. I don't know how to process it all because I'm drawn to him. Even though I tried not to like him, it was impossible. I want to know him, but I think he might be crazy, delusional, prone to fantastical imaginings." Kallan said everything he was thinking and feeling, and Mac just sat there and didn't look at all surprised.

"He told you?"

"What?" Kallan's response was sharp.

"He told you what he is?" Kallan assumed he was referring to being a bear, so he nodded slowly, and then Mac continued with an excited smile and leaned forward onto the table. "Did he shift for you? Because that shit is awesome."

"He told me that he's a shifter, a paranormal being. He said that he could physically turn into a bear at will. He was dead serious." Kallan spoke with loud clarity just in case there was a misunderstanding occurring.

"Noa is a bear shifter, Cross is a wolf, a huge wolf. I saw him once, and it was unnatural the size of that beast." Mac continued, matter of fact. "Lowell is a vampire, which is unusual since vampires and shifters don't, as a rule, get along that well. Cade's a cougar, and so is his brother Hofer, of course. I don't see as much of Cade since he mated that wolf shifter from up north." Kallan couldn't hear anymore. He covered his ears and closed his eyes.

"Are you saying this crap is real?"

"It is real," Mac stated.

"I can't believe it; I just can't accept it. He said there are fairies and magics as well in this fantasy land, and it is just too outside what I can believe." Kallan slapped the table in his frustration.

"He didn't shift for you." Mac surmised.

"He had to take a call from Cross Mercer and stepped out of the room. I grabbed my clothes and headed to the bathroom. I left through the window before he got back." The fact that he had to grab his clothes caught Mac's attention.

“You got naked, did you?” He smiled and then chuckled. “I guess you were getting along pretty well.” He laughed again.

“Yeah, we were getting along great until he started talking crazy.” Kallan’s voice began to rise, and Mac raised his hand in an effort to have him take it easy and calm down.

“Okay, so you don’t believe him,” Mac said, and Kallan nodded. “Do you believe me?” That caught Kallan up short, and he didn’t know how to respond. “I saw Noa shift, and it blew my mind at the time. I happened over to his place and heard something in the backyard and just rounded the house to see what it was, and that was what I saw.” Mac was serious and also a little irritated.

“Normally, when someone happens onto information like that, they have their minds swept. Vampires have the ability to take memories from humans, but Noa and I were friends, and he petitioned his Alpha to allow me to keep my awareness of the paranormal world. Only those who are completely trusted or mates of paranormals are allowed in on the secret.” Mac looked at him speculatively and then pulled the collar of his shirt to one side and checked his left shoulder, and then did the same and checked his right shoulder.

“You have a scar there; he bit you, didn’t he? Noa bonded with you, Kallan.” He smiled and shook his head, pleased and disbelieving. “That’s why he had to fix his blunder, why he needed to win you over. At some point, he realized who you were.” He said with the same lighthearted tone. “You’re his mate. This is so cool, so ... so cool.”

Kallan thought his head would explode, and then he began to calm down. His breath evened out, and his heart slowed back to normal. He took a deep breath and looked at his cousin, silently studying his expressions and demeanor. “I think I believe you but man, this is some crazy stuff.”

“Yes, I can see why you would think that, but it is real, Kallan, and you need to go back to Noa and talk to him. He is no danger to you. Trust me, I would never put you in danger.”

“I know, and I feel awful for running out on him. I should go back.”

“You should go back.” Kallan had made his decision to return to Noa when Mac’s front door came down with a thundering crash.

## CHAPTER NINE

Noa was disappointed when he pulled back the curtain, and the shower was empty, but it was not surprising. His mate was resourceful, and the whole shifter and mate explanation probably had his mind spinning. He was worried and needed to find Kallan before anything happened to him. The danger to him was very real. He quickly dressed, having a pretty good idea where his mate would go.

“Hey Mac, is Kallan with you?” Mac didn’t answer, so he left a message. He then called Kallan’s number and also got voice mail. His gut was telling him Kallan was with Mac, so he took off for Mac’s place.

The minute he got into his truck and began pulling out of his drive, he felt a sudden flash of panic. He pulled out onto the road and drove as fast as he could over to Mac’s. The panic grew, and soon he was engulfed by a fear that stiffened his muscles and clouded his mind. This wasn’t his panic or his fear. This was Kallan’s. He was feeling Kallan through their bond. Kallan and Mac were in trouble. He could sense their distress and that the grays were at the heart of it.

Panic hit him again, but this time, it was his own. The thought of those monsters being near his mate was driving him insane. He parked on the curb in front of Mac’s house and raced up the walkway to the front door. He didn’t wait to knock, simply knocked the door down and rushed inside.

The panic he felt in the truck was nothing compared to the terror that burned through him when he saw the damage to the house, the blood on the floor, and the fact that no one was there. He scented his beautiful mate, Mac, and the distinct acrid stench of Jackal. They took his mate, and that fact caused Noa to shift.

He was unable to restrain his animal. He burst through his clothing, shredding them on the spot as he became the fierce, protective, and vindictive grizzly that lived within.

His sudden agony was felt by his Alpha, who, along with Parc and Zeke, headed for the primary hideout of the grays. It was clear that something terrible had happened, and they could only assume that it involved Noa's mate and the grays. Noa's pain and anguish were so stark that they could taste it in the air. The plan to attack in the morning was scrapped, and the battle was to be immediate. They only hoped that they would arrive in time.

Noa stayed in the wooded areas taking a direct route to the hideout by the railyard. Private yards, private property, fences, barriers, nothing stopped him as he tore through the suburb. He could smell their bitter, pungent odor stinking up the air and could also scent the sweet beauty of his mate. He and Mac were scared, but they were alive, and Noa needed to get to them before the grays carried out whatever twisted ideas they had regarding humans.

His poor little mate, his heart was breaking for the man. He should have taken better care of him. He shouldn't have left him alone when he was so confused and unsure. Noa was beating himself up but quickly set his guilt aside and focused on the job at hand. The building lay straight ahead, and he could easily smell all of them inside. That bastard Axel and his followers were not going to survive this night.

He came up to the entrance and, like before, did not wait and took out the door and the north wall with it busting inside to confront a group of startled and woefully unprepared shifters. They apparently had not expected immediate retaliation for their deeds.

A couple of wolves ran for the back door, clearly smarter than the rest. Noa didn't stop them. His bear had their scent, and he would deal with them later. Noa charged through the building in search of his mate, and nothing was going to stand in his way, least of all a few mangy shifters.

His grizzly became enraged when he scented the blood of his mate on the hands of a jackal. He killed the shifter without thought or concern. The guy was slow and, although strong, was a poorly trained fighter. That Jackal was no match

for a raging grizzly bear. Noa took him out with little effort leaving the remains strewn about the dirty floor.

Noa stayed on course, following the scent of his mate crashing through walls and killing jackals as he made his way to the second floor of this now unstable structure. His only goal and his entire concentration were on securing the well-being and freedom of his mate and killing every shifter who had dared to lay a hand upon him. His bear was in full control, and he was a single-minded beast.

Kallan was scared out of his mind. Looking around the small room, he felt the hatred of these men pressing in on him and Mac and feared the worse was about to happen. The man who led them was the same man who'd bumped into him and who he'd seen standing outside his apartment the other night.

The man was brutal and rude and smelled bad. He hadn't noticed it that night, but as soon as he broke into Mac's house, Kallan could smell the vilest stench of rotting flesh. Mac said he smelled nothing out of the ordinary, which seemed strange because it was pungent.

He heard one of the men refer to this man as Axel, so he assumed that was his name. He was not overly tall, about five foot nine or ten, maybe. His hair was stringy and black with no real style apart from what his skull cap was able to accomplish. They were all unkempt and wild looking, not in the manner Noa had looked wild but in a mad or insane manner. Noa had been sexy and appealing even when his eyes flashed, and the wildness of his inner being shown through. Noa had never scared him, and God, he wished he were there now.

Noa looked over at Mac, who was seated on the floor beside him and, like him, was tied with his hands behind his back and a rag stuffed in his mouth. He should have stayed with Noa. He could have handled these guys. He knew in his heart that Noa would have prevailed. These beasts could not stand against a grizzly. That thought came out of nowhere, and yet he knew it to be true. These men were shifters too, but they were the dregs and a stain on society.



All of this was true, and a sense of release, understanding, and clarity overtook him. This was Noa. He felt it was his mate who was reaching out to him, to comfort him, and Kallan found himself relaxing in the knowledge that his mate was coming for him. He could hear him downstairs; Noa was there. This was so strange and yet so right and so clear. He wanted to call out to his mate, but the rag made it impossible.

He tried to move and began to struggle against his restraints until Axel came over and backhanded him across the mouth. It wasn't the first time these guys had hit him. Both he and Mac were bleeding from the beatdown they received upon capture. The guy stepped back, his face a mixture of fear and confusion when in response to the powerful slap Kallan smiled up at him.

Axel yanked the rag from his mouth and got into his face. "Why the hell are you smiling?" He pinched Kallan's chin holding him still and bringing him even closer. "I'm going to kill you slow and painful just as soon as my men take care of that fucking bear downstairs. Your life is but minutes from ending, so why are you smiling?"

Kallan turned his head slightly, baring the scar on his shoulder, and he knew when the man saw it. He saw the shock in his eyes, and the panic, and it was delicious. "That's my mate downstairs. He's a grizzly bear, and he's going to kill you all slow and painfully." Kallan laughed in his face, and the man jumped back suddenly, not so sure of himself or his plans. "That chaos you hear is a grizzly cutting through your gang. Let us go, and maybe he will spare your life. It is your only chance." The man stared at him for a moment as if considering his options, then reached down and grabbed him by the back of the neck.

"I have a better idea." He spat at Kallan. "I'll use you as currency to get out of here, and once I'm clear, I'll spread your parts from here to hell for your mate to find and grieve over." He said the words and delivered the threat, but his eyes were filled with terror.

“I don’t care as long as you die too, and you will. Your life is now measured in minutes.” He repeated the man’s threat. Just then, they all froze when there came a roar from the outer room followed by a blood-curdling scream, and then the door came down.

Noa was amazing. His bear filled the doorway and beyond, taking down part of the wall as he charged inside. Axel held Kallan by the throat and positioned him in front, shielding him from the bear, but he wasn’t going to get away. Kallan had no doubt that his bear would save him. He glanced down at Mac, who was pressed against the wall trying to protect himself from the fallout.

“Back off, bear, or I kill him. Don’t push me, or your little mate gets his throat torn out.” Axel moved toward the door with his back to the wall and Kallan in front of him. He kept his eyes on the bear, believing he had a chance at escape, but there was no way he was leaving that room, especially not with Noa’s mate in tow.

Noa shifted back to his human form, which strangely was just as frightening as his bear. He blocked the door, and his gaze followed the Jackal as he continued to shuffle his way to the door. Kallan had never seen a more perfect specimen of manly perfection than his mate Noa.

“Let me leave, and I will not kill him.” The Jackal promised, but it seemed hollow even to Kallan’s ears. The Jackal took a step to the left, and Kallan stumbled, and that was the break that Noa had been waiting for.

Noa was not letting the bastard leave the room. His mate was holding it together and seemed to be receiving the calm that Noa was sending him. Mac was safe where he was, so he kept all his attention on the Jackal holding his mate. Fighting was still going on throughout the derelict building. Cross, Parc, and Zeke had shown up and were taking care of the rest of the grays. Axel was Noa’s, and he was going to take great pleasure in ending this bastard.

The moment Kallan stumbled and loosened Axel’s grip, Noa grabbed Kallan by the front of his shirt and jerked

him away, tossing him over toward his cousin, and Noa went for Axel. Leaping upon him as Axel shifted into his beast, the Jackal was large and ferocious but still no match for a man like Noa, who was bound and determined to protect and avenge his Fated mate.

Bonding strengthened a shifter in a way that could not be described. The position of protector brought with it enhanced, focused, and supercharged abilities. The Jackal, although powerful in his own right, began to falter under the attack of the bear.

Noa wrestled the beast to the floor and wrapped his arm around its throat and his legs around its midsection rendering it immobile as he continued to tighten his grip. He twisted aggressively to his right breaking the Jackal's neck and subsequently ending his life. Noa would have preferred drawing it out and delivering considerably more pain for the crimes committed against Kallan, but he went for expediency so he could go and comfort his mate. He desperately needed to hold the man in his arms and know that he was well and safe.

The minute he dumped the guy off him and rolled to his feet, he found his arms filled with a grateful mate. He had expected appreciation but had not expected the love and adoration that poured off him. God, he loved this man, always a surprise and always so sweet.

“Noa, I am sorry for running. I won't doubt you again. Mac told me the truth. I know who you are. It's a lot to process, but I will get there. I want you in my life.” Kallan was in a rush of apologies and explanations, and all Noa could do was smile. Having the man in his arms relatively unhurt and more interested in Noa's feelings than the mayhem that was surrounding him was heartwarming. Noa broke the ties binding his wrists, and Kallan's arms were instantly wrapped around him.

He held his mate flat to his chest and buried his nose in his hair, relishing the vitality and life of this beautiful man. He glanced over at Mac, who was standing a few feet away. Noa reached over and broke his ties, and Mac began to rub his

wrists. He didn't speak, just nodded with a smile and gave Noa a thumbs up.

"What's going on downstairs?" Kallan asked as the sound of fighting continued for a few more minutes before silence and then the sound of voices.

"Cross, Parc, and Zeke are cleaning up down there. Nothing to be afraid of." Noa assured him.

"That sounds like a cat, a large cat," Kallan commented and then tilted his head to the side as another loud snarl pierced the silence.

"Zeke, the surveillance specialist at the club, is a tiger shifter," Mac interjected. "I've never met him, but I hear he's deadly impressive in his tiger form."

"Very impressive indeed." There came a voice from the doorway, and it was Zeke who walked over and introduced himself to Mac and then put his arm around him. "Let me help you." He said and assisted him along as they followed Noa and Kallan downstairs and out of the building. "You take care of your mate, and I'll see to Mac," Zeke stated and walked Mac over to his vehicle.

Noa took his mate into his arms once outside. Thankfully Cross had brought him a change of clothes since his were destroyed in his shift. He checked Kallan over to make sure he wasn't injured, only a few cuts and scrapes. The fact that they were bonded had assisted him in healing and strengthened him for the attack he endured. He would explain that to him later. Noa had enough explaining for one night and didn't want to risk fucking things up again.

"I want to go back to your place Noa. Let's go back to where we were before I got all stupid and ran away." Kallan was endearing, and Noa was so in love with this human he couldn't imagine a life without him now.

"You weren't stupid, sweetheart. You were discerning." Noa corrected. "I didn't explain myself appropriately.

"Either way, let's go back to your place," Kallan repeated.

“It’s our place, Kallan, unless you’d like to live somewhere else. We can house hunt if you like. I’m open to whatever you desire.” Noa knew he was getting ahead of himself again, but he just couldn’t seem to stop.

“You want me to live with you?”

“I want you to live with me.”

“Normally, my answer would be a firm no, but I’m finding that with you, Noa, my love, I look at you, and all I want is more. You are a charmer like no other, and yet I believe every word you say.” Kallan reached up to cup the side of his face and placed a soft kiss on his bottom lip.

“I will never lie to you, never desert you, never look at another. You are it for me, baby.” Noa stated emphatically. Kallan searched his face for a few seconds and then smiled, having obviously found what he was looking for.

“I don’t know where this relationship is headed, but I know it’s going to be interesting.” Kallan smiled, completely at ease with his decisions now and completely at ease with his new reality.

“Thank you, sweetheart, for giving me a chance.”

“Thank you for saving my life in more ways than one.” Kallan reached up again and pulled him down for a proper heartfelt kiss that spoke volumes of what he was feeling. Noa gathered him close and kissed him like his life depended on it. He loved this man, and he knew for a fact that no one would ever make him feel the way Kallan made him feel.

“Let’s go home.”

“Let’s go home.”

Ames and Hofer arrived to assist with the cleanup, and Ames tossed Noa his keys. “Go home and enjoy your young man.”

“Thanks, Ames.” Noa shot back, more than ready to do just that. His body was calling for Kallan, and he couldn’t wait to taste that beauty once again.

“Take a few days off. I’ll cover for you.” He said, and before entering the structure, he stopped and turned back to regard him with a lighthearted smile. “Congratulations, Noa mates are the greatest gift of life, don’t you agree.”

“The greatest gift.” Noa agreed while never taking his eyes off Kallan’s lovely, upturned face. He hadn’t believed in Fate or mates but thank God Fate believed in him.

**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

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