



Home for Charlie (Secret Springs)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Charlie Putnam loves his job at the Grand Springs hotel, not because he adores front desk work, but because he gets to meet all kinds of people, which he'd be too scared to do otherwise. He's also being allowed to redecorate some of the rooms. He has a passion for it, which makes it impossible to resist Kaleb, who shows up at the hotel with two enormous dogs and a plan to remodel the most famous, and infamous, house in the Secret Springs area, even though he's been hurt in the past. Literally.

When Kaleb Raleigh sells his business and retires in his thirties, he decides to move to Secret Springs. And to buy the Dewhurst mansion, which supposedly is the scene of a very sad murder. Meeting Charlie at the hotel is the best kind of bonus, and Kaleb sets his sights on the shy young man right away. Can they solve the mystery of the big house, find the common ground Kaleb knows they have, and make a home for Charlie?

Total Pages (Source): 20

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

One

“Good afternoon, sir! Welcome to the Grand Springs Hotel.” Charlie Putnam smiled at the elderly man who was heading for the front desk. He imagined this was Dr. Eggleman from Sacramento who was arriving in to give a guest class at the birthing center.

Everyone was very excited.

“Hey there. Beautiful lobby. I remember it being a touch...shabbier.”

“Mr. Harlan has been renovating, but do you remember the chandelier? It’s been hanging here for eons.” And it took a week—a full week and professionals—to clean. The huge damn thing was a joy to look at, though, and it was gloriously tentacular.

“I do, actually. It looks pretty grand now. Dr. John Eggleman. Checking in.”

“Dr. Eggleman. You’re on the first floor. It’s a lovely room with an amazing view of the river. I just need a signature and a card for extras. The room has been paid for.” He pushed the printed signature paper across the desk to the doctor, then grabbed his credit card to open the deposit.

“Thank you. Is the restaurant here good?” Eggleman asked.

“It’s exceptional. Our head chef, Bridget, is amazing. She focuses on Colorado-based cuisine, and she makes an elk burger to die for. It’s my absolute favorite.” Charlie loved it, and the breakfast oatmeal with the blueberries and pecans and chia seeds.

Weird, but true.

“Sounds wonderful. I know the clinic accoucheur is supposed to take me to a place called Fuel for supper tomorrow, but I’m on my own this evening, and if I don’t have to leave the hotel, I’ll be a happy old fart.”

“You can just come out and eat at the restaurant here. Would you like me to make you a reservation so you don’t have to wait?” They didn’t often have a huge waiting list, but there usually was a short one.

“I would love that.”

“What time do you prefer to eat?” He called up the dinner reservations on the computer.

“Around six?”

“Perfect. I’ll make sure you aren’t waiting.” Not that he was going to be here. He was off the clock at five.

“Thank you.”

“Would you like help with your bag?” Looked like the doc only had one.

“No. No, I think I’ll be fine. I appreciate it.” The guy took his key and headed off.

Lord have mercy. That man was a bundle of energy for being at least, what? Sixty-five? Seventy? Whoa. Charlie grinned. He did love this job. It was like that movie with Edward Norton; he got single-serve friends out of it, without having to commit to being social.

He was too damn tired to make lots of friends. He had supper weekly with Hank, to check on the ghost tours, see what the hotel could do to make it easier. And Hank had always been so kind to him...

And Bridget had gotten him this job, so he hung out with her when he got off work sometimes, having a beer at the bar.

Okay, he also could visit with Tim and Lukas at the tattoo studio below his apartment whenever he wanted.

Charlie shook his head at himself. So he was kind of a recluse these days. So what?

His life had changed a lot after—after he came to Secret Springs.

He went back to cleaning up the lobby, making sure the place was spotless. The last bit of snow always made a mess, and he wasn't about to leave the night auditor, Jamie, something to clean up if he could help it.

He looked out the door, smiling at the lights that were just starting to come on down at the hot springs pool. They always turned them on a few hours before dark, just to get them fired up, but they looked so pretty to Charlie from up the hill.

"You look happy, buddy. I made meatballs. Want some? They're fresh." Bridget had a covered plate with her, a warm smile on her face.

"Oh, god. Yes. Yes, please." The smell of basil and parm and meat was pervasive and luscious.

"Cool. It looks slushy out there, huh?"

"It's been way worse. The winter is pretty much over, I think."

“Oh, God, don’t say that. It will dump a foot.” Bridget honestly looked totally horrified, and it cracked him up.

“I like the snow.” He wasn’t afraid of it. Hell, he was from Gunnison originally where it was white mostly from September to April.

“You are a strange and unusual boy, but I still like you. Come on, eat meatballs and admire my prowess.”

“Sounds good to me.” He grinned, then went to sit at one of the low tables in the lobby. That way his food wasn’t at the desk making a splash. “Oh, yum. Garlic bread.”

“I know. A man does not live on meatballs alone.”

“No. And this is stunning.” She was too good to him. That was one reason to stay on at the hotel. Charlie ate like a king.

He never had to cook at home, which was cool, because he was an I-can-make-an-omelet type of guy. When he’d been carb-loading for baseball, he’d lived on Eggo waffles and ramen noodles.

Between Bridget, the catering manager Ryan, and the owner’s husband, Chase, they kept him in the best food ever. Like, ever.

He took a deep breath and let it out, finding himself with a smile. He didn’t have the life he’d intended to have, but it wasn’t a bad life, not at all.

He loved Secret Springs, he loved his little apartment, he loved the hotel, and he absolutely adored his friends. He could be...content. Once in a while, he thought about what it would be like if he hadn’t had his shoulder broken, if he would still be

in baseball.

But he'd been in the minors for two years without getting the call-up, so really, would he have been happy there?

He didn't know.

It didn't matter.

He had been broken. His dream had to change. And he was here.

And that was good. Really good. No matter what else, he had a safe place to be, and Charlie wasn't going to look that gift horse in the mouth.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Two

Kaleb Raleigh looked at the bird poop in the big parlor at the house he'd bought, pursing his lips. "Well, guys, I don't think we're going to be able to stay here yet."

His two big Saint Bernards came to him for ear scratches, Neo pushing Trinity out of the way like the big butthead he was. So he turned so each dog had a hand as he surveyed the mess in the house. The roof was still watertight, he thought, but several windows had been broken out, and the plywood the previous owner had put up hadn't kept out the doves or, from the looks of the feathers, the crows.

He'd have to fix the windows and get the furnace up to speed, minimum, before he could move in and start working on the DIY.

The Dewhurst mansion sat on the side of a mountain rising up above Secret Springs, Colorado, a looming monstrosity of a house made of brick and stone on the facade, with a fairy-tale pitched roof and turrets capped with weather vanes and a widow's walk.

It was an old house lover's dream, and it was going to be a freaking money pit, Kaleb could tell. God he loved it.

"Okay. So I guess we need to see if there's somewhere in town to stay a week or two that allows mini mooses, huh?"

Trinity chuffed and bobbed her head like she totally understood, while Neo just drooled on his boots. They were a hoot, those two.

“Come on. Let’s see what else we’re up against. Watch your step.” Hell, Neo weighed almost as much as he did, and could go right through a rotten floorboard. He headed to the kitchen to assess the appliances.

Kaleb had bought the house sight unseen. He loved the old oil and lumber baron houses in Denver, and one of his favorite places on earth had always been Miramont Castle in Manitou Springs. So when the opportunity had come up to buy this place in the San Juan Mountains on the Western Slope, Kaleb had jumped at it.

Wasn’t that what crazy techie guys who retired by thirty-five did? Buy hopelessly weird houses and give tons of money to charity?

Sure it was. He...hell, it was going to be fun as anything.

The kitchen was a nightmare, but the huge iron eight-burner stove was magical, and there was a dumbwaiter.

A dumbwaiter.

He thought about all the horror books and movies with a dumbwaiter, and he grabbed his mag light out of his pocket to look at it. It was a hand-crank deal that went both up and down, and it made him so happy he shouted with laughter, which had the dogs sidestepping.

“I know. I know, but that means that whatever room that is at the very top might be magical...or haunted!”

The place had at least one hidden staircase, a set of pocket doors, and now a dumbwaiter that hadn’t even been in the seller’s description. Bird poop or no, this was paradise.

His stomach rumbled then, and Kaleb sighed. “No way are we going to be able to eat here any more than we’re going to sleep. And the stairs might be better left for tomorrow morning when there’s more daylight.” He would meet his contractor, Kynan Tierney, onsite then.

Stepping back into the parlor, Kaleb called his realtor, a lady named Annette, who lived in Secret Springs.

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Kaleb Raleigh? I picked up the keys to the Dewhurst mansion from your assistant this afternoon.”

There was a pause, then a low, amused chuckle. “Oh, God, please don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind now you’ve seen it.”

“Are you kidding? There’s a dumbwaiter. I was just wondering if there was a place to stay in town that allows pets. I don’t want to have to drive back to Montrose. Oh, and a good place to eat.”

That earned him another soft little laugh. “Well, I can answer both questions with one answer. The Grand Springs hotel. They’re pet friendly—they even have a pet walker—and there’s a great little restaurant there. If you go outside and look straight down into town? You can’t miss it.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmm. It’s just up the hill from the hot springs pool, and it lives up to its name these days. The renovations have been lovely.”

“Okay, I’m in. Thanks, Miss Annette. I appreciate it.”

“Of course. I’m glad you’re not disappointed. You gave me a moment of panic.”

“No. No, I love it. But you know what? I decided I don’t have to camp out here for at least another week. Maybe when I get the wiring looked at.”

“Of course. If you want, I can see about moving a travel trailer up there, but the hotel is the quickest, most comfortable answer.” Annette chuckled softly. “And the restaurant is absolutely to die for.”

“If they have room for me, I’m in. I’m much more into room service, and I’m not sure I want to chance plugging in a trailer to the water and electrical up here.” He might be retired from the tech trade, but he still needed to check his investments pretty regularly, so he needed Wi-Fi, too.

“Fair enough. I’ll call over and make sure they know you’re coming.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Are you kidding? You bought my white whale.”

He laughed. “Well, I adore it already, so it’s not a hardship. Let me take you to lunch next week.”

“Perfect. We can go to Se?or Dragon’s and have green chile fried rice.”

“Se?or Dragon’s? What alchemy is this?”

“Chinese Mexican fusion. You’re gonna love it.”

“Oh my god.” He moaned. “You’re on. Thanks again. I’ll holler at you.”

“If you need anything, just call.”

They hung up, and he called the dogs back from sniffing around. “Truck, guys. Come on.”

They danced and woofed, heading right out the front door to the truck, the snow not bothering them in the least.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Three

Charlie checked on room 208 on his way down from the third floor. This was the fifth room Mr. Jack had let him redo, and it was looking good—the white bedding would contrast beautifully with the maroon wallpaper and the art, which was botanical illustrations. Just the sight of things being returned to the period of the hotel soothed something deep inside him.

“It looks great, doesn’t it?” He nodded to the woman who was hanging wallpaper. “I’m so pleased. I think Mr. Harlan will be over the moon.”

“I think he’ll love it,” she said, shooting him a grin. “Seriously. It’s so historical, yet clean.”

“And very strong, but not rough. I love—” His phone rang, the front desk’s emergency tone sounding. “Excuse me, I have to take this.”

He grabbed it as he headed out into the hallway. “Hey, what’s?—”

“Mrs. Norman says there are horses in the courtyard!” Samantha was brand-new, so wet behind the ears she squeaked.

“Horses?” What? That was a new one. “I’m on my way down. Are they attached to a person, or loose?”

“I don’t know. I have guests here checking in.”

“Then you focus on that. I’ll deal with the—” Horses. “—courtyard.” Fuck him. He didn’t run until he hit the stairwell that was for employees only. Then he zoomed.

“Yes, sir.” She hung up, and he snorted. Every time someone called him sir, he looked over his shoulder to see if Jack or some other alpha was there. It was bizarre. He was panting by the time he got to the ground floor and raced out to the big patio courtyard that, in the summer, housed a little breakfast area that served just coffee and pastries and doubled as a tiny bar in the evenings.

Right now, it should be deserted.

He heard the rushing sound of something or somethings running at him about a heartbeat before he was tackled to the ground, fuzzy paws on his shoulder as a giant dog licked his face.

Wow. That was a lot of slobber.

He reached up to push at the hairy chest and neck, laughing. “Hi there. Oof. Oh, there are two of you. You are kinda pony sized. Did you know it was snowing?”

Neither beast looked particularly Cujo-esque, so he decided not panicking was the smart thing, and he sat up. “Can you two sit? I’m assuming you belong to a guest...”

Both hairy butts hit the ground, tails wagging hard.

“Good, uh, dogs.” He was in no position to ascertain gender at this point. Charlie climbed to his feet. “You guys want a cookie?” He pulled out the hotel phone.

At the words cookie, they both perked right up.

“Samantha? Can you please bring me two dog biscuits and find out which guest has

two beautiful Saint Bernards, please?”

“Oh! They’re not horses?”

He did not grit his teeth. “No. They’re dogs.”

“That’s one-oh-nine.”

“Got it. Biscuits.”

“Yessir.”

One-oh-nine was one of their luxury ground floor rooms with a little patio. Obviously there had been an escape.

“Let’s get a cookie; then we’ll find some towels from housekeeping and get you to your person, huh?”

“Neo! Trinity. Where are—Oh, Lord. So sorry about this!” A tall broad-shouldered man rushed out to the courtyard, leashes in hand. “I thought I had them corralled. I just went to the bathroom for like, a minute.”

“No problem.” He found the guest a warm smile, even though his butt was wet and frozen.

“Did they knock you down? Do you need any help?” The guy clipped leashes onto collars.

“Here are those cookies, Boss.” Samantha stopped short. “Oh, good. You found him.”

“I did. Or he found me.” He took the dog biscuits. “Can I give them a treat?”

“For mauling you?” The guest laughed, head falling back, showing off an absolutely stunning body.

“Oh, they are vicious, for sure.”

Chuckling, the guest looked him over. “I’m sorry again. They’re used to having some room to run. They were staying with my mom over in Fort Collins for a few weeks.”

“Aww...poor babies. They’re welcome to be out here, but they need to be leashed. Boss’s orders.”

“Oh, absolutely. Otherwise, it’s a liability issue. And from now on, they’ll be leashed on the little patio too. I’ll be here at least week, maybe two.”

Oh, well, that was good to know. He’d let all the staff know they weren’t ponies. And he would also maybe have something pretty to look at from time to time. One-oh-nine was very attractive, with his glossy black hair and light-colored eyes. It was hard to tell out here what color, but he was hot as hell.

That was pretty rare here.

This place called to the older men, omegas generally, who didn’t trigger Antonia, the hotel’s resident ghost. The alphas ended up getting a little spooked, what with the knocking and wailing and sometimes soup spilling.

“Can I give them the treats?” The dogs were watching his hand, where he was holding the cookies Samantha had handed him.

“Of course. They’re not finger nippers. Be good, you two.”

“They’re good babies. I can tell.” Goofy and huge, but just babies. How could he not

like them?

“They are. I’m Kaleb, by the way. This is Neo, and that’s Trinity.”

“Oh, how cool.” He fed Neo first, then Trinity. “I’m Charlie, incidentally. I work the front desk during the day, so if you need anything at all, please holler. Samantha here is my backup, and she’s also amazing.”

Samantha flushed and ducked her head, stammering a thanks, then fled.

“She’s new, huh?”

“So new,” Charlie said with a laugh. “And she was convinced we had ponies in the courtyard.”

“Ah. So new and a townie, at that.” Kaleb’s tone wasn’t ugly or anything. In fact, Charlie got the feeling it was self-deprecating.

“Yeah, but she’ll learn, and she did the right thing, one way or the other.” Because it was his job to deal with hotel emergencies. No question.

He was the king of deal-with-it.

“They can be overwhelming, for sure. Thanks so much for corralling them. They wouldn’t wander too far, but they would make themselves a nuisance.”

“It’s my pleasure, sir.” And his job. He was like the concierge of Secret Springs.

Kaleb grinned back. “You’re very kind. Where do I go to get a cookie?”

“The human-friendly ones are in the lobby. Today, we are having white chocolate

macadamia.”

“Yum. Let me put these guys in my room.” Kaleb tugged the slobber factory back inside.

“Lord have mercy.” Charlie shook his head and went to make sure there were, in fact, fresh cookies waiting for their guests in the lobby.

Somehow, he really didn’t want to disappoint Kaleb.

A fresh tray of cookies sat on the big huntboard along one wall, and he checked the temp on the coffee and the hot water containers. They did need more cold water, though, so he filled that dispenser and changed out the lemon slices.

By the time he got back, Kaleb was there with the cookies and coffee, a blissful smile on his face.

“Oh, good. You got a cookie.”

“A cookie? I’ve had three. So good. Where do you guys get these?”

“There’s a local bakery in town that provides them. Dan and Matteo are good friends with the Harlans.”

“Oh, man. I know where I’m going tomorrow for a midmorning snack. I have to have breakfast here. The buffet is too good to pass up, and I’m the dogs snow hiking, so I’ll take some sweets with me.”

“Oh, have a good time, sir. Make sure you let someone know where you are heading and when you’ll be back.”

“I will. I filed a plan with my realtor.” Kaleb chuckled. “She’s really the only one I know in town. I mean, I’ve talked to my my contractor too.”

“Mr. Tierney?” Kynan was amazing. Everyone loved him. “Did you know he used to be the mayor?”

“No. Really? He seems young for the job.”

“He said no one else wanted to do it, so he stepped up. He was great for the older parts of downtown.”

“I bet. There are some gorgeous old ladies. Houses, I mean.”

“There are.” He had a wistful moment for one of the old Victorians he could never afford but would kill to decorate. “Which one are you buying?”

Kaleb chuckled. “I bought the Dewhurst mansion.”

“Goodness! Really? That’s...that’s a project. Congratulations!”

“Thanks.” Kaleb’s smile went wry. “I had intended just to camp out up there, but man, the power and water situation is dire. So I’ll stay here while I at least figure out what needs doing.” The wry turned into a wince. “Since I already sold my condo in Denver.”

“Well, this is the slowest season, so we’re more than pleased to be your home away from home.”

“I appreciate it.” Kaleb offered him a cookie. “I don’t suppose you can join me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I have to work, but thank you for the offer.” He didn’t do that. He

wasn't alone with strange men. Ever.

“Sure.” Kaleb’s face fell, but then his smile reasserted itself. “Well, thank you for all the help.”

“Of course, sir. If you need anything, please call. We’re here for you.” He smiled. “And the pups.”

“I should get back to them. I need to actually walk them before supper.” Kaleb snuck one more cookie, winking at him as he did.

He chuckled and went back to his job.

Pretty man. Too bad Charlie was off the market.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Four

Kaleb headed into town from the hotel, wandering like he had for the last few days, Neo and Trin loose on their leads, just trundling with him. He liked the town a lot. A lot. The bakery had amazing goodies. The bagel place had good coffee and sandwiches, and the library was packed for such a small town. They had a great fantasy collection and a DD game every week.

That rocked pretty hard.

He was meeting Kynan at his office, and the man had told him to bring the beasts, so he was taking advantage of the brisk but sunny weather and letting everyone out of the hotel room.

Charlie hadn't been at the desk this morning. Kaleb hoped he was okay.

There was something about the pretty man with the light-brown curls that just fascinated him. He was lovely, kind, and the dogs loved him. Kaleb figured he must be straight as a ruler, the way he ignored all of Kaleb's not-so-subtle clues, but that was okay.

He could still look. And maybe be friends, if Charlie would let him.

A little terrier wearing a plaid sweater careened around a corner, barking furiously, and Kaleb saw it all start to go bad before he could stop it.

Neo jumped a foot in the air before scrambling back in abject terror, while Trin

leaped forward, head down and butt up, ready to play. The leashes snapped taut, his arms went two different directions, and his feet went right out from under him.

Bang.

“Oh my gosh! Hey, pup. You’re okay. I have you.” A tiny dapper man grabbed Neo’s leash, then came to help him up. “You okay, buddy?”

“I think so?” He shook his head when Neo came to lick his cheek. “That came out of nowhere.”

“Actually, it came from Mrs. Neely’s house just up the way.” The man handed him Neo’s lead, then scooped up the wiggling Westie. “He’s enthusiastic.”

“Yeah. And Neo is a big weenie.”

“Most big guys are.” The guy winked at him, obviously playing, and Kaleb had to grin.

“Yeah, yeah.” He chuckled. “Kaleb. Thanks for the assist.”

“Hamish! There you are. What a bad dog.” An older woman in a wild purple coat and a hat with a giant flower sticking out of it came rushing over. “Hank, thank you so much. Young man, are you all right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just strengthening my bones.”

She blinked, then laughed out loud, slapping his arm. “I’ve heard falling helps.”

“In theory if not in practice, hrm?” He shook his head, feeling like nothing more than an idiot.

“I think you need a coffee,” the Hank guy said. “Let me buy you one.”

“Oh.” He blinked, then nodded. “I’m on my way to a meeting, but I could totally stop and get a coffee first.”

“Who are you meeting?” Hank just herded him and the dogs toward the coffee shop.

“My contractor, Kynan Tierney?” He supposed it was presumptuous to assume everyone knew everyone, even if the town seemed impossibly small to him, and Kynan had been mayor. But he put it out there.

“Oh, did you buy a place in town? He does amazing work. His husband, Andrew, is my best friend.”

“So I hear. I bought the Dewhurst mansion.”

“Oh my God.” Hank stopped dead, staring at him. “Did you really?”

He grinned. “I really did.”

“Oh. My. God. How exciting! Did you know that Augustus Dewhurst killed his omega and then killed himself in that house?”

“Annette might have mentioned it.” He didn’t put a whole lot of credence into ghost stories.

“It’s a cool story. I used to run the historical society, and there is a ton of good information, pictures, that sort of thing.” Hank opened the coffee shop door. “There’s a little area over there that is dog friendly. What kind of coffee are you into?”

“Just coffee is fine.” He grinned. “I’ll grab myself a treat, but I appreciate the busted-

my-butt-on-Main-Street sympathy coffee.”

“Are you kidding? I get to pick your brain about the mansion.”

“Ah, now I get it.” He laughed, taking the dogs to the pet area, much to the oohs and ahhs of the other patrons.

There wasn’t anyone else in there now to scare the big goofball, so he felt okay leaving them there, and there was astroturf so they couldn’t make a mess.

He headed back to stand with Hank, who was perusing the coffee board.

“What are you going to have?”

The barista chuckled. “The Ghost Hunter. It’s named after him. It’s a white chocolate mocha with caramel, pecan, and an extra shot.”

“That sounds great.” He would totally pay too. “Let me get it, man.”

“No, no. I’m going to treat. You can get it next time.”

“I will.” He decided then and there that he and Hank would be friends. “So were you on your way here for coffee?”

“I was. I come every morning. Antonia’s father watches her for a couple of hours for me, and then I take the afternoon. We split the evenings.”

“Oh.” Did that mean they were divorced? Was he in weird water there?

“We’re both work-from-home types,” Hank said with a chuckle. “So we both need some time away.”

“Oh! That’s cool. I mean, I get it. It’s harder to structure work from home.”

“Yes, and I like to get out, see the town, remember that I have a life that isn’t in the sound studio.”

He tilted his head. “What do you do in the studio?” He loved the people he met here in Secret Springs. They all had these crazy interesting lives.

“I have a ghost-hunting podcast. I’ve been fairly successful. My husband, Eliot, is a novelist.”

“Neat! Do you do the ghost tours too? I’ve seen the brochures at the hotel.” He checked on the beasts, who were sitting half on top of a kid who had sidled over to say hi and whose mom looked concerned. “Be right back.”

“No worries. I’ll bring the coffees.”

“Cool.” He rescued the preschooler, gave the dogs each a cookie out of his pocket, and then went to rejoin Hank. “Sorry. So. Ghost tour?”

Hank handed him a coffee and they went to sit. “Yes. I’ve been running them for years, and I love it—the history, the paranormal, all of it.”

“Fun!” He grinned. “You’ll have to come up and do a podcast from the house at some point. When it’s safe again.”

“I’ve tried for years, but the management company that dealt with the estate said there were unsafe areas on the upstairs floors.”

“Looks like that’s probably the case, yeah.”

“Bummer. That’s a shame. Are you going to repair them, then? You know that ghosts often get riled up during renovations?”

“I’ll holler at you if that’s the case. And I’m going to restore the place. I really want it to be period but have modern comforts too. But I hate old houses with like, obviously brand-new shiny kitchens.” He grinned. “There’s a dumbwaiter.”

“Dude. For real? That so rocks. You have to be so excited.”

The coffee was sweet, and he found himself laughing with Hank.

The bell over the door jingled, someone else coming in, and Hank clapped. “Yay. Charlie, come meet Kaleb. He’s going to renovate the Dewhurst mansion.”

“Oh, Mr. Raleigh, nice to see you. Neo, Trinity.”

“Hi, Charlie. Please call me Kaleb.” Surely Charlie could do that off duty? His lovely light-brown curls looked windblown, his cheeks pink from the weather. He was so pretty, with his dark blue eyes and kind of pointy chin.

“Of course, Mr... Kaleb.” Charlie chuckled softly. “I need a cup of coffee. Do you guys need anything?”

“Oh, we have coffee, but come join us,” Hank said. “You can help prep Kaleb here to talk to Kynan about the renovation.”

He glanced at Charlie and raised his eyebrows.

“Kynan loves an old house. I’m sure he’ll be respectful. I’m coordinating with him at the hotel, and he’s wonderful to work with.”

“So what’s your role at the hotel?” He put his elbows on the table and gave Charlie his undivided attention.

Charlie curled in on himself. “I—I’m just the front desk guy. Mr. Harlan lets me redo the rooms. Keeping them period. Nothing much.”

“Hey, that’s awesome. I mean, I’m in one of the renovated suites, and it’s amazing. The bathroom is so cool. I love how the shower looks like one of the really old rainbaths, but it has the jets hidden in the wall too.” He did love that shower.

“It’s a good shower.” Charlie smiled at him. “I couldn’t resist.”

“Well, trust me, it’s a good thing. I may have to show you my plans for the bathroom in the master at the house. I mean, it doesn’t really have one, but I want to carve one out, and then sort of blend it in.”

“Oh, I’m not a professional. I’m just... I’m not a real designer. Mr. Harlan’s allowing me to pinch hit.”

“But you did such a good job. That makes you a designer in my book.”

Hank cheered. “See, Charlie? I told you so.”

That earned them a blush and the sweetest grin, and Kaleb wanted to see it again and again. There was something about Charlie that called to him, that was as right for him as Secret Springs and his new old house.

Something that made him want to wrap around Charlie and hold on tight.

“Well, thank you, but I don’t want to misrepresent myself.”

“Here’s your usual, Charlie,” the lady behind the counter called.

“I’ll be right back.” Charlie hustled off.

Hank eyed him. “He’s a sweetie.”

“He is. And I like him.”

“I do too. I think I might be his best friend.”

“Yeah? Is he always a little shy?” He wasn’t going to ask Hank to dish on Charlie, but if he could get himself a little information, well, he wasn’t above that.

“He’s been through a lot.” Hank shrugged, smiled.

“Oh. I’m sorry. That sucks.” He wondered what Hank meant, but again, not Hank’s story to tell. It was just that he wanted to be around Charlie. He wanted to not step on a mine in the field while doing it.

“Just please remember, he’s been hurt.” Hank’s words stopped as Charlie got closer.

He nodded to show he understood. Kaleb was the king of slow hands. So to speak. Maybe because he had a few scars of his own.

“I’m running late. I promised I’d bring doughnuts for everyone today, so Mr. Matteo offered to save me a couple boxes.”

“Do you need a ride, Charlie?” Hank asked.

“Nope. I’m great. I’ll see you both later!”

Before he could even blink, Charlie was out the door.

“Damn.” He watched the door where Charlie had disappeared. “I was hoping he had time to sit.”

“He’s the most loyal guy I’ve ever met. Ever.”

“Yeah?” That sounded like a good quality. “Is he—is he seeing anyone?” Hank wasn’t acting as if Charlie had a partner, but it was always good to ask up-front.

“No. No, he’s not attached. He’s living in the Apartment for Lost Omegas. Some of the town alphas—well, they keep an apartment for emergencies.”

“The Apartment...” He could hear the capital letters in his head. “Okay. Well, then, if he’s free... Once I’m not a guest at the hotel anymore, I can ask him out, right?”

“I don’t see why not. I like you, so far, and you have big neat dogs. Charlie was a minor league ball player. I bet he could throw a ball for them.”

A woof from the dog area made him grin. “Speaking of dogs... They want to finish their walk, and I need to meet with Kynan. Thanks for the insight, Hank. It was nice to meet you.” Kaleb stood. “Oh, hey, about the podcast. Do I just call the brochure number?”

“You do. Or you can just call me.” Hank held out his phone. “Put in your info?”

“Sure.” He tapped in all his contact stuff. “I can’t guarantee a signal up at the house, but I will be checking in several times a day.” He was a tech guy. He couldn’t live without being plugged in at least a little.

“Fair enough.” Hank chuckled and sent him a text as soon as he handed the phone

back.

“Got it. I’ll add you to my contacts.”

“Perfect.” Hank grinned as he went to get the dogs. “Be careful out there!”

“I will.” He leashed up the dogs and headed to see Kynan. He was going to ask Kynan about Charlie, dammit. Hank was an unknown, and one of Charlie’s good friends, where Kynan seemed like the kind of alpha who rented out apartments to omegas who needed a place to go...

Kynan just happened to be arriving as they walked up, the dogs lunging forward to meet him since the last time he’d given them a cookie.

The big alpha had a brand-new baby in a sling against his chest, two children in a stroller. “Hey, guys! Kaleb! Come on in.”

The little boy in the stroller made grabby hands. “Puppy!”

“Troy, we ask first.”

“Hey.” He tugged on the leashes. “Sit.” Two hairy butts hit the ground, so he grinned.

“Okay, now they can greet.”

“Thanks, man. Careful, Troy. Remember what we talked about.”

“Hand ope. Soft pat.”

“That’s good, bud. I appreciate that you listened.” Kynan winked at him and then helped Troy to pet Trin, who was the one on that side. Deliberately. Both dogs loved kids, but she was so much more confident than Neo.

“Me! Me, Papa! Me!” The little girl beamed, clapping hard. “Good girl!”

“Okay, Hannah, but you have to be very careful.” Kynan held her hand too, and he kept his hand on the leash loose and relaxed, letting his girl know he trusted her. Tension would make her tense.

“They’re very good,” Kaleb said.

“We know our share of dogs.” Kynan grinned, then frowned. “You take a header?”

“There was a Westie.”

“Ah. Yes. Come in. I’ll get you a towel and a cup of coffee.”

It seemed that the answer to most things here was coffee. Or craft food and beer if it was at night. Totally Colorado.

“Thanks. You want me to leave these two somewhere?”

“Nah, I have a towel for them too. They can come on up.” Kynan led him inside, and he was glad to be able to bring the dogs all the way in, not just tie them in a foyer or something. He’d thought that was what Kynan had meant when he’d said they were welcome, but hello, little kids.

“Pup-pup,” the little girl said, and her brother nodded to her, then pronounced?—

“Baby dog.”

Kynan grinned. “He’s very into the idea of babies since his daddy had his little brother.”

“Ah.” Kaleb nodded. “Big brother syndrome. It’s a real thing.”

“Ah, are you a big brother? My husband is too. I’m an only.”

“I am. I have a couple of half siblings. Though I’m biologically an only. And my dad doesn’t exactly encourage me to talk to the others.” And now he had two moms, which rocked.

“So your folks split up?”

“Oh, yeah. My dad is on wife two. She’s nice, but she disapproves of me because I don’t work anymore.” He rolled his eyes. “She’s a psychologist. And mom is married to Maman, which is great.”

Kynan chuckled. “Wow. So that turns the stereotype on its ear.”

“Hey, she’s the alpha.” He shrugged. “So I need to talk en suite.”

Kynan’s eyebrows rose. “Okay.”

“I’m in love with the bathroom at the hotel. I want that shower. It looks period but feels like twenty years from now.”

“I know, right? That was a fun project.”

“Hank—I met him at the fall in the street portion of the day—he says Charlie at the hotel helped design it?” There. His lead-in. Go him.

Kynan nodded. “He did. Smart kid. Talented, and what he doesn’t know? He looks up. He’s in the library a ton.”

“Yeah? Hank says he’s had a tough time of it.” He hoped he wasn’t sounding weird or something. He was feeling a little pushy, but he had this burning urge to know Charlie. And he rarely questioned his gut. It had guided him well his whole adult life.

“Ah, you heard about the apartment, did you?”

“I did. And he told me to be careful, that Charlie had been hurt.” He spread his hands. “Maybe it seems fast, but I like him. A lot. And I don’t want to mess up.” In fact, he wanted to ace this one, to let Charlie know he was safe to let things develop.

“Yeah, so Hank and Elliot found him in the basement. He’d been beaten half to death by a bunch of assholes while he was up camping, and thrown into a coal chute to die. He’d been a baseball player, and that’s over.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. They broke his shoulder. So he’s been living above Lukas’s tattoo shop, working at the hotel, and hiding out.”

He shook his head. “That’s nuts. He’s so sweet, too. So good with the guests. The dogs.” He was reeling a little, because that was more than like a relationship crashing.

“Yeah, he’s a good guy, but he seems lost to me, you know? Distant, but he has his reasons.”

“Sure. Do you think he’d like to work on my house? No strings attached?”

“He lights up when he talks about reno at the hotel, so yeah. But take someone with you to begin with. Me. Hank. Someone.”

“I can do that. Okay, so, how did we do with that change order?”

“Given how much of the original plumbing is s. h. i. t., what you want is totally doable.”

“Oh, cool. I need to be up there living soon, too. I can get an RV rental, but I’ll need a hookup at the least.”

“Electrical and heat are our first priorities. That way, when we put in new plumbing, it doesn’t freeze.”

“Right. Electric. Heat.” He shook his head. “My own personal money pit, huh?”

Maybe this was an epic mistake, but he loved this house.

“Yep. You’ll have to see mine sometime. Come over for a beer or whatever you drink. Andrew loves to show off our monster house.”

“You did one of those corner lot Victorians downtown, right?”

“She’s a grand old lady.” Kynan beamed at him, the love shining from his face. “It’s home.”

“I’d love to see it.” He was really loving the vibe of Secret Springs. He might not end up being besties with any of these folks, but they were willing to give him a chance, and he already felt like he knew more people here than he ever had in Denver.

“Papa! Pup-pup.”

“Oh, God. Do you have a paper towel?” Kaleb went to pull Neo, who had decided Troy was his new favorite thing ever, off. And now he needed to mop drool. “Sorry.”

“He’s a child. He’s gross. He washes.” Kynan dug in a diaper bag and threw over a

wipey. “I believe in the dirty-children-are-happy-children philosophy.”

“You’re a contractor. That makes sense.” He scrubbed Troy up, and the little one giggled madly. “I have St. Bernards, so it’s a good thing I’m not a germophobe.”

“God yes. It’s like my buddy Chase. His man is a cowboy and they live on a ranch. Their children are always like little urchins. He says he had to give up his worry about that or go nuts.”

He cackled. “That sounds amazing.”

“It kind of is. They do the best Fourth of July barbecue. Chase is the owner operator of Fuel and the hotel restaurant.”

“Hey, that’s seriously impressive. The hotel has amazing food. Bridget is a great chef.”

“She’s amazing. You’re going to fit in here, man. This is not the ‘man is an island’ type of town. We’re nosy, and we love to get together.”

“I think I’m ready for that. I... I’ve been alone a lot.” Even in his company, he’d been the guy they all came to ask things and then the employees would all go out to lunch and leave him in his office. Not that he was all wah wah about it, but he thought he’d sold out and retired early just to go off and find a new place and a chance at a new Kaleb. He was still young enough to learn to be more than what he’d been.

“Yeah. I hear you. Come to supper with me, Mark, and Elliot tonight? We’re going to have supper at Fuel and then head to the tattoo parlor next door. Lukas is going to work on my back piece.” Kynan grinned and winked. “All the omegas are heading to my house to play with the new baby.”

“I’d love to, if no one else minds.” He didn’t have supper plans, and this way, he could get to know some more people around town.

“I can almost guarantee no one will care, but I can send a text around. And King is always happy to make more money, so he’ll add another name to the reservation.” Kynan grinned. “We’re a pretty open bunch. We love new folks.”

“Well, if they don’t mind, that would be great.” He was ready to make more friends, for sure, and to learn more about Secret Springs.

And somehow, he would work in getting to know Charlie too.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Five

“So, my house is ready for me to move up there to start the work,” Kaleb told Charlie when he came down for his third doughnut trip late in the morning one day. “I’ll hang out until the end of the week, like I paid out, but I won’t need the room for another week after that.”

“Oh.” He hoped his face didn’t show it, but Charlie felt his heart fall. He’d really enjoyed having Kaleb there at the hotel, and the dogs had become favorites of the whole staff, their antics making everyone laugh. “Well, we’ll miss you.”

“Aw.” Kaleb gave him a glinting grin, those clear gray eyes, which should have been glacial somehow, heating up. “Not too much, I hope. I’ll be coming in for Bridget’s weekly Irish special as much as I can.”

“That’s good.” His cheeks heated. Yes! He would get to see Kaleb, which had been a reason to look forward to coming to work even more.

“Yeah. And since I won’t be a guest anymore, I was hoping to talk to you about something else.”

“You were?” He stared, his heart racing. If Kaleb asked him out, what would he do? He just—He would have to say no. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t go out alone with someone.

“Yeah. I was wondering if you would meet with me and Kynan about some of the house renovations.” Kaleb picked what Charlie thought was imaginary lint off his

sleeve.

“I—really?”

“Yes. I honestly love the rooms you’ve redone. I’m interested in your opinion.”

He had to smile, because how cool was that? “Seriously? You know I’m not trained, right?”

“Me either, but I’m going to live there, so I want to be happy.”

“I understand that.” He’d redecorated the apartment he was in now, with Lukas’s blessing. Most of it was removable, so he could take it with him if he had to go, and he hadn’t touched the two big pieces of amazing antique furniture, but he was proud.

“Anyway, what do you think? Kynan said he would give you a ride up to the house if you didn’t want to have to depend on me.”

“I—” Well, fuck. He really, really wanted to check it out. The place hung up in the mountain like it had grown up there, all scary and dilapidated. “I’d like to see the place. I’ll totally run up with Mr. Kynan as soon as he’s heading up while I’m not at work.”

His boss, Jack Harlan, came out of the office with his daughter, Elizabeth Anne, grinning at them. “Run up where? I’m nosy. Hey, Kaleb.”

“Jack. Good to see you.” Kaleb nodded, and Charlie had to wonder how he knew everyone in town already.

“Good to be seen. Are you having lunch with Hank today, Charlie? I found those pictures he wanted.”

“Yes, sir. I am. I’ll take them.”

“I’m going to get Charlie to come up to the house with Kynan and work with me on the plan for the decor. I want to start doing some woodwork now that the floors have been assessed and I know all the beams are stable.” Kaleb chuckled. “I forget not everyone has quit their day job.”

“No, just me, Chase...really, that’s it. We’re the three.” Jack winked at him, and Charlie fought his smile. It was impossible not to like Mr. Jack. Seriously. The man was happy, and he loved sharing it with everyone else. “I’m a lucky bastard.”

“Daddy! You said a cuss! I get a dollar!” Elizabeth Anne bounced and held out her hand, that little girl as sharp as a tack. “He never learns. I’m going to be a zillionaire and buy a barrel horse.”

Jack pulled out a money clip that only ever had singles in it and gave his daughter a bill. “You should run up with Kynan tomorrow, Charlie. I bet Gail would be happy to get a few hours in. Her grandkids will be coming in May, and she always saves to do fun things with them.”

“Oh, I—Are you sure?”

“Of course. Kynan can take you up. You’re a talented designer. You should go with it.” Jack’s airy wave meant more than a stern talking to, because that meant Jack meant it. What he was saying was just second nature.

“Thank you.” He glanced at Kaleb. “Is tomorrow good?”

“It’s great. I’ll text Kynan. What time do you want to come up? I think he was planning on around nine a.m., but we can work that into something else if you need to.”

Nine a.m., huh? Well, maybe he'd only have to take a half-day off. That would be nice. "That's fine. I'm free, thanks to Mr. Harlan."

"Perfect." Kaleb beamed. "Thank you. And thanks, Jack."

"Can I see your dogs?" Elizabeth Anne asked.

"Do you have time?" Kaleb looked at Jack.

"Sure. I'll get those pictures for Charlie, if you don't mind taking her. I can meet you out in the courtyard."

"Yay!" Elizabeth Anne took Kaleb's hand, dragging Kaleb away.

Jack chuckled. "She does love animals."

Charlie shook his head, but he had to admit, he loved those big buffoons. They were sweet and goofy and gentle. "They're good dogs."

"They are. Kaleb seems like a real decent guy, too. I met him a few times back when I was doing investing in Denver." Jack watched him rather carefully, he thought.

"Did you? So you were okay with him?" He wasn't scary?

Charlie didn't feel particularly scared of him, to be honest.

"He's a solid citizen, as far as I could tell. He ran a tech company. I understand he sold it and is basically living off investments from that now." Jack grinned. "Hell of a job."

"Yeah." He was never going to be that guy. He was going to be on a time clock until

he died. It had been a fantasy that it would ever be different.

“Well, anyway, I think you’ll love that damn house. I thought about buying it and making it into a B-and-B type situation. It’s got something like twenty-four rooms. But I decided it needed too much work. Glad to see it go to someone who will make it shine.”

“Yes. I love how it hangs up there, like a growth on the mountain.” And he had to admit he was curious to see inside.

“It does kind of look like that from down here, huh? I always imagine how tough that had to be to get to when it was built. Be right back.” Jack disappeared back into the office behind the desk, then emerged with a stack of old photos. “For Hank.”

“Oh, he’ll be over the moon. He loves this?—”

“Daddy!” Elizabeth Anne came running in, feet slamming on the floor like she was as heavy as an elephant. “Daddy, they’re Nana dogs! Daddy, I love them, and Mr. Kabob says I can visit them and they’ll be my friends!”

“That sounds amazing, kiddo.” Jack grabbed her hand. “Did you run away from Kaleb?”

She frowned. “Um.”

“We were all supposed to meet in the courtyard.”

“Miss Antonia came with me.”

Jack sighed. “Honey, ghosts don’t count on the buddy system, okay?”

“Oh, okay. Daddy, will you be my buddy?” Butter wouldn’t melt in that child’s mouth.

“I will. Let’s go get your dad.” Jack looked at Charlie. “He’s bothering Ryan in the kitchen. Holler if you need anything. I’ll get Gail in for tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” He chuckled and shook his head at himself. He did not need to get all excited. He was not a designer. He was not trained. He was a guy who liked to decorate things.

He had an enormous Pinterest board collection and he bought all of the vintage house magazines. But surely Kynan knew more than he did.

Kaleb came back through with the monster dogs. “When do you head out for lunch? I won’t horn in, but I could walk with you. These guys need a long trek.”

“I’m meeting Hank at David’s Pizza. Would you—” Come on. It’s lunch. He’s checking out. “Would you like to join us?”

“God, yes.” Kaleb grinned. “Though it might be best to leave these guys here. Do I have time to run them out to potty?”

“Of course, but...look, that’s way out of your way, if you’re heading to your house. You can let them stay at my apartment, if you want.”

“That sounds great, if you don’t mind. That way I can drive us to lunch instead of walking back here after, huh? Can Hank bring you back, though?” Kaleb frowned, clearly trying to figure out how to achieve getting him back with an escort.

“If he can’t, I’ll walk, but usually Hank stops here so he can make sure things are ready for the ghost tour.”

“Oh, good. I met, uh... Stone? I met him a few nights ago.”

Stone worked with Hank giving tours and doing his podcast.

“Yeah, he’s amazing. He stayed in my apartment before I did. He actually still lives in my building with his husband and their baby.” Demetrius and his sister owned the corsetry shop downstairs, next to the gym.

“Oh, wow. This small-town stuff is all new to me. And that’s not being mean. I think it’s really cool.” Kaleb oofed as Neo tried to pull him over to get to a guest who walked in with a box of doughnuts.

“Neo. Stop it. I have a cookie in my pocket.” Silly, goofy boy. Charlie adored them both.

Neo’s ears perked up, and he swiveled, lunging to sit at Charlie’s feet.

“Ooof. You are so going to stay in Charlie’s apartment. And be good.”

“They don’t chew furniture, right?” There was a big wardrobe that was irreplaceable...

“No. And I’ll give them their rug and a couple of big dental chews to make sure they’re comfy and busy.”

“There you go. They’ll be fine, and Lukas—he’s the building owner and the tattoo artist in the studio downstairs—doesn’t open until three p.m. on Thursdays.” So if they barked, it would be fine.

“Oh, wow. Does that get weird if you’re trying to sleep, him being open late?” He could tell Kaleb was just curious, so he didn’t tense up about his private life.

“No, I never hear anything upstairs.”

“Neat. It looks like an old building, so I didn’t know.”

“Fuel is way louder.”

“Oh, I bet. People leaving the restaurant, right? I used to live over one of those fancy burger places for a while, when I was still starting out in Denver. People have no idea how loud they talk when they leave a restaurant, because they’ve had to talk louder to be heard inside, huh?”

“Exactly! But it’s insanely clean down there. I mean, the smells are enough to make you feel like you’re starving all the time.” Jesus, Charlie. Shut up.

“The food is amazing. I ate there with Kynan last week. I mean, damn.” Kaleb shook his head. “Listen to me going on. Are you ready to go to lunch, or should I walk them around until you get off?”

“Let me make sure my coverage is here.”

Speaking of, Gail walked in, a smile on her face. “Hey, you. I’m here for your lunch.”

“Thanks, Gail. I’ll be back in an hour and a half, give or take.” He grabbed his coat from underneath the desk, then followed Kaleb out of the hotel, the big dogs greeting everyone they passed.

“I bet the other guests will be glad to get rid of these guys.” Kaleb led him to a big truck, putting the dogs in the back seat.

“Once they figured out they weren’t horses, they were fine.” Charlie figured it was safe to tease.

“This is true. I can’t believe someone reported them as ponies.” They headed across the river and up Main. It was such a short drive compared to walking, and in no time, they were stashing the dogs in his apartment.

“This is a great apartment!”

“Thank you. I like it. It’s warm and cozy.”

“It is. I mean, it’s really neat. Look at all of that woodwork. And I love the colors of the cushions and the drapes.” Kaleb looked around, then let the dogs off their leashes.

“Do you have a sheet I can cover your couch with?”

“Of course.” He went to the little linen closet and pulled out his spare clean sheet.

“They’ll be fine.”

But he thought it was so sweet how Kaleb worried and loved them.

“Oh, I don’t worry about them, really, but this is your place. I’m not going to let them destroy it.” Grinning, Kaleb helped him drape the couch, and then he got a bowl of water to put out on the hard floor in the kitchenette.

“We’ll be back in a few, guys. Don’t worry, all right?”

They headed over to David’s—the walk was short, and the sun kept things reasonable. It wasn’t warm, but it didn’t suck. And Kaleb was a large, solid presence, but he wasn’t looming or trying to dominate in any way. He was just sharing space and chatting.

It made him ache a little, because he really liked Kaleb, but he didn’t...he wasn’t...dammit.

He just couldn't go there.

"Hey!" Hank met them outside. "Kaleb, hi. Charlie." Hank gave him a hug.

"Hey there. Is it okay that Kaleb comes for lunch?"

"Of course. You're always welcome." Hank shot Kaleb a grin. "How goes the house?"

"Good. We're go for the stairs now. The electrical is mostly up and running, and I'll be up there in an RV now until we make sure the roof is totally solid. I want Charlie to come up and look at the woodwork and make some recommendations for the bathrooms."

They got into the line to order, and Hank beamed at Kaleb. "Oh, that rocks. Have you seen the ghosts yet?"

"Nope." Kaleb chuckled. "Lots of chipmunks."

"Darn. I was hoping for all these wild encounters." Hank grinned over at Kaleb. "You're going to let me come up, though, right? Do a podcast?"

"Of course. Anytime. God, it smells good in here."

"Yeah. Did you want a sub or a pizza? They're both amazing." Charlie wanted a meatball sandwich, he thought...

"I think a sub. I love an Italian." Kaleb's grin was so infectious.

"So when are you going up, Charlie?" Hank asked. "Today?"

“Oh, no. No, I have to go back to work.” Meatball sub. That was the ticket. “Gail will cover for me tomorrow morning and I’ll ride up with Kynan.”

They ordered then, with David himself prodding Kaleb into trying the half and half salad with his sub. They settled at a booth, and he found himself sitting with Kaleb because of all of Hank’s paperwork and books.

“Are you going up today, Kaleb?” Hank’s eyes shone with unholy curiosity, which was always a bad sign.

“I am, yes. I have an electrical hookup now, and I’m renting an RV.”

“Well, then. Let me call Gail, Charlie. I bet she can cover you this afternoon. I’m free, and I can drive you up.”

His eyes widened. “Hank?—”

“Hey, that would be awesome. That way, I would have some intel before I meet with Kynan tomorrow.” Kaleb grinned at him and Hank like they were geniuses.

Hank pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts. “Gail... There she is.” He hit call. “Hi, Gail. Hank Vargas-Graham. Yes. I’m with Charlie at lunch, and he was wondering if you could—Exactly. Uh-huh. Perfect. Thanks, hon. Bye.” Hank beamed as he hung up. “She says that’s better for her than tomorrow.”

Charlie felt a little as if he’d been run over by a truck.

“That’s great. In fact, my dogs are at Charlie’s.” Kaleb nudged Charlie gently with his elbow. “You can ride up with me and ride back with Hank.”

“I—Um.”

“And you can grab a notebook or a sketchbook or whatever at your place too, right?”

“Of course, but?—”

“Then it’s settled.” Hank clapped his hands. “I’m so excited.”

Charlie sat there, blinking and trying to figure out how he’d been so outmaneuvered until the food came.

Then he sat there watching Kaleb eat and wondering why he’d never noticed what a disturbingly attractive thing it was to see a man moan over a mix of pasta and green salad.

Hank chattered enough for all of them, and it wasn’t until he was in the truck with Kaleb and on the way up to the mansion that he caught his breath.

“I hope this is okay,” Kaleb said. “I know we kind of browbeat you into it.”

Charlie clutched his notebook in his lap. “No, it’s fine. I’m just a little bit of a routine guy. It takes me a minute to adjust if my plan goes awry.” He said it wryly, but it was true. He had a well-ordered life, and he’d just been sent sideways.

“Ah. Yeah. I was very much that way when I was working all the time. I forget that not everyone can just hare off on a weird mission.” Kaleb gave him a little smile. “I’m sorry.”

He took a deep breath, determined to enjoy the ride up the mountain. “No, it’s fine. Really. The view is breathtaking from up here.”

“It really is.” Kaleb turned off on a road marked private, and wound up to the house, which was...crazy. Pictures didn’t even come close to doing it justice.

It hung off the mountain like a natural outcropping, three stories of house with towers reaching even higher. It wasn't Addams Family dark, but intimidating? Hell yes.

"Wow." Charlie laughed, because what else could he do. It was a decorator's dream, really. And it had to be a logistical nightmare for Kynan. Or a challenge, he supposed.

"Yeah. From here, you really see how freaking huge it is," Kaleb said, his chuckle joining Charlie's as they parked. They climbed out of the vehicle and Hank bounced over to meet them.

"Oh my God, I've always wanted to see this place," Hank said.

"There's a lot to see." Kaleb said it wryly as he let the dogs out.

"Seventeen bedrooms, a ballroom, a conservatory, a billiards room, a two-story library—" Hank sounded like he was going to cream his jeans.

"Seven—Did you say seventeen?" Houses didn't have seventeen bedrooms. Hotels did.

"Yep. And there are a few water closets, but I'm having to put in real bathrooms. So a couple of those bedrooms will probably become bathrooms and closets, but there is a ton of storage. And did I mention the dumbwaiter? Trinity, leave Hank alone."

Hank chuckled softly. "She's in love with the peanut butter snacks Antonia keeps in my backpack."

"Well, make sure we put that high up on a counter. They can reach, but they know they're not allowed to." Kaleb led the way up the stone stairs to the front entry, then unlocked the door with a flourish. "Enter, my friends."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Six

Kaleb watched Charlie explore his house, those pretty blue eyes wide and wondering. It made him feel ten feet tall and bulletproof.

Hank was running off in all directions, some kind of electronic doohickey in hand, apparently trying to measure ghost activity, which left him and Charlie mostly to themselves, the dogs following Hank's treats.

"This place is magical... I mean, look at it. Where are you... Are you going to have parties in the ballroom?"

"I have no idea. Maybe I'll just roller skate in there." Kaleb looked around the grand hall that led back to the billiard room, ballroom, and omegas' lounge. "Do you think there are more secret passages that we don't know about?"

"I guarantee Hank is knocking right now," Charlie warned.

"That's okay."

"I can't believe this place. It's so beautiful."

"There are amazing bones under the dust and the scaffolding. I had to buy it. I mean, I didn't even come see it first. It called to me." Kaleb ran a hand over some woodwork, and he thought he heard Charlie swallow hard. When he glanced up, though, no one was looking.

“I’m so glad someone’s going to love it. This is a house for a huge family. Laughter and love.”

“It is, huh? It’s kind of sad that’s never happened up here. Not according to the history.” Kaleb sobered a little. The history was pretty grim.

“No? That’s awful. I—I can’t imagine being here all alone...”

“They say the oil or timber or whatever baron killed his omega.”

Something caught the corner of his vision. He looked but didn’t see anything.

“Was that Hank? It didn’t seem like Hank. That’s awful. Why? Why not just let him leave?”

Had Charlie seen what he saw?

“I don’t know. Maybe people just didn’t break up back then.” Kaleb frowned at the window, which was weird, because if it was Hank, he was out in the hall...

“What’s wrong? Are the dogs out?” Charlie frowned at the hallway, eyebrows lowered.

If it was, why was Hank loitering out there. Out the window? Wasn’t he upstairs?

“No. I think they’re with Hank upstairs.” Kaleb moved across the room.

“No, I think Hank is—” Charlie went the other way, his voice fading. “Dammit, Hank, what’s wrong?”

“Is someone out there?” He thought he could hear Charlie talking, but he was focused

on finding out what was outside the window. There had to be wrongness for Charlie to act like this.

His omega hated being alone up here in the mountains. Everyone in town said so...

“Hank! Hank, where are you? Why are you running?”

“Charlie? Charlie, why are you outside?” Kaleb tried to find Charlie, but he couldn’t.

“I’m not outside! I’m here.”

Too bad he didn’t know where here was.

“Ezekiel? Is that you?” He heard a voice calling, deep and almost...angry? Was that his voice?

“Who?” He heard a frisson of worry, of panic. His omega was hiding. He knew it. Someone was hunting him.

“Charlie?”

“Ezekiel?”

He shook his head. How was there fog inside a house? Snow? How was this so confusing?

“Trinity? Neo? Pups, can you find Charlie?”

He heard a rough bark, a booming sound that just woke up something in him. He followed the sound, and soon he knew he was close, his vision starting to clear.

“Oh, guys. I was so scared,” he heard Charlie whisper. “I got turned around.”

“Charlie?” Kaleb felt about as confused as Charlie sounded.

“Sorry. Sorry, I was following Hank and I got turned around.”

“I thought you were outside. Scared me.” Kaleb appeared in the hall where Charlie stood looking out the window, and Kaleb realized it was an awful long way down.

“How did you get up here?”

“I don’t know. The dogs led me to you.” Kaleb grabbed Charlie, hugging him tight.

“That was weird as hell.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was scary.” He held on tight, his heart pounding violently. He was pretty sure Charlie would be able to feel it through his ribs. “Whoo. So, this old place really echoes, right? Hank moving around got us all confused.” Kaleb put a finger under Charlie chin to lift his face up. “Are you okay?”

“I am. I’m sorry. I just... I think I panicked.”

“I’m glad. I’m not sure I’m okay.” Those eyes looked a little wild. Kaleb smiled for him, but something serious was going on.

“Not sure you’re...” Charlie trailed off, lifting his face.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I’m not sure I’m sorry.” He wanted Charlie to see this coming.

“Oh.”

“I want to kiss you.”

Charlie nodded, teeth working his bottom lip. “I know. You’re not a guest anymore...”

“I’m not. So is this okay?” He bent, his lips hovering over Charlie’s while he waited for an answer. He wanted to go all alpha and control the situation, but Charlie demanded more care.

“Uh-huh...” Charlie looked dazed, but it was him who made the last push, who pressed his lips to Kaleb’s.

Kaleb stifled a moan, because he’d been dreaming about this, and he didn’t want to overwhelm Charlie right out of the gate. He did put his hand on Charlie’s nape, stroking but not holding as he deepened the kiss.

Charlie’s hand wrapped around his waist, and he swore lightning shot up his spine.

Kaleb grunted, taking the kiss to another place, his hand cupping the back of Charlie’s head. He tasted Charlie with his tongue, pushing just deep enough to tease them both.

Charlie’s moan was soft as silk, the sound brushing his ears.

His breath hitched, and he slowly slid his other hand down under Charlie’s butt, pulling them closer together. Kaleb lost himself in Charlie’s taste, in the feel of his warm body.

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation, no, in fact Charlie was firming in his jeans.

Oh, hallelujah.

He pushed one leg between Charlie’s, reveling in that hardness, wanting Charlie to

have something to lean on, and he was about to push Charlie back against the closest wall when they heard a sharp bark followed by a call.

“Charlie? Kaleb? Are you all right? I’m a little lost!”

Hank.

“Oh. We have to help him.” Charlie almost whimpered.

“What floor are you on, Hank?” He did not snarl. Nope. No snarling. That would make Charlie think he’d done something wrong.

“The third?”

“That’s one floor up.” He took Charlie’s hand, not wanting to get separated again.

“We should go get him.”

“Yeah. Together.” Charlie went with him, and they ended up on the third floor, Hank standing in a long hallway that reached all along the house.

“Hey. You okay?” Hank looked like...like maybe he’d seen a ghost, so to speak. He hoped not. Because damn.

“Yes. I got lost. Sorry.” Charlie found a smile for Hank. “Are you okay?”

“I think so. I got all turned around.” Hank shrugged, but Kaleb thought he seemed way more concerned about the house than he’d expected to be. “Remind me to make folks use the buddy system from now on in your house, Kaleb. That means you, specifically, Charlie.”

“Will do.” He shook his head. “Who wants a Coke or something? We can regroup in

the RV.”

“I’d love a Coke, and I want to totally come up here with Stone and do a podcast.”

“Anytime. Though I think you’re right. No one goes in and out alone until I get more lights and stuff fixed up in there.” That had been wild. So much weirdness.

“Do you still...” Charlie’s cheeks went bright red.

Kaleb took Charlie’s hand, not afraid to let Hank see how it was. “I want to see you. No matter what.” He stole another soft kiss. “And we can work on the house together.”

Because this was his lover, his omega, and he knew it. He just needed to create a safe place for them.

Hank cleared his throat as Charlie blinked at him. “Well, this definitely calls for a drink, even if it’s nonalcoholic.”

“I—I could have a drink...” Charlie gave him a warm, if shaky, smile.

“Come on, you two. Trin! Neo! Come on. Outside-outside.” His dogs met them on the stairs, and they all headed out.

What a weird trip that had been, but he couldn’t complain. It had brought Charlie to him, and he didn’t think Charlie was scared of him at all.

Maybe he could get even closer. Soon.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Seven

Charlie waved and headed out to the walkway. He wanted to grab something easy to eat, go home, and text Kaleb.

See how the dogs were.

He'd been...seeing Kaleb for a few weeks now. The house was great, but it was Kaleb he was really interested in, and Charlie was willing to admit it to himself now.

Kaleb was...sweet. Gentle. But still alpha enough to thrill Charlie to his toes. And he loved Kaleb's smile.

Still, they hadn't had sex yet. Soon, he hoped. He was...wanting. It was a great feeling.

Maybe this weekend.

Heading home. How's you?> he sent, unable to wait until he got home.

He got three dots for a long while. Then he got @\$%. I blew the whole fuse box and the RV is dead>

Charlie didn't bother to text back, he just called. "Hey. Come to the apartment for the night. Bring the dogs. I'll order Se?or Dragon's. They deliver."

"Oh, wow. Really? Are you sure?" Kaleb's smile was one hundred percent evident in

his voice. “I could probably go to the hotel, but the hot springs is having that thing tonight.”

“No. Please. Come on. I’ll be home in about...twenty minutes? We’ll meet each other there, probably.”

“I’ll load up the dogs. And an overnight bag?”

His heartbeat kicked into high gear. “Absolutely.”

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard in a couple of long days. I’ll be there.” Kaleb hung up, and he had to grin.

In fact, he grinned all the way home.

He managed to get home and out of his work clothes about the time that Kaleb knocked, the dogs bouncing in.

“Guys! Hey!” He got snuggles and slobbers, those tails wagging hard. He gave ear scratches, laughing as they mauled him.

“Come on, puppies. Let Charlie breathe. Hey, honey.” Kaleb hung up leashes and his jacket, then came to give him a kiss, warm and intimate.

“Hey.” He pushed up, letting the kiss go deeper, hotter. He wrapped his arms around Kaleb’s neck, holding on, and Kaleb pulled him close, their bodies rubbing together.

“Mmm.” Kaleb hummed, but they both yelped when cold noses pressed between them.

“Someone’s jealous, hmm?” He reached down to snuggle the pups, scratch their ears.

“They’re just excited from being in the car.” Kaleb grinned. “And to see you.”

“They love me. I know it.” He smiled at Kaleb, hating the stress he saw. “Are you okay? Come in and sit, we’ll order food.”

“Ugh.” Kaleb rubbed the back of his neck, going to sit on the couch. Then he popped back up. “Do you have a Coke?”

“I do. Sit. Please. You look so tired.” He stood and grabbed two cans of Coke from his fridge.

“How was your day, honey?” Kaleb sat, the dogs starting to hop up. “No, you louts. Leave room for Charlie.”

“Just work. The latest room is finished and Mr. Harlan was pleased with it.” He was too. It was going to bring in more money, and be a wonderful place to stay.

“Good deal. That was the suite, right? The one the gunslinger used to stay in back in the day?” Kaleb put a hand on his leg as soon as he sat down. Kaleb was super tactile, but never...invasive.

“It was. We went with Old West, but not tacky, you know?”

“I do. You have a great eye.” Kaleb leaned back on the couch, pressing the Coke can to his forehead.

“Oh, honey...” He stood and moved around the sofa to start massaging Kaleb’s shoulders, using his thumbs to dig in.

“Mmm. I feel bad. You’re the one who had to work all day. I was just dealing with a big money-sucking house.” Kaleb moaned, letting his head fall forward.

“Evil money-sucking house.” He just kept rubbing, searching for a way to ease his...friend.

“Mmmm.” Kaleb’s little sounds made him feel so much more than friendly. “Thank you, love. Come sit with me.” Kaleb grabbed his hand and pulled him back around.

He overbalanced a bit and landed half in Kaleb’s lap.

“What do you want to eat, honey?” He kissed Kaleb, brushing their lips together.

“Did you say something about Senor’s? I love the green chile egg rolls and the carne asada noodles.” Kaleb put a hand behind his head to pull him in for a longer kiss.

Oh. He moaned, trying to focus on food, but?—

But this kiss was curling his toes and it was too good to stop. Kaleb kissed him as if there was nothing else he would rather do.

The restaurant was open for another four hours. He could wait.

Kaleb pulled back to breathe, staring into his eyes. “Is this okay, Charlie? I want you more than supper, but I won’t push.”

“Everyone told you about me, didn’t they?”

Kaleb paused, searching his face. “Hank and Kynan both said you’d had a hard time of it. That you’d been hurt in an attack. I just want you to know that we can stop any time, not that this is a weird pity thing, okay?”

“I’m not—they didn’t rape me. They beat me up, left me for dead. I’m not. I can’t play. But I’m not dead.”

“I kinda figured that by the way you kiss me.” Kaleb traced his lips. “I’m glad.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m so glad. I’m not scared.”

“Then kiss me again.” Kaleb’s lips curved in a devastating smile, and that mouth touched his again.

He opened up, pressing their bellies together, letting Kaleb feel his need. He was hard already; maybe he had been since Kaleb had said he was coming for the night...

“I want you,” he whispered. He was wet and aching, his body ready for Kaleb.

“Good.” That was a little smug, that word, but it made him laugh, not get huffy. He was pleased Kaleb was proud to have him. He wanted Kaleb to want him just as badly. “You can have anything you want, Charlie. Anything at all.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.” Kaleb pulled him the rest of the way over onto those strong thighs. “I want to give it to you.”

“Good.” He pulled off Kaleb’s shirt, baring that broad chest. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, sweet.” Kaleb pulled at his sweater. “You too.”

He wasn’t as pretty, but fair was fair, and he didn’t want Kaleb to balk, so he stripped it off, baring himself.

“Mmm.” Kaleb stroked his chest, then thumbed his nipples. “So damn pretty. I could just love on you forever, Charlie.”

“That’s a really long time.” And he was in.

Or he wanted Kaleb in.

“It is.” Kaleb slid one hand down his belly to his pants’ waistband. “I’m one of those guys who knows when I want to keep something good.”

“Do you? I’m not—I don’t have a huge future, but—” He was a good man.

“Charlie. You’re here with me, and I want you. You want me. That’s the perfect thing. And you even like my house.” Kaleb grimaced. “Which is a nightmare right now, and I would rather focus on you.”

Lifting him up, Kaleb got his pants undone.

“Just focus on me. I’ll make it better.” He wanted to make Kaleb need as much as he did.

“You always do.” Kaleb kissed him again, and he couldn’t catch his breath, because the need had ratcheted up between them.

He worked his jeans open, standing to shove them down, keeping their mouths together. It was easy, really. Kaleb was like a magnet, pulling him in.

Those big hands cupped his butt as soon as he was bare, pulling him down again to rub against Kaleb’s belly.

“You next. Need your prick.” Oh, he felt so daring.

“You can have it. All of it.” Kaleb helped lift him up again, and he watched in anticipation as Kaleb opened his jeans and skinned out of them along with his work

boots and boxer briefs. Oh, that was worth waiting for.

He reached out, hands wrapping around Kaleb's heavy cock.

"Uhhnn." Those gray eyes went wide, Kaleb watching him, lips parted. "Damn, baby. That feels so good."

"You are going to taste amazing."

"You like that, Charlie? Do you want to put your mouth on me?"

His heart pounded as he nodded. "I do. I like sucking. I want to make you need me."

"Then I'm all yours." Kaleb spread his arms along the back of the couch, lifting his hips as in invitation.

He grabbed a pillow for his knees, then settled between Kaleb's legs. He pushed his hands under Kaleb's butt and tugged them closer together.

"Look at you, pulling me around." Kaleb let him too. That body didn't look like the body of a guy who sat and did investments. Charlie was an athlete; he knew better.

He licked his lips. "How did you stay in shape? Before you started working on your house?"

"Hiking with the dogs. Rafting in the summer. And I worked with Habitat for Humanity. A lot."

"I love that. I could raft, I think. I think I'd like it a lot." Not as much as he'd like that cock in his mouth though.

“I can take you this summer.” Kaleb reached down with one hand, petting his hair, then guiding him down to take a taste. His lips opened, and he sucked the mushroom tip in, swiping at the liquid drops he found there with his tongue.

Salty and bitter and perfect.

Charlie pressed down, his muscles going tight.

Kaleb groaned, hands gentle where they landed on his head. Those long fingers worked against his scalp in a massage, and he panted, working as far down as he could before pulling back up.

“Fuck...babe, please.”

Charlie loved the desperation in Kaleb’s voice.

“Mmmhmmm.” He did it again. Then again. He bounced his head, licking and sucking, that cock growing even more between his lips.

“Gonna make love to you. Gonna knot you and stroke you until you scream.”

He shivered, his whole body on fire. He would nod if he could, but he wanted that. Charlie had never wanted anyone to knot him, but Kaleb, he needed it from.

His body felt as if it was on fire, like he’d been lit from the inside.

“Soon, baby.” Kaleb lifted his face up, staring into his eyes. “I need you back up here.”

He swallowed hard, one hand cupping Kaleb’s balls.

“Charlie!” Kaleb pulled him off gently, then dragged him up that long body.

“H-hello.” Charlie shivered against him.

“Hello, love.” Kaleb kissed him, then pulled him down to straddle those long thighs.

“I need you. I...touch me?” He moved and leaned in for a kiss.

“Anything.” Kaleb gave him kisses, all the while petting and stroking. His back, his thighs, his cock. His whole body heated, his skin going tight.

It was almost too much, too wild, and he needed to move.

“You all right, Charlie?”

Charlie nodded wildly. “I just—I’m so hot. I’m going up in flames.”

Kaleb pulled back slightly to look at him. “I’ll take care of you.”

“I trust you. Help me.”

“Yes.” Pushing one hand down under him from behind, Kaleb touched his hole, which was aching for just that contact. “Oh, you’re wet for me. I love that.”

Charlie’s cheeks were on fire. But he was wet and aching and hard as a rock. He’d never felt like this in his life.

“Going to open you up for my knot now.”

“Please.” Charlie’s lips parted as Kaleb pressed in, spreading him and making him shake.

“That’s it, love.” Kaleb pushed in a finger, then two, not lingering or making him wait. Just moving, keeping him stretched, getting him good and spread.

“Gonna need you soon.” His body ached, and all he could think of was how badly he needed Kaleb’s cock.

“I know. I can tell. You’re trying to pull me in.” Kaleb laughed, the sound low and heated, rough as a corn cob. Those fingers drove him higher and higher, making him squirm and moan. “Are you ready to ride, sweet?”

“Yes. Yes. I’m ready. I need.” He arched, kneeling up high.

“So fucking perfect.” The words were rough, but the tone was reverent. Kaleb was right there with him. Those hands bracketed his hips, and Kaleb helped to lift him so the broad head of that cock could probe his hole.

He sank down, his eyes going so wide that they pulled at the corners.

“Charlie.” Kaleb stared into him, just growling out his name in a way that made him shiver, his ass clenching hard around Kaleb’s cock.

He wondered if this was what heat sex felt like.

If so, he wanted to be in heat daily.

Maybe more.

“Harder, Kaleb.”

“Love.” Kaleb’s wild grin made him laugh for sheer joy, and then Kaleb was pulling him down and arching up, banging right into him.

His toes curled as he took Kaleb all the way in to the root. The feeling of Kaleb's knot swelling inside him made him groan and grasp at those wide shoulders. His head fell back, his body trying to adjust. "Feel you. Your knot."

He felt everything.

"Good. I want you to. I want to feel every move you make. I want to see your face when you come."

God, Kaleb made him feel fine, beautiful. Needed.

Safe.

He hadn't felt safe enough to want a man in so long. And now he knew what it was like again.

"I swear, I'll never hurt you." Kaleb's whisper sounded like a prayer as those strong hands began to move him, dragging him up and down the heavy cock.

"I know. I do." Charlie nodded, breathless, and he added a little bounce of his own to the mix, which had Kaleb moaning. They created an amazing circuit of pleasure, loving on each other hard.

The world stopped and all Charlie knew was this—Kaleb and pressure and heat and pleasure that threatened to short him out. They rocked and moved, and that knot caught inside him, and he knew why there were alphas and omegas and why this was so damn important. All of a sudden. Boom.

He leaned back, trusting in Kaleb's hands to support him, exposing himself, stretching up tall and rolling his hips.

“So damn pretty,” Kaleb murmured, hand sliding on his cock, which had him moving even faster, trying to get more of everything.

“Don’t stop. Please. I need you.” He didn’t feel the slightest bit embarrassed to beg.

“Not going to stop, honey. I couldn’t if I wanted to.” Kaleb’s voice had gone down a whole octave, he thought. It was almost a gravelly growl. “Have to knot you so good.”

“Yes. Please. I want to be right here with you.” He wanted their bodies to meld together.

“Uh-huh.” Kaleb watched him, hands like iron on his hips. They were barely moving now, just short, sharp thrusts that pushed Kaleb even deeper.

His body tightened, he grabbed Kaleb’s shoulders, and he shot, his ass muscles clenching down on that amazing cock.

“Fuck!” Kaleb arched up underneath him, knot lodging so tight he could barely breathe, so that he wanted to scream, it was so good. Then Kaleb came for him, hot, wet jets of seed filling him.

He slumped forward, snuggling in, his cock pulsing weakly as that knot shifted inside him.

“Uhn.” Kaleb held him up, let him lean on his wide chest. “I—Nope. No words.”

“Mmhmm. Stay.” He’d order food later.

“Yes, please.” Kaleb looked over his shoulder, chuckling. “The dogs went to lie down where they can’t see us.”

“Oh, good. That would be weird.”

“They’re nosy, but not stupid.”

“They’re amazing. I love them both, dearly.”

“I know. That’s one reason I’m crazy about you. You never acted like they were a nuisance.” Kaleb stroked his back, then pulled a throw off the back of the couch to wrap them.

“They’re angels.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “I’ll call for food...later.”

“We can always make soup out of a can if we need to.”

“Or get Hannah to deliver from the truck stop.” Charlie grinned, because while Secret Springs wasn’t really big enough for Door Dash, they had some amazing entrepreneurs who would do the job.

“Mmm...my brilliant lover.”

Charlie chuckled softly, but he snuggled in. He could live with that.

Lover.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Eight

“Ezekiel...”

Kaleb raised his head, glancing around. The dogs were outside, learning their territories, and Charlie wasn't there yet.

He was supposed to come up for a few hours before he went down to town. Right now it was bright and sunny and great for working in the house.

So what was that he'd heard...

“Hello?”

“Ezekiel, where are you?” The voice sounded so far away.

“Hey, is someone here?” He stood, dusting off his knees. He'd been pulling up some shitty vinyl someone had put in back in the seventies when they'd thought about making the house a museum with a kitchen restaurant. Really, though, he didn't want folks wandering through the house. It wasn't safe.

In fact, it had been one disaster after another, and Kynan had been off for nearly three weeks as the flu ravaged his whole family. So he was DIYing a lot and cursing more.

“Please. Come back.”

He whirled in a circle, his heart pounding. That had come from much closer, and a

wave of longing, of sorrow, had damn near driven him to his knees.

Suddenly he wanted to see Charlie more than anything on earth.

He headed outside to get some air. Maybe he was getting lightheaded from dust and fumes. His eyes watered. So he pulled out his cell to check and see where Charlie was.

There were a couple of texts from his omega.

Miss you>

wanna go to lunch?>

wanna go to supper?>

He texted back. Hey. I do. Sorry. I must not be getting signal all the time>

And he was hearing things.

Pick me up? We could go to Fuel. I got reservations>

Oh, ho! Charlie was spoiling him.

Love that. Let me grab a shower and I'll be down> He had time for that before Charlie got off work. At hotel?>

Yep. I've been working hard>

You always do. See you soon.>

He whistled up the dogs, who came running. “Hey, guys. Come on. We’re gonna go take a shower and feed you. Then we can go to Charlie’s and you can hang out in the apartment while we eat.”

Kaleb was ready to get away—He frowned, because he would swear he saw someone moving through one of the windows.

He frowned. “Did you guys see that?”

Trinity growled softly, head tilting.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” He grabbed a crowbar from the pile of tools by the back door. “Whoever you are, I’m coming in! This is my house, and I don’t allow squatters!” He sounded brave, he thought...

It wasn’t even that there was a stranger. It was that he had the weirdest feeling. Something just kept tugging at his brain, at his senses, and he couldn’t figure out what.

“Ezekiel!” The cry was loud, shaking, and he jumped back a good three feet, wondering if he should call the cops.

Neo howled, running into the house.

“Neo!” He took off after his damn dog, because if someone hurt Neo he would have to beat them to death.

Trinity was at his heels, barking loud, slobber flying. She would protect them to her last breath.

He skidded into the kitchen, but no one was there, so he checked the pantry and the

dining room. “Is someone here?”

He heard the faintest whisper. “Ezekiel...”

The hair stood up on the back of his neck, and the cold was so intense in the dining room that his nipples went hard and his balls tried to crawl into his body. What the fuck?

“Neo. Trin. Outside,” Kaleb croaked.

He was calling Hank. Hank would know about this weird shit. He herded the dogs into the truck, then dialed Hank’s number. He’d been having lunch with Hank and Charlie, and he liked the guy a lot. He dialed up Hank while he fed the pups.

“Hey, Kaleb! How goes it? No, Antonia. You cannot bother him. He’s working.”

“I think I just had a ghost encounter at the house, man. It was freaky deaky.”

“What? That’s awesome! Amazing. Where are you now?”

“You don’t have to sound so pleased.” Hank’s enthusiasm did make him smile, though, centering him. “I’m on my way to meet Charlie for dinner at Fuel.”

“Oh, yum. Lucky man. So, ghosts. When? Where? What happened? Talk.”

“In the kitchen. I was pulling up that vinyl. And there was someone calling for an Ezekiel. But no one was there.” He still shivered at that.

“Ezekiel? Seriously? When can I go take readings?”

“Tomorrow. And I don’t want anyone up there alone.”

“I can bring Stone if you’re busy.”

“As long as you buddy up. I’ll be up there tomorrow by noon.” He frowned, head tilting. “Does Ezekiel mean something to you?”

“That’s the name of the omega that Dewhurst built the house for.”

“No shit? Didn’t you say the owner killed his omega or something?” What the hell?

“That’s the scuttlebutt, yeah. They say it was a murder-suicide.”

“Well, someone was calling for him. Asking him to come back.” He turned down the road that headed down into town.

“Damn. Well, I hope he’ll talk to me tomorrow. You’re staying with Charlie still, right?”

“I am. The RV just has too many issues. Lights go out. The shower sprang a leak. Thank god the toilet works.”

“Well, I know Charlie’s enjoying having you in there at night. He’s beaming every time I see him.”

“I adore him.” He wasn’t ashamed to say it. He wanted the whole world to know it. “And if I make him happy, then I’ve done my job.”

“You’re doing great.” Hank chuckled softly. “Go eat with your omega. Call me tomorrow.”

“Will do. Thanks for the info, Hank. And tell Antonia the puppies said hi.” Neo was, in fact, drooling on his shoulder.

“She’ll be over the moon. Have a good night, man.”

“Night.” He turned onto Main where it branched off from the county highway and headed to the hotel. The river walk area was already far busier than it had been when he’d first arrived in Summit Springs, hinting at what it would be like in the summer.

He saw his lover standing on the steps, the sun shining down on the light brown head.

God, he had it bad. So damn bad. And he felt like they’d moved faster than he’d expected, but not as fast as he wanted to just gobble Charlie up and keep him just for himself. Which was like, super alpha and kinda not like him at all.

Charlie waved at him, beamed. “Hey, you! How’s your day been?”

“Weird, honey.” He got out to open the door for Charlie. “No, Trin. Stay.”

“Hey, guys.” Charlie hopped into the vehicle. “How are my drooly besties?”

Neo woofed softly, no doubt telling Charlie all about their ghost.

“So what’s up?” Charlie asked.

“I think I heard a ghost. Either that or someone has decided to do a horror movie and play recorded voices to drive me out of the house.” He headed across the river and up Main into downtown.

“Oh, wow. Did you call Hank?”

“I did. He wants to run up in the morning with Stone to take some readings.” Kaleb chuckled. “He was happy as a clam. It was a little disturbing.”

“Hank is very focused, isn’t he?”

“He is.” He thought it was kind of hilarious actually, but Kaleb had never really believed in ghosts. “What do you think?”

Charlie blinked. “About Hank? He’s my best friend.”

“No, about ghosts. At the house especially.” He didn’t want that to scare Charlie off.

“Oh. Well, there was that weird mist that one time. And I swear sometimes I see something out of the corner of my eye when I’m there taking measurements.”

“But does it worry you?”

“No. Ghosts are all over this town. So far, if you aren’t trying to harm anyone, they don’t really seem to harm you.” Charlie sounded as if he knew that from experience.

“Is this from working at the hotel?” Kaleb asked.

“Partly.” Charlie chewed his lip. “And partly because on my first day in town, a ghost saved my life.”

He pulled in to park at the apartment. “No shit?”

“No. I was dumped in a coal room under the Merchante building. No one would have heard me and I might have died if it wasn’t for the resident ghost.”

“Holy shit.” He turned to face Charlie, touching his cheek. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I hear that. I’m glad I’m here too.” Charlie beamed at him, stroking his leg. “Come on. Let’s walk the dogs.”

“Sounds good. And then we have a yummy dinner to get to. I wonder what the menu looks like tonight.” Fuel was a wonder because the menu changed all the time. It was a pop-up sort of place with a permanent location. He loved it.

“It’ll be good, whatever it is. Spring—so asparagus? Uh...pasta salad? Lamb?” All of the sudden, Charlie seemed to turn green around the gills. “Oh. Oh, gag.”

Charlie threw the car door open, heaving on the sidewalk but not bringing anything up.

“Charlie!” He was out of the SUV in a heartbeat, running around to help keep Charlie from falling out the open door. “What’s wrong?”

Trinity woofed, trying to crawl through the console.

“Sorry. Sorry, I must have just... I got queasy. So sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” Maybe he needed to turn the air up when Charlie was in the vehicle, but he’d never had a problem before. “Car sickness happens. You okay?”

“Fine. Nothing even came up. I’ll go get something fizzy and cold. It’ll fix me right up.” Charlie’s cheeks were red. “So embarrassing.”

“You’re fine, honey. I promise. Let me take the dogs up and you can sit out here in front and get some air, okay?” Charlie could sit on the bench outside and breathe some.

“I’m all right. I just need a ginger ale and to splash some water on my face.”

“Do you want to go ahead and sit? I bet they’d just give you our table.” He kissed Charlie’s forehead, relieved that it wasn’t fever hot.

“Come on up to the apartment. The pups need to go in, and I want to change my clothes and brush my teeth.” Charlie winked at him. “We could shower together? Conserve water?”

“Oh shit.” Kaleb looked down at himself. “I didn’t get that shower. Yeah, come on. I’m sorry, honey, I just wanted to get you the ginger ale and I was going straight line instead of thinking about logistics.”

Charlie snorted. “You have alpha brain.”

“I do. Man provide sparkly drink.”

“Come upstairs, and I’ll let you provide all over the place, okay?”

“That sounds like a great plan.” God, he was an idiot. He’d just wanted to get Charlie that fizzy drink, but they had to shower and change and that would really help Charlie’s tummy, he’d bet. “Come on, mooses. Walk pretty for me.” He pulled the dogs out of the car, and they did him proud, loose leash walking in so he could give Charlie his other arm.

“Look at those angel babies. They do make me smile.” Neo and Trin both wagged hysterically, so happy to be loved.

“They’re ridiculous, but they’ve kept me sane more than once over the last couple years.” They got upstairs, and he was worried at how pale Charlie still was. “You sit. I will provide lemon-lime fizziness.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. I’m so silly.”

“No, you’re not. There’s nothing silly about getting a little caught up. Was it car sickness? You’ve never had that before riding with me, so I just want to know for the

future if it's an issue for you." He hit the fridge to pull out a bottle of ginger ale, then poured some over ice in a glass.

"Never has been. I thought it was a bug, but I don't think so." Charlie shrugged, the motion almost invisible. "It was just the thought of the lamb, I think."

"Oh? Do you not like lamb?" Maybe he should call down to Fuel and make sure they had some other option, if that was the case.

"I used to, but just the thought..." Charlie swallowed hard, clearly trying to push down another round of gagging.

"Let me call King and see what's on the menu tonight, okay?" He had no idea what was going on with Charlie, but he wanted him to be able to eat whatever they settled on, even if it was canned soup. He pulled out his phone while Charlie sipped his ginger ale.

"Fuel, can I help you?"

"Hey there. Can you tell me what the menu is tonight? This is Kaleb Raleigh. Charlie Putnam and I have a reservation in just a bit."

"Oh, of course! We have ravioli with a lemon cream sauce, a chicken paillard, and an amazing pesto and chicken pizza. So. Good."

"Yum. No lamb?"

"Um, no. Not tonight. Chef King is kind of nose-to-tailing it with the chicken."

"Perfect. Thank you. We'll see you soon." He hung up to go squat down in front of Charlie, hands on Charlie's knees. "Good news. No lamb. Just chicken."

“Mmm...okay. I’m in. I’m sorry, Kaleb. I’ll try to keep my drama to a minimum.”

“Stop apologizing. Tell me when you want that shower.”

“Oh, let’s do it. We have time to get naked and wet before our reservations.”

“We do? Awesome. I love that with you.” He sprang to his feet to help ease Charlie to his. Charlie took his hand, looking much better, color back in his cheeks.

It was the easiest thing ever, to let Charlie lead him to the water.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Nine

Pregnant.

He was pregnant.

He wasn't stupid. He'd had heat sex. Morning sickness. Nothing tasted great. He was tired and a little weepy, and sure?—

Charlie had suspected for a week or two. Maybe three or possibly as long as five, but now?

He stared at the pregnancy test in his hand, the two pink lines screaming the truth.

Whoa.

He bit his lower lip. He had no idea what to do. Panicky feelings tried to push in, and he shoved them down. Okay. Okay, he maybe needed some advice. Should he call Hank? Maybe Bridget.

Bridget was an alpha, though. She might not understand. Hank's friend Andrew had raised a baby alone. Hank had gone through this.

Sort of.

He wanted to talk to Kaleb, but...

Should he?

He finally called Hank. Because really, he trusted Hank so much not to steer him wrong.

“Hey, man! Are you wanting a ride to the house? I’m heading up this afternoon to do a podcast with Stone. You can come with.”

“I—Maybe? I don’t know. I sort of needed to talk to you.” A little bit. He stared at the test on the counter.

“Okay.” Hank paused. “You sound upset. Do you need me to come over?”

“Um. Do you have time?” He felt like such a wienie.

“I do. Give me...twenty. I’ll be there.”

“Okay.” He smiled faintly. Twenty meant Hank was stopping for comfort pastry.

Heavens knew he needed comfort pastry like whoa.

He touched his belly, staring at the flatness of it. Pregnant. It seemed hard to believe, and just a few short years ago, he would have scoffed at the idea.

He hadn’t been interested in having babies until after his career was over, but?—

That wasn’t a thing.

Though, he guessed that career was over. That made him laugh humorlessly.

The knock came on the door at almost exactly twenty minutes after he called Hank,

and he went to open it, chewing his lower lip.

“You look freaked out. What’s up? Who do I need to kill?” Hank bustled in with his box of pastries.

“Hank.” He tried for a grin. “Hi. What did you bring?”

“Crullers for me, apple fritters for you. And a couple of turnovers, because they smelled so good.” Hank set the box down, then came to hug him. “Tell me all.”

He held onto Hank for a second, then sat. “I’m pregnant.”

“Oh?” Then Hank’s eyebrows went up. “Oh-h. Um. Kaleb?”

“Who else?” God.

“Sorry. I just needed to make sure I had all the pieces.” Hank chuckled. “Can I make tea? I feel like we need tea.”

“Of course. There’s Irish breakfast, mint, hibiscus, and gunpowder.” He headed over to start the kettle.

“I’ll take Irish with the pastry.” Hank sat at his little dinette. “So, how do you feel about this?”

“Scared. Stupid. Scared.” His cheeks were on fire.

“Well, we’ll work this out. If I’ve found out anything about Secret Springs, it’s that we take care of people. You. Kaleb. Whatever combination there is.”

“I don’t want him to think I’m a slut, Hank.”

“Charlie.” Hank grabbed him and sat him down, then got up to make tea. “I have seen him around you. If he thought you were a slut, or if this was just about sex, he would have moved on to another omega or maybe two or three by now. He’s into you.”

“He is. He is? You think so?” God, he wanted to think so.

“I do. I was the one who watched all my friends pair off before I met Elliot, remember? I know when someone is serious about someone else.” Hank waited on the kettle, leaning on the kitchen counter. “So you need to tell him. I mean, you’re into him, yes?”

“Yes, but I don’t want him to think I did this on purpose...”

“Ah. Well, you didn’t, right? So you tell him that.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

Hank snorted. “Relationships never seem to be that, huh?”

“No. No, and I haven’t had any that were as important as this one.” He opened his eyes wide. He did not cry.

“Well, then you need to talk to him.” Hank poured the tea, then brought him a mug and a fritter. “I mean, I think he’s a good guy. Stone likes him too.”

“He’s amazing. He is absolutely...amazing.” And Charlie thought that maybe he loved Kaleb. Kaleb was...strong but sweet. It was like the perfect combination. And he loved his life. Fixing up the house. His dogs. Silly movies. Charlie adored him.

“See? He won’t be ugly.”

“What if he’s disappointed?” he whispered.

“No. I can’t see it.” Hank gave him a firm head shake. “He’s going to be thrilled.”

“Oh, Hank. I’m just scared.”

“Do you want me to be there when you tell him?”

Oh, God. Did he? Sure. Was that fair? No.

“No. No, he won’t hurt me. I know him. He might break my heart, but he won’t hurt me.”

“Okay. Well, I’m here if you want to talk it out.” Hank munched his pastry. “Mmm. Nice and fresh.”

“What do I do if he doesn’t want to be a father? What do I do? Will Lukas let me stay here?”

“Of course he will. Lukas has never kicked anyone out. They’ve always left on their own.” Hank pushed his fritter toward him. “You need to eat.”

“I’m scared I’ll puke.”

“If you do, I won’t tell, fair?”

He smiled, because Hank was his good friend, and the man was right. He knew that if he puked, he puked. Hank had been there. He knew what it was like, right?

“So are you and Elliot going to shoot for more kids?” he asked.

“I don’t think so. Antonia is perfect—she loves to travel, she loves history and reading and going. The three of us are going to be on the road a lot. I feel like—and so does Elliot—that our family is complete.”

“That’s so cool.” And rare for his group of friends, so he wondered if Hank still felt like the odd man out, or if he loved it. Charlie thought about a lot of things he would never ask.

It didn’t really matter either, when it came right down to it. He didn’t need to alienate anyone.

“I have so many nieces and nephews and godkids,” Hank said. “It’s a full life.”

“You’re obviously happy. Antonia and Elliot adore you.”

“I know.” Hank looked a little misty all of a sudden. “It was worth all the waiting.”

“I hope that Kaleb thinks the same thing about me.” He took a bite of the fritter, and it was good, fresh.

And it didn’t make his stomach roll.

“I should tell him tonight.”

“You should. Then you can start to make a plan. Is he coming here to spend the night?”

Charlie nodded. “He’s been staying here. It’s easier.”

“I bet.” Hank shook his head. “It seems like everything that can go wrong up there has.”

Charlie tilted his head. “Do you believe the house is cursed? That Augustus murdered Ezekiel?”

“I have no idea. There’s no proof he did, but there’s no proof he didn’t either.” Hank shrugged and sighed. “I mean, renovations are notorious for that sort of activity.”

“True. I just can’t help but think of that house in California.”

“The Winchester Mystery house? Well, Dewhurst isn’t that big or weird, but it’s pretty cool. Did you want to go up with me and Stone?”

“I’d like to, yes.” He nodded. He was no coward.

“Perfect. We’ll take the leftover pastry and some good coffee... Can you take coffee right now? I had issues.” Hank was so good at organizing things.

“Mine is the thought of red meat. I can’t even, you know?” Blorp.

“Ah. Well, that’s pretty easy.” Hank patted his hand. “Do you feel a little better?”

“Still scared, but I’m glad to know you’re my friend.”

Hank’s face creased with a fond sort of sympathy. “Always. I know how it feels to think you’re alone.” His eyes widened. “I mean, Saul did it for so long! And I’m not your only friend, okay? Everyone cares very much about you.”

“I hope so. I’m trying to be a part of this place. A good part.”

“You are.” Hank nodded, so earnest. “I adore you.”

“Thank you.” He took another hug. “I’m pregnant, Hank. I’m going to have a baby.”

“You are!” Hank squeezed.

He leaned in and rested, and then he girded his pregnant loins. He had to talk to Kaleb.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Ten

Hank and Stone were set up in the big ballroom, where there had, apparently, never been a ball. The house had never had the big opening party Augustus and Ezekiel Dewhurst had planned in the spring of the year the house was finished.

Ezekiel had died that winter.

At least that was what Hank had pieced together from the records and newspaper articles he'd been able to dig up.

The whole history of the house probably fascinated him more than it should.

He and Charlie were looking over plans for the butler's pantry, which had a fake door in it that led to a wine and spirits room. He thought that was too damn funny, but Charlie seemed...off.

Oh, he'd loved on the dogs and given Kaleb a warm kiss in greeting, but he kept stealing looks at Kaleb and chewing on his lower lip.

Finally Charlie took a long, shaky breath and met his eyes. "I need to speak to you, Kaleb. About something important."

That sounded ominous. He hoped it didn't equate to, "I'm leaving town." Just the thought of that made him feel a little...growly.

"Of course, honey. You can tell me anything."

“I hope so. I—It’s serious, and I have to tell you, I’m really scared of what you’re going to say.” Charlie dropped his gaze to his hands, which were trembling.

“Hey.” He grabbed Charlie’s hands in his. “I’m right here. I’ve got you.”

“I—I haven’t been feeling well, and I took a test this morning.” A tear balanced on his eyelashes. “I’m pregnant.”

For a moment, Kaleb felt as if someone had punched him right in the gut. All the air whooshed out of his lungs. Time stopped right there.

Then the world rushed back into focus, and he stared at Charlie, clinging to his hands. “You’re sure?”

Charlie nodded, that single tear falling. “You—” He swallowed hard. “You don’t have to... I mean, I’m strong. Brave. I can do this on my own. I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry.”

“Charlie.” Joy welled up in him, and Kaleb had to laugh. “You’re pregnant.” He picked Charlie up and twirled him around. “Wow!”

Charlie stared at him, searching his eyes. “You mean it?”

“Yes! Holy moly.” He wanted to say a lot more, some of it profane in a good way, but thought that might upset Charlie. “I mean... Wow.”

“So not mad. Thank—I was so scared. I didn’t want you to yell at me.”

“I’m not mad.” He set Charlie on his feet. “And even if I wasn’t interested in something long term with you, Charlie, I would never yell at you about something like this. And you never deserve to be yelled at.” He touched Charlie’s cheek. “But I

am. Interested.”

“Yeah? You mean it?” Charlie leaned into his hand for a second, then pushed in to hug him tight. “Because I’m interested. I… I’m in-love type interested, Kaleb.”

“So am I.” It seemed fast, maybe, but Kaleb knew deep down in his gut that this was his one true thing. He’d known since the day at the hotel when the dogs had jumped all over Charlie.

Charlie lifted his face, begging a kiss, and Kaleb had no problem giving it. He bent down, lips closing over Charlie’s, letting his lover feel how happy he was, he hoped.

He couldn’t believe this—his omega was having their baby. They were pregnant, and more importantly, Charlie wanted to build a future with him.

“Oh, God, I need to get the house done.” He couldn’t have a pregnant omega living in this mess. And he knew it was ridiculous to keep splitting their time between Charlie’s apartment and this monster of a home.

“We’ll get it done. You can stay with me for as long as you need to. I can give you some of my salary, if that would help?”

“I think you should put your salary into savings for the baby.” He chewed his lower lip, thinking. “I mean, I know we can stay at the apartment until this place is safe. Lukas isn’t going to kick you out for me staying if he hasn’t by now.”

“Are you kidding?” Charlie grinned, looking less terrified. “The pups are his best buddies.”

“Yes, but I want my baby and my omega here, creating our home.”

“I want that too,” Charlie said earnestly. “So bad. And I didn’t think I would ever want that until I met you. And now I do.”

“Then we’ll get moving on this place, huh? I’ll tell Kynan we need a bigger crew. Oh, God, we’re pregnant.” He was gonna just fly off over the moon.

“We are. I’m guessing November or December.”

“Holy shit.” His eyes widened so hard they pulled at the corners. “I mean, that seems soon, right?” He hugged Charlie again. “We need to celebrate. What do you want to eat tonight? I’ll take you out.”

“I want...an omelet and a big biscuit.”

“Truck stop it is.” Kaleb kissed him. “Should we go tell Hank and Stone?”

Charlie nodded. “I told Hank, because I was scared, but it’s time to tell everyone you want to.”

“I’m sorry you were scared, love. I’m glad you told me.” Kaleb beamed at him. “We’re going to be dads!”

“We are. We’re going to be dads. Together.” Charlie kissed him, the touch tingling all through him.

“Come on. Let’s go check on Stone and Hank.” He kind of wanted to kick them out and just be with Charlie. But then he also wanted to celebrate with someone.

Charlie twined their fingers together, and they found the guys setting up some equipment.

“We’re pregnant! We’re having a baby!” He couldn’t hide his joy.

Hank looked from him to Charlie, then grinned. “Congratulations!”

Stone’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow! Yay!”

“Yeah. I—Yes. Yay.” Charlie chuckled softly, shook his head. “I just told him. Just now.”

Kaleb beamed. “And I couldn’t be more thrilled. We’re celebrating at the truck stop.”

“Fancy!” Stone laughed at them, but it was all right. It was what his omega wanted.

“Well, you’ll have to let us have you over to supper this weekend, right, Stone? I bet Elliot and Demi would love that.”

“Oh, you know they would. Any chance to get together. The new intern is doing the tours Sunday night, so that would be a great night.”

“I think I can swing that.” Kaleb tried to say it with a straight face, but failed utterly, cracking up. “I mean, I can come any night. Can you swing it, Charlie?”

Charlie nodded. “I’m off all day.”

“Okay.” Hank clapped his hands. “You’ll have to tell me what not to make.”

“Um, meat. I can smell it, I’ve found, but the idea of a big hunk—” Charlie swallowed convulsively.

“Falafel. Or vegetarian lasagna. I’ll come up with something.”

“Good man.” Kaleb squeezed Charlie’s shoulder. “And we’ll bring dessert, hmm? Whatever you want.”

“I’ll holler with the menu maybe Friday night?”

“Sure.” Kaleb beamed.

“If you guys want to go on?—”

“No.” He and Charlie said it at the same time, and he exchanged a glance with his lover. “No. I don’t like leaving you guys up here alone. We’re okay.”

Charlie nodded. “We’re not in any hurry. We have a lot of work to do if we’re going to move in before the baby comes.”

“We do.” He glanced at Charlie sideways. “Though now you have to wear a respirator mask when you’re up here.”

“Uh-huh.” Charlie gave him a wry smile.

“Hey, it’s my job to protect you.”

The minute the words left his mouth, the lights Hank had set up...exploded. There was really no other word for it. The little generator didn’t go out. The lights just went off like flash bulbs.

“Nobody move!” Kaleb shouted. “Everyone stay right here while I get some light.”

“Okay...that was weird... Hank? Stone? You okay?” He heard Charlie move toward the guys.

“Yeah.” Stone chuckled. “That doesn’t usually happen with a generator.”

“I think that’s what Kaleb is worried about,” Hank murmured.

He grabbed a couple of battery lamps. The angle of the light just wasn’t coming in the windows to illuminate the big ballroom, and he didn’t want them to run off and get separated.

Kaleb was going to have a long talk with this house.

He got the lamps set up and on, then checked in with Hank, Stone, and his Charlie. All present and accounted for. And here came Neo and Trin, nosing around the room as if they were searching for another person.

Charlie got a broom and started cleaning up shards of burst light bulbs. “That was wild. Everyone is okay?”

“Yes.” Stone shook his head. “Did the equipment register anything, Boss? That looked like ghost activity to me.”

“I know.” Hank fiddled with dials, looking for some reaction Kaleb really didn’t understand.

“We are going to have to talk to the ghost about being good to our baby,” Charlie muttered.

“Yes. Because I won’t put either of you in danger.” He kind of wanted to shout that. Do you hear me, house? I’ll sell you first.

“Stone! We got a reading. Start the recording so we can talk!” Hank sounded so excited that he didn’t have the heart to herd everyone out. He’d give them an hour.

Then they were all heading back to town.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Eleven

Charlie was exhausted. He worked fifty hours a week at the hotel, and then he was at the house, putting in another forty to fifty to help Kaleb.

There was so much work to be done—electricity, plumbing, cleaning, plaster work. And they had to get things done. Now.

They had a baby on the way. Which was totally a joy. It was. But he was freaking out.

The roof was in the dry. The floors were in. The drywall was good. Electrical and plumbing were up to date. The furnace was up to snuff. The air-conditioning could wait until next year if they needed it.

So now it was time to start decorating.

He had paint chips, but he needed to see what they looked like in the light up at the house. And Kaleb was in Montrose, picking up a load of lumber to work on the side porches.

Maybe he would just run up there and look. It would take five minutes. “We could go together, right, guys?”

Neo wagged, his tail flopping on the couch.

“Okay, let’s go. We’ll send him a text from the house.” He leashed up the dogs and

headed down the stairs to his pretty little car. Kaleb had surprised him with it—a new-to-him low-mileage Subaru that he absolutely loved.

It was so baby safe. Good on snow and ice, good back seat and cargo room for the dogs, good air-conditioning. The puppies loved it.

He headed up the mountain, the view really lovely now with all of the summer flowers blooming, everything green and pretty. He parked at the house, then sat there for a moment, hands on the wheel, staring up at the imposing facade of the mansion.

Charlie grinned at it. “We need to come to an agreement. We have to start thinking of each other as friends.”

He sent Kaleb a quick text, then let the dogs out to wander. They were trained to a treat, and they knew not to go too far. The way Kaleb loved his dogs was one of the things that had made Charlie trust him.

Then he went back to talking to the house. “Seriously. I love you. I want to have a family with Kaleb and fill the rooms with laughter.” He unlocked the front door and went in.

There was a gust of wind behind him that stirred some leaves that still needed to be cleared out, and he shivered even though the day was nice and warm. Whew, what a weird breeze.

“I’m serious. I want to be happy here. I want you to be happy too. Please, let us stay?” He needed to go to the second and the third floor, and hang up paint chips, and he was not going to be scared in Kaleb’s home.

He took a deep breath before heading inside, and suddenly, the dogs were there with him, flanking him on either side. That gave him a nice little shot of courage, because

he needed it. He just had to know he wasn't alone.

He locked the door behind him but opened up windows. Kynan and his crew would normally have them open, but it was the weekend, and the place was empty.

His footsteps echoed as he walked into the foyer, and he looked around, pleased with how the wall sconces looked. They'd replaced the old gaslight ones with electric, but he'd chosen good replacements, and they totally looked period.

He peeked into the ballroom, imagining a huge Christmas tree in there, a lovely grouping of sofa and rugs and places to visit. They could have all the alpha diner club up, which Kaleb was a part of now, and Hank and all of his ghost tour folks.

He smiled, thinking of all the kids who could come up. How fun would it be to do a day camp for Saul maybe. The kids could learn all about the history of nineteenth-century Colorado.

This was going to be a special part of Secret Springs, a pocket of history and beauty and family.

Ezekiel... The whisper made goose bumps rise on his skin, and he turned in a circle to see where it had come from.

"Did you hear that, puppers?"

They bough wagged.

"Hey, uh, Augustus? I'm not Ezekiel. I'm sorry. I'm Charlie." He knew that Augustus was supposed to be the murderly alpha, but that whisper wasn't mean. In fact, it sounded sad and scared.

Ezekiel, where are you?

Oh. Charlie put a hand to his chest. That cry made his heart hurt it was so desperate and sad. “Oh, honey. I don’t know. I don’t know where he is.”

Another gust of wind slammed the main door, and he jumped at least a foot. Trinity barked, and Neo whined and tried to hide behind him, but then he could breathe. The ghost seemed to be gone.

Hank would have a cow when Charlie told him about this.

But still. He’d managed it, hadn’t he? He hadn’t panicked, and he’d dealt, and he was heading upstairs to look at paint chips.

The light coming in the windows was perfect for him to make a decision, too. Whew. It was a bit hot up there, though.

He opened up one of the windows, sucking air. Sweat was pouring off him, and he sat on the windowsill.

His vision swam a little, and he wished he’d brought some water. He was queasy as hell, too.

Cool air poured into the room, making him gasp. Oh, that felt good.

“Better. Whoa. Better, guys.” He smiled at the dogs, the grossness easing back. “We’re going to have to make sure we leave some windows open when we’re up here, huh? That was wild.”

The weather factor had to have been nuts back when the house was built. Up at this altitude it was extremes.

“Still, I think that this peachy cream will be beautiful up here, don’t you?”

He held the paint chip he’d decided on up to the wall one more time, which was when he heard the crunch of tires on gravel. He looked out the window to see Kaleb pulling in behind his car.

“Huh. That was fast.” He leaned out of the window, waving as Kaleb got out of his truck. “Hey, love!”

“Careful, honey.” Kaleb waved back, but he looked a little worried. He hurried into the house, and Charlie heard him thunder up the stairs.

He brought his paint chips. “I like this one for this room. What do you think?”

“I like it.” Kaleb came to kiss him, neatly sidestepping the dogs. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. I wanted to see the colors in the light. I think the alpha ghost talked to me.”

“Yeah? What did he say?” Kaleb looked around as if it was an automatic reflex.

“He was asking for Ezekiel. I told him we didn’t have him.”

“Which is true enough as it is.” Kaleb tilted his head. “The last time I heard something it was Augustus calling for Ezekiel. Why would they be searching for each other?”

“Well...if they loved each other...” It sort of made sense to him.

“Yeah. I think you’re on the right track. But how did that turn into Augustus killed Ezekiel?” Kaleb held the paint chip up to the wall.

“I thought Augustus killed his omega.”

A rush of cold air hit him, blowing his head. I did not!

“Ow.” Charlie blinked. “That was wild. Did you hear that?”

Kaleb peered at him cautiously. “What did you hear?”

“I did not. That was what he said. What did you hear?” He pushed into Kaleb’s arms.

“He didn’t.” Kaleb held him close. “So... So we’re hearing different ghosts?”

“Is that a thing? Who did you hear?” They needed to call Hank. Charlie wasn’t sure that was a thing, but if anyone would know? It would be Hank.

He knew everything about ghosts.

“I think I heard the omega from back when the house was built...” Kaleb shook his head. “Ghosts were never even on my radar until I came here.”

“Weird.” He leaned his head against Kaleb’s chest. “Mmm...you smell good.”

“Do I? Thank you, sweet.” Kaleb stroked his back, humming low in his throat. “You scared me a little, I have to admit.”

“Oh, I was okay. I can’t be scared of being home, love. We have to let them know it’s okay.” He hoped.

“Yeah. Yeah, I can see that.” Kaleb sounded a little dubious, though. Of course, he’d never had a ghost save his life. Charlie had.

“Do you need help unloading the truck?”

“You could keep me company, for sure.”

He had to smile. Kaleb was trying to keep him from doing any heavy lifting.

“I’m pregnant, not sick,” he pointed out.

“But you are pregnant.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, Kaleb. I am pregnant.”

In fact, they’d even seen a picture of their little girl, the baby tiny—mainly head and heartbeat and tiny little hands and feet.

“That’s what I remembered. I seem to have heard that my omega was carrying my baby.” Kaleb paused and grinned. “Do you know what that means?”

“Uh…”

“It means you can watch me unload the truck, and then I’ll take you to supper. There’s a new vegetarian place in Montrose that the lady at the hardware store told me about. They have tempeh enchiladas and falafel wraps both.”

“Ooh…” He did love some falafel. He hadn’t even known about it until Raven at the birthing center had shared some with him.

Amazing stuff, really.

“Right? If you’re really good, I’ll take you for ice cream afterward. I’m craving a hot fudge sundae.”

“Are you now?” That tickled him. “This is one powerful baby, you know that? She can cause her alpha father to crave.”

“It’s a mystery, but true.” Kaleb rubbed one hand over his belly, and to his shock, the baby kicked Kaleb hard, right in the palm.

Kaleb gasped, his eyes going wide. “Babe, was that? Was that?”

“Your daughter?” He nodded, staring and drinking in the shock and joy in his lover’s face. “That’s her.”

“Oh. Oh, wow. I felt her, Charlie. I felt her move.” Kaleb sounded utterly awed.

Now Kaleb understood a little bit of the wonder he felt. He’d been experiencing the tiny little flutters and kicks for days, and at first, they had been so gentle he hadn’t been sure they were real.

“It’s wild, isn’t it? I never thought that this was going to be something I could experience, and after the…” He stopped and shook his head. Charlie never spoke about that night. He didn’t even want to remember that awful day in the cold room waiting to die, knowing he wouldn’t be found.

Thank god for Joe.

Kaleb hugged him tight. “After the what, babe?”

“You know.”

“Yeah, but I think maybe at some point you have to talk about it.” Kaleb didn’t sound like he was going to let it go this time.

Did he have to? He wasn't sure, but he did know that Kaleb was good to him—better to him than anyone ever had been, and it wasn't as if his life had been a terrible thing before.

He'd been happy. He'd had a career, a family, everything, and after the attack, he just walked away from it all.

"I was out here camping. Nothing serious, nothing nefarious. I was totally taken by surprise. I'm still not sure to this day what exactly they wanted. I lost so much..."

Kaleb nodded as if he understood. "I'm so sorry. There was no way that you could go back to playing baseball?"

He shook his head. "There was no way I could go back, even if physically I could have healed. There was no way I could go face anyone I'd known before."

Kaleb looked utterly confused. "I don't understand, babe. Why not?"

"I don't know. Shame maybe? I have a sister out there, a brother too, but I just couldn't let them know what had happened. I'd been so proud of my career, of how I was going to make it as a baseball player. Then suddenly, I didn't have anything, and I couldn't face them."

Kaleb shook his head. "So they don't know where you are? They don't know if you were okay?"

"No. I couldn't tell them." And it was weird, because saying it out loud made it sound so ridiculous, so impossible. These were people that loved him, had loved him his entire life, and suddenly he couldn't believe that he'd just left them behind as if they meant nothing. "I'm a bad person, aren't I?"

“Of course you’re not!” Kaleb sounded shocked. “You were traumatized. It hasn’t even been that long. You needed time to heal, and I know that, but when you’re ready, I’m happy to help you. I’ll be there for you when you’re ready to talk to them again.” Kaleb didn’t sound like he was angry or even like he was disappointed. If anything, Kaleb sounded sad.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Charlie, I want you to listen to me.” Kaleb sounded so serious. “There is absolutely nothing—nothing at all that I would not do for you. You’re the father of our baby.”

There was a sound from deep inside the house as if a boiler was going off, an odd pinging, and Charlie tilted his head. “Did you hear that?”

“That I did hear.”

“I’m not sure I wanna know.” Charlie took a deep breath, and it was like a pressure he hadn’t realized he’d been dealing with was suddenly released. “Whatever it was, I’m sure it’s going to cost a fortune...”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Kaleb laughed, the sound merry and echoing through the house. “Good thing I have money.”

“Good thing you do, because I’m sure not setting the world on fire.”

Kaleb leaned back, staring into his eyes. “Oh for God’s sake, Charlie, don’t stand here in the middle of this haunted house and say anything about fire.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:56 am

Twelve

The house seemed to be cooperating a bit more these days. The main floor was mostly done. The old woodwork gleamed with new life. They'd put a powder room in under the stairs, and the kitchen looked period but would function in a high-tech modern way. The grand staircase was refurbished, and the floors looked amazing.

Now it was bedrooms and towers that needed all the finishing.

Charlie was working his ass off.

Seriously, the man was painting and stripping plaster, pulling down old wallpaper and just generally working with the freneticism that worried Kaleb a little bit.

Not only that but Charlie was also working at the hotel, which caused Kaleb an enormous amount of stress, because he had things that his omega could do.

Like rest. Buy things for the nursery. Eat. Not be on his feet for fifty hours a week at one job before then coming here and working at the house. It didn't seem to matter what he said. Charlie just looked at him with those beautiful eyes and said, "Mr. Jack needs me."

At least Charlie had graduated from Mr. Harlan.

So, he was going to take the bull by the horns and go to the alpha's breakfast and discuss this with Jack Harlan.

Surely the man would understand. It was summer, Charlie was pregnant, and they had a whole life-consuming project at the house. They had a life. It was just time.

Not only that, but Jack had what? At least forty children of his own. He should understand.

Kaleb headed up the stairs to the third floor where Charlie was busily working on the tower room. Kaleb wasn't one hundred percent sure what Charlie intended to do with this room, but he did know that every time he couldn't find Charlie, there was no question where his lover would be.

"Hey, babe, what you doing?" He looked around the room, shocked as hell to find Charlie standing on the ladder hanging a piece of chocolate-brown wallpaper with huge burgundy cabbage roses on it. Lord, that made him a little speechless. It wasn't that it was dangerous. Charlie wasn't far enough along to be terribly off-balance, but one hard fall could be disastrous, and—When on earth had Charlie bought wallpaper?

Where on earth had Charlie found that particular wallpaper?

"Hanging wallpaper."

Well, duh. "I can see that. Why are you hanging wallpaper? Where on earth did you get the wallpaper?"

"I found it in the attic. It was like it was waiting for me, and I just knew that this is what was supposed to go in this room. I think this was supposed to be the nursery."

When had Charlie climbed up into the attic? What if there were rusty nails? Mouse turds? Mummies?

Kaleb frowned deep. "Wait. I don't understand. Baby, this is the third floor. This is

the tower room, and that is some dark-assed wallpaper. Not baby appropriate.”

Charlie cracked up. “No, no. I know. This isn’t our nursery, but this was supposed to be the nursery. This is the wallpaper that was supposed to go in it, and I thought what a perfect scenario. To put the old wallpaper where it belonged.”

Uh-huh. Perfect. “Well, what are you going to put up here then?”

Not his baby.

“I—” Charlie shrugged, looking oddly confused. “Well, to be honest, I’m not sure. All I can imagine is a carved wooden baby bed and one of those old baby buggies. You know, the wicker ones that had the little covers and the big wheels?”

Kaleb knew that he was looking at Charlie like he was insane. “That’s three floors, babe. Why would anyone put a pram with wheels on the third floor?”

Charlie shook his head and frowned deeply at him. “I didn’t say this was the nursery, dammit. I just like the wallpaper!”

“Oookay.” This was the weirdest situation since, oh, at least yesterday. He was really beginning to regret buying this house, which was a shame because he loved it dearly. Not to mention it was becoming something amazing.

Every now and again, though, there would be this moment, this weirdness that he couldn’t get over.

Like a nursery on the third floor with dark wallpaper that wasn’t their nursery.

“Maybe we should make it a library,” he suggested.

“Do you really want to carry books up to the third floor?” Charlie asked.

“Did I not tell you I was going to hire a butler?” he teased, relieved when that got Charlie to stick his tongue out at him.

“No butlers.” Charlie did relax, though, offering him a grin. “What did you come up here for?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Uh-huh, and?”

He shrugged. “Today is the alpha brunch, and I knew that you and Hank and Saul had some plans, so I thought I’d drop you off. Then I’ll go to the diner and come pick you up after we’re done.”

Charlie smiled and nodded. “We’re gonna go get our nails done. I’m going to get a pedicure. It sounds so good, the idea of someone rubbing my feet.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Anytime your feet are sore, I’m at your beck and call.” Kaleb wasn’t above rubbing his pregnant omega’s feet when the occasion called.

“Yeah, these days they’re always a little bit sore, and a little swollen.”

Yep, he was talking to Jack. There was no question about it. It was time for his omega to not be on his feet all day.

“Well come on, o’ wallpapering one. Do I need to cover up the glue or anything?”

Charlie started down the ladder, and Kaleb saw the rung begin to break, as if someone was pulling at it or stamping on it.

He rushed over, catching Charlie as he fell. “God damn it.”

“What the hell happened?” Charlie asked. “This is a brand-new ladder!”

“And I’m taking it back!” Maybe they needed a priest.

Holy water.

Something.

This was getting ridiculous. Kaleb didn’t understand what was going on in this house, but it was about to be done.

He was not going to risk his daughter, or more importantly, his Charlie.

Thirteen

“Charlie, are you sure that you wanna keep working the front desk?” Mister Jack looked so worried, and Charlie just wanted to pop him in the nose.

“I’m fine. I’m just pregnant.” Pregnant didn’t mean he was an invalid.

“Yes. Pregnant and working on your feet all day while restoring the rooms here in the hotel. Not to mention restoring the house. It’s a lot.”

He hated when Jack was like this—the benevolent alpha. He was more than capable of dealing with things. He was capable. “Do you want me to stop renovating the rooms?”

“No.” Jack’s answer was very, very firm. “I want you to stop working the front desk and focus on renovating the rooms. You’re not just a front desk person.” Jack stopped and pursed his lips. “What I meant to say was that you have a particular talent, and I don’t want you to waste your energy on the desk work.”

Charlie closed his eyes for a second, trying to find that part of him that knew what was the right thing to do. God knew he wanted to design. That was where his passion lay—making things look like they should have been, making things beautiful, making things functional.

But he also knew he wasn’t trained, that this was partially just Mr. Jack being good to him.

Jack caught his gaze, and also his attention again. “Look, I love the rooms. The guests love the rooms. It’s good practice for when you hang out your own shingle, for when you start doing this for other people.” At Charlie’s surprised look, Jack laughed. “Did you honestly think people were going to look at the house and not want you to come down and do the same thing here in town?”

“Of course not. I mean, I hadn’t even considered...”

“The rumors about what is going on in that house—and I’m not talking about the ghosts—are flying. You’re going to be so busy.”

Charlie snorted. “Busy. I’m already busy, and when the baby comes...”

“And when the baby comes, you’ll be in that amazing house with your amazing alpha and he will help.” Jack grinned, the expression oddly lupine. “Trust me, nannies are a thing.”

Him? Have a nanny? Dude, he couldn’t even fathom that. He didn’t know anyone except for Jack and Chase who had a nanny.

Was Kaleb going to want him to get a nanny? Did they need a nanny?

All of a sudden he had so many questions. So many things. They’d been so busy with remodeling the house and working that they hadn’t bothered to find out about one another.

Like what were they going to name their daughter, and what color were they going to paint the bedroom?

Like was Kaleb going to want to put her in dance?

Swimming?

Athletics?

Band?

Did Kaleb want to get married?

Whoa. He wanted to get married. In fact, Charlie thought he wanted to get married before the baby was born.

It was old-fashioned, and it was silly, but it was what he wanted.

He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't realize that Mr. Jack was speaking to him until he'd stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry, what?"

"Charlie, you're an amazing employee and a good friend, but it is more important for me that you work for me as a designer than you work for me at the front desk."

"I think I understand." Charlie nodded, feeling a mixture of regret and satisfaction. Mr. Jack was right. He had a lot to consider. "I think I need to speak to my lover, but yes you have my two-weeks notice for the desk position."

"I accept on one condition. Will you be willing to train the new person for your duties?"

Charlie nodded, and he didn't even begrudge Jack's victorious smile. "Absolutely. I won't leave you in the lurch."

"I know you wouldn't. Why don't you go take the afternoon off? Go take some lunch to your man, see how the house is going."

That was an easy thing to agree to, because it was exactly what he wanted to do. He was going to go grab some sandwiches and some soup because it was getting chilly, especially up in the mountains. Then he was going to discuss some of these things with his husband-to-be.

Because he intended to ask his husband-to-be if he would like to be, well, his husband-to-be. Dammit.

He gathered his things and headed out to the parking lot. It was still amazing to see the little car. Kaleb had just handed him the keys, and there was a little bow on the front of the car.

Just “here.”

Not happy birthday. Not happy Arbor Day or anything, just, “Here. This is for you. I love you.”

He headed into town, stopping at Alicia’s for one veggie sub—no cream cheese, heavy on the hummus—and one Italian sub, plus two bowls of potato soup. He also got turkey sandwiches and chips for Hank and Stone.

Then he stopped by the bakery grabbed half a dozen cookies before he started his long slow drive up the mountain.

He loved how, as he drove up into the mountains, the house just sort of appeared. Every time he saw it, he had a little moment of awe.

Hank was trying desperately to communicate with the ghosts in the house, and Charlie had simply decided that he was not going to have any more of that nonsense. He was done with worrying about ghosts. He was going to live in this house, and they were going to be happy, dammit.

Still it didn't hurt that Hank was going to be at the house today working with Stone, doing some kind of podcast up on the third floor.

He knew too that Kaleb was working on the sunroom off the back porch. That room was going to be one of his favorite spaces, he could tell.

Charlie pulled up into the big circular drive, and he had to smile. The outside paint was done now, and the house was red with white trim. It seemed friendly.

He grabbed his bounty, balancing the baked goods while he pulled bags of sandwiches out. Grinning, he figured once a concierge, always a concierge.

"Hey, do you need help, baby?" Kaleb appeared, smiling at him as if he'd made his lover's day.

"I will take some, love." He lifted his face for a kiss. "I missed you. I needed to see you, be with you. I'm off for the afternoon."

He was off any regular schedule in two weeks, in fact.

Kaleb gave him a lingering kiss, lips warm from the sun and his natural heat. Then he took the big box of baked goods. "What's all this?"

"Lunch. Sandwiches and cookies. Kynan always provides for the crew, but the ghost hunters forget to eat, and so do you." Him? If he missed a meal, their little one reminded him.

"Yeah, Kynan's crew is on an emergency job in Montrose today. So I'm just pottering on the sunroom." They wandered into the house together, and it was more like home every time he walked in the door.

“Oh, emergencies suck.” He left Hank and Stone’s lunch on the kitchen counter, then texted them. “Let’s go into the sunroom? I love it in there.”

“Sure, baby. There’s a little dust from me working, but I do have a table and a couple of chairs set up.” Kaleb led him to what the ghosts probably would have called the solarium or the conservatory. The glass was mostly original, though the casings had all been reinforced and a few panes replaced. There was ironwork, and the old woodwork gleamed again from oil soap and wood conditioner.

“This place is like heaven.” He could sit here and see the river valley, the town, the snaking highway.

“It’s something, huh? I love that Kynan was able to get someone in to convert the heating so we can use it all year.” Kaleb set the food down, then grabbed him and waltzed him around. “The Crapitorium says we can come pick up the chaise lounge this week. Mrs. Clinton had it cleaned for us.”

“Oh cool. I loved that thing.” Charlie stepped in, humming. “I have a lot to talk to you about. I want to talk about baby names.” And about quitting my job.

“Yeah? Have you had some good ones spring to mind?” They stood there, leaning on each other for a moment, Kaleb’s hands on his lower back.

“I was thinking about Natalia Quinn. Natalia Raleigh has a nice cadence.” And Nat was a sweet nickname, too.

“Is that family name stuff?” Kaleb just sounded kind of curious. Kaleb hadn’t really mentioned any names he’d particularly want...

“It was my mom’s name.” He thought she’d like that. She’d been killed along with his dad when he was a kid. He’d lived with his grandma until he left home.

“It’s a beautiful name,” Kaleb said, offering him a little smile. “Do your siblings have kids?”

“No. Vicki is a doctor overseas and her twin, Victor, is in the service.”

“Victor and Victoria? Seriously?”

He nodded. “They had a sense of humor, my parents.”

“Sounds like it. So were you Charlie for a reason?” He could feel Kaleb’s side move with laughter.

“I’m named after my dad’s favorite silent movie star.” He waggled his eyebrows, teasing hard.

“Ah, you little tramp.”

That made him laugh too, because it was a great comeback. “Yep. That’s me. Should we eat?”

“Absolutely.” Kaleb sat and pulled Charlie down to sit on Kaleb’s lap rather than the other chair.

He did love that. He snuggled right in and handed Kaleb his sandwich. “I’m giving notice at the front desk, love.”

“Are you?” Kaleb leaned back enough to just beam at him. “That will take quite a load off both your stress and your ankles.”

“I’ll train the new person, but I’m going to just work on the new rooms.”

“Hey, that’s amazing. I mean, I think between that and doing stuff up here? You’ll be busy as hell. Even when we get all the reno done, we’ll have the baby, and Hank is making noises about tours and maybe teas in the old formal parlor.”

“Oh, wow. That could be fun, but we’ll have to work around the baby’s schedule, hmm?”

“Yes. I told Hank we probably wouldn’t roll out any events until the baby was close to a year old. And did I say I liked that name?” Kaleb nibbled his sandwich.

“Do you? I’m glad you like it. I do too. It makes me smile.” Charlie leaned into him, nibbling at his own sandwich. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course, baby. What is it?” Kaleb stole his pickle.

He chewed on his bottom lip. “Do you want to get married? To me, I mean?”

Kaleb’s eyes went wide and the icy gray blazed like silver in the sunlight. “Are you kidding? Of course I do. I was planning to ask once the house was ready to move into full-time. I bought the ring last month.”

“Oh. Well, I have a ring for you too. I want to marry you, before the baby comes. I mean... I would want to marry you without the baby, but with the baby, there’s a timeline.”

“Then we need to get the show on the road.” That gaze went speculative, Kaleb turning in as he thought. “What kind of wedding do you see for you, baby?”

“You. Me. We can do it on the grounds here. The roses are blooming. It’s beautiful.” He didn’t need fancy. He needed Kaleb.

“Okay, cool. We can just have our friends then. And someone to do the ceremony. You don’t want your sibs?” Kaleb’s smile was just like the sun outside. Bright and warm, making him want to bask.

“I’ll invite them, of course, but they may have to attend virtually, if they forgive me at all.” Charlie shrugged, but he had to believe they would understand.

“Why don’t we reach out to them? We can just see. I can help, if you want.” Kaleb squeezed him with the arm holding him on that warm lap. He felt so safe right where he was, and that made him think maybe he could do it.

“I should. I want to. We aren’t super-close, but they are my family.” And he was building his own family here.

“When you’re ready, baby. No rush. If you want just our local friends to come, then that’s what we do, and we call your sibs later.” Kaleb offered up a chip.

He munched it, humming deep in his chest. “No. No, that’s cruel. I’ll just do it. Send out an email to them, explaining everything.” It might take a bit to fix, but starting with an apology and a reason couldn’t hurt.

“That sounds great, baby.” Kissing his temple, Kaleb hugged him close and hummed, like he was compelled to comfort Charlie.

“You seem happy today.” He leaned in, laughing as Natalia kicked hard.

“I am. I have the sun. The work is going well today. I have you and a yummy sammy. What’s not to love?”

“True. When we’re done eating, I’ll help. Just let me know what you need done.”

“Sure, baby. But no ladder time, okay? If it needs fixing or polishing high up, that’s my job.” That knowing tone made him blush a little.

“Yeah, yeah, no ladders. I promise.” Charlie had to roll his eyes. “It was a brand-new ladder.”

“It was. It had a weak spot. I looked.” Now Kaleb sounded super solemn. “Someone did you a favor. That last rung had a knot hole in it. It would have broken anyway.”

Now that made him feel good. Honestly, the ghost was protecting him? That was amazing.

“Kinda goes against Hank’s murder tale, huh?”

Kaleb chuckled. “I guess that depends on who broke the ladder for you. But I’m not buying the murder thing based on what we’ve heard. They seem to be searching for each other.”

“You think they are? Has Hank managed to contact them?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Another chuckle. “I mean, I’ve heard things. Someone calling for Ezekiel.”

“Yes. I’ve heard someone crying for an Augustus.”

“Yeah. So...” He got another kiss. “Ah, well. I guess we may never know for sure. So, I was about to start on that baseboard.”

“Okay. Painting? I’ll work on it.”

“Yep. Wear a respirator please.” Kaleb patted his butt when he got up.

He wiggled deliberately. “Yes, sir, alpha sir.”

“Such a sweet tease, my omega.”

“Yes, but you like it,” he shot back.

“I do.” Laughing, Kaleb rolled up the trash from their lunch. “I’m going to go toss this and make sure the guys got their lunch. Respirator,” he repeated firmly.

“Right here.” Charlie slipped it on, then went to sit on the camp stool Kaleb had set up, grabbing up the paintbrush.

A gust of cold air brushed the back of his neck, and he shivered, his whole body chilling down super quick.

“Whew. When the sun changes positions, it gets cold fast,” he said to no one.

I miss him. He was my sunshine.

Okay. Okay, Charlie, be cool. “I’m sorry. Is...is he still here?”

I miss him. He was my sunshine.

Was this what Hank said happened when a ghost was caught in a loop? Was he hearing just...echoes? But echoes couldn’t break a ladder. “I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

Tell him I love him. I got lost. I want to come home to him.

“Okay. I can do that.”

Somehow. He had no idea how.

Thank you. The whisper trailed off, and the warm sun fell on him again, heating the room.

“Wow.” He pulled out his phone to text Hank. Encounter in the solarium. Temp change etc>

OMW> That was fast, and soon he heard the thundering footsteps of Hank, Stone, and his Kaleb.

“I said to be careful!” Kaleb exclaimed.

“I was! I just sat here!”

Hank held up some sort of meter. “So what happened?”

He explained, and Stone wandered around the room taking measurements with a point-and-shoot thermometer.

“Wow. Wow, okay. That must have been Ezekiel. He was Augustus’s omega that was murdered.”

“He wasn’t murdered,” he said.

Even as Kaleb said, “He wasn’t a murderer.”

Hank looked up, bright-eyed and bushy tailed all of a sudden. “What?”

Charlie’s ears heated. “Ezekiel. He wasn’t murdered. He missed Augustus.”

“Exactly.” Kaleb pursed his lips. “I think they’re looking for each other.”

“Yes. He wants to come home. He says he was lost.” Charlie had heard that loss.

Hank breathed out a happy sound. “Oh, wow. Stone, did you?—”

“I heard.” Stone gave Charlie a little wink. “That’s sad, but cool for us. That’s always easier than an angry or vengeful ghost.”

“What do we do?”

Hank shook his head. “I’ll research. See if we can find where they found the body. Maybe something was left behind?”

Stone chewed his lip. “I can see that. Maybe if we can find whatever it is, we can clear Augustus’s name once and for all, and then the house’s history will still be tragic but not scary. That will be nice for you if you want to do events, huh?”

“Yes. And for us as a family. We need to help this be the home they deserved.” Charlie believed that with all his heart.

Kaleb shared a look of understanding with him. “Hence the tower room. I get it.”

“I knew you’d catch on,” he teased.

“I can’t wait to write this up for my next book with Elliot,” Hank said.

“I just want Charlie and Natalia safe. I need to know that this is a good space for them.” Kaleb kissed him hard enough to make his eyes cross.

All Charlie could do was hold on, clinging to Kaleb’s arms as he melted into his

alpha's embrace.

There was a light round of laughter, but when he opened his eyes, Hank and Stone had disappeared, probably heading back upstairs.

"Oh, oops," he whispered, swallowing hard. "Why aren't any bedrooms ready?"

"I don't know. I think our priorities are askew, huh?" Kaleb stared at him as if there was no one else left on earth.

"Yes. Master bedroom. Bathroom. Kitchen. Then we can move in."

"Exactly. I'll have Kynan's crew back up Monday, and he tells me two more days on the big suite." Kaleb looked so pleased.

"Okay. We can start packing the apartment, then, and call for the movers to bring your things."

"Yep." Kaleb kissed him again. "We're doing it, baby."

"We are. We're going to make a home here." He kissed Kaleb's nose. "Dammit."

Kaleb nodded. "I can't wait to have our bed here. You and me." They had picked one out, and it was in storage.

"Soon. I'll tell them a week from today, and then we'll spend the night in our house."

"I knew when I saw it. I was getting it for a reason, baby. There's nothing else I would rather do."

"Maybe...maybe you knew I needed you." It wasn't impossible.

“I think I did. I’m not arguing with that.” Kaleb hugged him close, and it didn’t matter.

They were together. That was all that counted.

Fourteen

“That’s it, guys. Thanks so much for all your help.” Kaleb tipped the last of the movers, then shut the front door of the house and locked it.

He leaned against the big, heavy wood piece for a moment, grinning.

Their friends had offered to help them move, but he and Charlie had told them no. And when his alpha club buddies had protested, Kaleb had taken them aside and explained.

He had a brand-new bed and a new walk-in shower, a pregnant mate who might soon be getting too big to have energetic sex in said shower, and a moving-in day that had been delayed another two weeks by a broken piece of pipe in the basement.

It was time for him and Charlie to be alone in their house, and not having pizza with twenty of their closest friends. Movers knew when to leave.

So after a promise to have everyone up for supper this weekend, he and Charlie were just that.

Alone in their house except for the canines.

Speaking of which. He looked at Trin and Neo. “You guys ready to eat?”

At their bouncing and woofing, he grinned and headed for the kitchen.

“Baby? I’m feeding the dogs.”

When he got no answer, he chuckled and pulled out his phone to text Charlie. Feeding the dogs. Where r u?>

Putting sheets on the bed. Down in a few>

That was a major hazard of their house. No one could hear anyone else.

“Come on, hooligans. Supper time.”

The puppies followed him to the kitchen, and he opened cans and mixed the food with kibbles, adding a bit of leftover beef from a steak dinner at Fuel the night before. They loved those little tidbits, and they worked them off easily.

“Hey, love.” Charlie hustled in, out of breath. “I was making the bed.”

“Look at you, being all industrious.” He beamed at Charlie, then washed his hands before grabbing Charlie for a kiss. “Mostly alone at last.”

“Woo-hoo.” Charlie wrapped both arms around his neck. “Mmm. So what are we having for supper?”

“I think we have a nice entree salad in the fridge that Ryan sent for us. So we can just pop a bottle of fake wine and have that, yeah?” He and Charlie had discovered sparkling grape juice wasn’t a bad substitute for wine while Charlie was pregnant.

“Oh, that sounds great. He’s such a sweetie.”

Ryan did catering out of the hotel, working with Charlie’s friend Bridget. He was also married to King, who was the chef at Fuel.

Everything in Secret Springs was connected somehow.

“He is. And the salad smells amazing.” It was some sort of Mediterranean thing with chicken. Charlie was back to being able to eat chicken like a champ.

“This is amazing. I can’t believe we’re home.” Charlie leaned against him. “I can’t believe that Vicki paid to have my storage building packed and shipped. She said it was her wedding present.”

Charlie had a few pieces of furniture, a sewing machine, and a bunch of books. It was adorable.

“I told you we just needed to reach out.” Charlie’s siblings had both responded well when Charlie had messaged them, and Kaleb couldn’t be more glad. “I’m tickled they’re coming to the wedding.”

Kaleb had sorted through his own storage unit and gotten rid of some of the more modern, impersonal pieces from his condo in Denver, preferring to shop with Charlie all over the Western Slope for more vintage pieces in keeping with the house.

It was something they both loved, and they could spend hours wandering. Especially since they’d found Warrick at the Fuzzy Butt Doggie Daycare. The dogs loved that place, and War even did overnights at his own house, which was behind the vet office and daycare.

“Mmm. Thanks to you, I did get a hold of them.” Charlie kissed him again, then moved to pull out the salad and a pair of plastic forks, since nothing was unpacked in the kitchen but coffee pods and the Keurig for tomorrow morning. “She’s flying in with Victor. They’ll be here two days before the wedding.”

“Yay. We’ll have the guest wing ready by then, huh?” Or at least enough rooms in it.

“Absolutely. Those rooms were in the best shape. The guy is coming to install the claw foot tubs next week.”

“Oh good.” Their en suite was pristine, but the other bathrooms were still a work in progress, save the two powder rooms down on this level.

The days Charlie spent at the hotel were coming fewer and farther between, too. Two weeks training had become one, and five days a week designing had turned into two.

The house was a huge undertaking, but Charlie was also tiring more easily, his body telling him to take it slower. Jack was very understanding. Hell, the man had all sorts of advice for Kaleb.

The main part of which was “watch your omega” and “keep him busy with safe things.”

Thankfully, Kaleb was super good at watching Charlie do just about anything.

They sat across from each other at the dinette they’d put into the eat-in area of the kitchen, grinning at each other as they dug into their salad.

“So are you happy with the basics, baby?” Kaleb asked.

“I’m just excited to sleep in our own bed tonight, you know? Everything is good, though, solid.” Charlie smiled at him. “It’s starting to feel like a home, isn’t it?”

“It really is.” He needed to send Kynan and his crew a bonus. They’d really dug in and gotten shit done.

“I still think my favorite room is the sunroom, although the balcony from our bedroom is going to be amazing.”

“It is.” And he wasn’t having his Charlie out there until he was absolutely sure it was safe. Not structurally; that he knew was just fine. But ghost-wise? He had to make sure no one was going to shove Charlie off.

And he’d never in his life thought he’d have to say something like that.

“I’m going to put two chaises out there, and a table. Or maybe one of those larger two-man lounges with two side tables, then we could snuggle...”

“Oh, now see, that’s the best idea. Keep a stack of blankets and a warmer right by the door...”

“Yeah? We could just make ourselves a little oasis, a private balcony to watch the town.”

“We could.” That sounded so good to him. They’d put a bassinet in the bedroom, and that way the baby would be right there, but not out in the cold with them. He already had the baby monitors on order.

The crib was in the room next to theirs, along with two soft recliners and a changing table. All in all, he felt like this was going to be a good home.

Charlie forked up a piece of chicken and studied it. Then he ate it, which was a good sign. That meant he thought he could keep it down.

“It’s really good, isn’t it?” Charlie asked.

“It is. Ryan doesn’t steer us wrong.” He grinned at Charlie, feeling the good kind of tired. Not that he couldn’t expend a little more energy.

Charlie reached out and stroked his thigh, hand heavy and hot.

“Mmm.” This was so nice. Just to sit in their kitchen and love each other while they ate supper. “Hello, there.”

“Hey...” That hand moved up higher, toward his cock.

“Did you want to put the salad back for a bit? We could go upstairs and test the view.”

“I’d love that—testing the view. Together.” Charlie cupped his cock.

“Then let’s do that.” He closed up the salad, dropping a kiss on Charlie’s mouth as he rose to put it in the fridge. “Let me let the dogs out. I don’t want to just let them roam the first few days. Until they’re used to being up here full time.”

“Of course not. They are our family.” Charlie kissed him, then whistled up the dogs, who ran outside, galumphing along.

He grinned, rinsing off the forks to leave on the counter for afterward, then washing the dogs’ bowls. They would just close the bedroom door when they got up there. Charlie had never opposed sleeping with the dogs, but Kaleb drew the line at spectator sex.

Some things didn’t need an audience.

When the dogs were safely in, they headed upstairs hand in hand, their steps echoing in the huge main hall. Yeah, he could see getting a very good sound system...

“We’re going to make love in our bed.” Charlie was bouncing.

“We are.” And his cock was already hardening. He wanted Charlie badly, wanted to prove to his lover, his fiancé, how desired he was. They closed the bedroom door

behind them, and he locked it, because Neo and Trin knew how to open doors. They had to work at it, but they were tall enough to manage it.

Charlie knew just what he was doing, and the soft laughter amused the hell out of him.

“Laughing at me,” he murmured, turning to pull Charlie into his arms.

“No. At the dogs. They’ll be right outside whining when we’re done.”

“I refuse to feel guilty,” Kaleb said before bending to take a kiss.

“No guilt.” Charlie went up on tiptoe, belly pressing against him.

“None.” He kissed that sweet mouth again, loving the feel of Charlie leaning on his chest, holding his shoulders for balance.

He wanted to feel his lover—all the way to the bone.

They walked to the big bed, which wasn’t quite the fairy-tale bower he wanted to make for Charlie yet, but the big monster wore clean sheets, and the brand-new mattress was like a firm cloud when they sat on it.

And his omega seemed utterly over the moon, genuinely. “Oh, we’re home.”

Charlie reached for him, lips pressing against his, inviting him in to taste. He did just that, tongue sliding in to taste, and he moaned at how perfectly they fit together.

They always did, but this time was even more special, and Kaleb felt that in the air.

Charlie worked his belt open, then his fly. “I need you, love. I need your cock.”

“Anything you want tonight. I’ll give it, and I won’t give up.” He reached up to tug on Charlie’s shirt.

“You never do, my love. You never let me down.” Charlie held his gaze, so serious. “You’re my hero.”

“Am I?” Charlie was his hero. Charlie had been through so much and he still had so much love to give. He never complained, either. Even when he’d been working himself to the bone, he’d just gotten up every day. “Mutual admiration.”

“Perfect.” Charlie pushed at his jeans. “Admire more.”

Kaleb cracked up, hands moving to unfasten Charlie’s pants as well. “I can do that. I can so do that.”

“I like how you do.”

He grinned, easing Charlie’s pants down, fascinated at how his love’s body was changing with the baby. He had to explore that, sliding his hands over every new contour.

The sweet rounded belly fascinated him, the skin just beginning to stretch, and he loved the way his omega felt under his fingers.

Charlie wiggled. “Now you.”

“Hmm?”

“Clothes.” Tugging again, Charlie started to help him strip.

“Right. Right, I almost forgot. You make me dizzy.” And Kaleb needed Charlie more

than was reasonable.

“I want to. Not dizzy so you fall down, but dizzy so you feel good.”

“Oh, baby, you make me feel better than I ever have.” He got them both completely stripped, then stretched out with Charlie on the bed.

Charlie grinned at him, the look naughty enough to go straight to his balls. So he kissed that smiling mouth again, his hand on Charlie’s ass to pull them together at the hip, their cocks rubbing.

His lover was already hard, the hot column of flesh sliding over his belly.

Kaleb moaned, his body bucking, his balls tight already. So damn hot. Charlie made his knot swell before they were even joined together.

Charlie slid down, hot tongue dragging over his chest, teasing at his belly. His omega stared up at him, hungry, starving for his attention.

He sank a hand into Charlie’s hair, nodding, waiting for the feel of that hot mouth even lower.

Charlie gave it to him, loving on him, laving the head of his cock, tongue rough and heated. Every muscle in Kaleb’s body tensed, his breath coming in sharply.

He spread wide, letting Charlie settle in between his legs, offering himself up eagerly. And Charlie took what he was offering, sinking down to lick and suck, hands on his thighs.

God, that felt so good. Charlie was so giving. So perfect. He wanted everything his omega could give and more.

Charlie worked him, the pressure and pleasure mixed together to make his eyes cross. He watched Charlie's mouth on him, watched the way Charlie shook for him, and he moaned, his knot starting to swell.

"My knot... Charlie, I want you to ride me."

Charlie licked all around his knot, the little tickling touches enough to drive a man mad. "Do you?"

Sweet tease.

"I do. And if you don't hurry up and get astride, I won't even be able to get inside you."

"Mmm." Charlie gave one last lick before sliding up along his body, rubbing all the way. That was enough to make him grunt, his eyes trying to close.

Charlie straddled him, that sweet hole wet and ready for him, needing to be filled. He pressed two fingers against it, knowing Charlie could take the stretch, and prepared Charlie as fast as he could. He needed inside.

Now.

"No teasing. I need you. It's been days. At least days." Charlie shifted down, hole nudging his cock.

"We've been—uhn—we've been busy." But this was necessary, and he was so damn glad they had time and they were together. It was perfect. He pulled Charlie down on his cock, so ready to really move.

His eyes crossed, the heat surrounding him and making him gasp. Charlie cried out,

his hips rolling, driving them down together.

He grabbed those lean hips, helping Charlie move up, then down. Kaleb needed friction. He needed to watch Charlie come apart while he knotted that sweet ass. He could do this all day every day if his body would let him and the world would just butt out.

“Focus. Focus, lover. I need your knot filling me up.”

“I am focused, baby. I promise. I want you so bad. Just keep moving. Don’t stop.” He kept Charlie moving, gaze on Charlie’s face. He didn’t want to miss a moment of this. Not one.

“Not stopping.” Charlie sounded near desperate, the expression on his omega’s face one of pure bliss. The dark blue eyes were fastened onto him, while Charlie’s pretty pink lips were parted, and he could just see the tip of Charlie’s tongue, lapping at them restlessly.

Suddenly it was if Kaleb couldn’t breathe. His balls were so tight that his toes curled up in response, and he reached out and grabbed Charlie’s hips, pulling him down harder and harder. His knot swelled until he could barely force himself into the tight wet hole.

But that was where he needed to be, and that was where Charlie needed him, so that was what was going to happen.

“Love.” He bit the single word out, barely putting breath behind it, but somehow it was so loud that it echoed in their bedroom.

Their bedroom.

Their bed.

Their space.

Charlie arched for him, that sweet belly pushing out as his head fell back. “Don’t stop. Please, love, don’t stop.” This time, it was Charlie begging, but that wasn’t going to happen. Not now. Not when they both needed this so much.

He bent his knees to give Charlie some pressure, something to balance against as he formed a chair out of his body. Suddenly, he was in that sweet, tight body, and Charlie was rippling around his knot, making him roar with the sensation of it.

He reached out his hand, finding Charlie’s sweet dripping cock. He began to tug, needing his omega to come with him, to jump over the edge with him.

“Come on, babe,” he muttered. “Let’s do this thing.”

“I’m right here with you.”

At least he thought that’s what Charlie said. Really all that he heard was the rushing of air in his ears, but Charlie gave him a gasp and a nod, and then that sweet body flushed, the rosy heat climbing up his belly and into his chest.

Charlie came a heartbeat before he did, and he was incredibly grateful for that because he shorted out. The world went sparkly and gray with the force of his orgasm. He knew Charlie wanted him, but this had been special. This had been like heat sex, but bigger, hungrier.

It felt like something more real, and all he could think was that it was because they were finally home together.

Home in their bedroom.

In their home, ghosts or no.

When he floated back into his head, he reached up and eased Charlie down on his chest, their bodies still joined by his knot. He pulled the blankets around them, cradling them together.

“Nap?” he suggested, because neither of them were going anywhere.

“Can there be ice cream afterward? Chocolate with whipped cream and a cherry?”

“You know it, babe. Anything for my Charlie.”

Fifteen

“Okay, everyone smile. One, two, three—perfect.” The photographer took the last of the pictures, then gave them a thumbs-up. “Yay! Okay, folks. That’s the last of the pictures. You are reception bound.”

Charlie chuckled, looking at Kaleb, who was so handsome in his dark suit. “Yay. My ankles want me to sit.”

“Well, come on, baby. Do you want me to carry you?”

“No!” He did not need to be carried. He just needed to sit. “Butthead.”

“That’s Mr. Butthead,” Kaleb teased, and everyone laughed, including Vicki and Victor, and the Mrs. Raleighs, who didn’t want to go by Mary and Charlotte.

No, they wanted to be Mom and Maman.

“My Mr. Butthead.” He lifted his face for a kiss and got it immediately. God, it was a glorious day, the sun bright, the flowers smelling amazing, and only a little crisp this high up. The house shone like a jewel.

“Yes. Mr. Raleigh.” Kaleb smiled as Charlie sat, and Charlie had never been so happy.

All their friends were milling about, their families were here, the baby was kicking—it was perfection.

He glanced up at the house and blinked. Was there someone up there in the tower window?

Charlie waved, figuring if it was person or ghost, they needed welcoming.

“What are you waving at, baby? There shouldn’t be anyone up there.”

“Well, what if the ghosts are watching the wedding?”

That got him a few odd looks, but Kaleb just grinned. “Good point.”

He’d decided to live with them, and so far, so good. Every time he got scared, he was just a decent person. He explained what he was redoing. He had found everything but the baby’s cradle for the ghost’s tower room.

It had to be somewhere, right? He had a feeling Augustus had hidden it out of sight after the death of Ezekiel had happened... Who could blame him? Maybe it was in one of the sheds...

“Earth to Charlie,” Kaleb said, handing him a glass of apple juice.

“Oh, thanks. Sorry. I was thinking.”

“Be careful of that nonsense.” Vicki winked at him, her hair almost as short as Victor’s.

“I can see the smoke coming out of his ears,” his brother drawled, and they all grinned at each other.

They were dark-haired where he was light brown, almost blond, but they all had the same blue eyes.

“It’s a hazard for sure,” Charlie agreed. “Especially with pregnancy brain.”

All of the assembled omegas groaned with sympathy in a chorus.

Hank’s daughter, little Antonia came over to him, patting his belly. “Poor Charlie belly.”

“I know!” Charlie bent down to whisper to her. “It’s like I need cake.”

“Ooooh.” Her eyes got big.

“After supper,” Elliot said, coming to lift his daughter into his arms. “I hear there are hotdogs.”

They had gone informal with grilled meats and lots of late summer salads and vegetables for their food, and the kids were excited about the hotdogs and potato salad.

“Hotdogs and chips, all the good things.” He winked up at Elliot. “Having a good time?”

“I am. Man, this place is a historian’s dream. And you guys throw a great party.”

“Thanks.” Kaleb just beamed. It was true, Charlie thought. Kaleb had spared no expense to make their day special, but not just to throw money at it.

He was thoughtful about it. There was a bouncy house for the kids, and shady places to sit with their feet up for the preppers among them like him. There was food and games and people laughing and talking all over.

And he knew the food and music and fun would go on long past when he and Kaleb

headed down the mountain for a night at the hotel and a long private soak in the hot springs pool. Their mini honeymoon. Hank and Elliot and Kynan and Andrew had offered to spend the wedding night up at the house with the family just to give them their little idyll.

They'd join everyone for breakfast again in the morning.

Then his siblings were headed out for a vacation in Boulder, and they had Kaleb's folks for another week.

Good thing he already liked them so much.

"Hey! Who's ready for a plate?" King waved his tongs from over by the grill.

"I'll deliver," Ryan piped up. "Just tell me what you two want."

They had the best friends on earth. Charlie felt so loved.

"Oh, I want a little of everything not red meat, please." He still couldn't handle beef.

"No burger for you, man?" Vicki sat next to him. "Hormones suck."

"They do, but it's not that big of a deal. I'm due around Thanksgiving, so I can make a roast for Christmas."

"Mmm. Roast beast." Vicki smacked her lips.

"Well, you're welcome to come back then. I have mom's recipe."

"Woo." Victor fist-bumped their sister. "Though I bet there's some serious-ass snow up here then. How are you going to get up and down the mountain?"

Kaleb chuckled. "I've got a snowmobile if I need it, and an extra vehicle I'll store down at the main road in the garage we're building. It will have a block heater."

"Nice! That way if you can't drive down, you can get out in an emergency." Vicki nodded. "Babies can need medical help sometimes."

"They can. And I don't want to have to attach the St. Bernards to a sled."

There was a round of chuckles, but then one of the kids yelled as one of said Bernards stole a hotdog.

"Oops. Let me go replace that," Chase said, hopping up to go get a new plate for his child.

"Neo!" Kaleb called Neo to the carpet, and the big dog slunk off to lie down near the grill, no doubt hoping King and Bridget would drop stuff.

He kind of wondered if anyone was left in town working. He guessed the peasants back in Secret Springs would have to eat pizza and Senor Dragon's...

Then he giggled, because that was such a silly thought.

Especially since David and Mrs. Chen were here at the party...

"This is the wedding of the year, man," Hank said, coming to sit next to them. "I love it."

"I was just thinking how no one was in town working," Charlie said. "Is that weird?"

"Nah. You know how it is when Jack has a to-do out at the ranch."

“True.” Small towns seemed to be very understanding that way. When something was important to people, they just took the time off to enjoy it.

“So,” Hank asked. “Are you feeling more comfortable up here now?”

“I am. I decided to make my peace with Ezekiel and Augustus.” They had been here first after all, and he didn’t think that was such a bad idea. He was convinced that Augustus was absolutely not a murderer. There was no way that he had murdered his omega. No one might be able to prove it, but he believed that with his entire soul.

“Good deal. I think the house is beautiful, and I’m hoping at some point—after the baby’s born of course and maybe when everything’s finished—that you would let me do ghost tours up here. Not every day, or even regularly, but you know, on special occasions.”

“I can see that. I keep wondering if it’s not weird for Kaleb to have bought this house—to have this house just for us. For the two of us, soon to be the three of us, I mean. But then I think, we can have parties, there can be people. We might fill this house with children.”

Hank cackled. “You mean like Jack and Chase?”

Charlie snorted, lowering his voice. “I’m not sure anyone is like Jack and Chase.”

“True that.”

“Kaleb and I were talking, and if you want, you could come do a special-edition ghost tour here for Halloween night.”

Hank’s eyes lit up. “Oh really?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I don’t see why not.” It wasn’t like he was actually going to be able to help by then. He’d be pretty far along, but he could sit and serve cookies and nod to people as they passed through. Or maybe he and Kaleb could go down and watch all the things in town while they ran the tour up here. That way, he wouldn’t even have to be here when it happened.

A breeze lifted the hair on the back of his neck, making it stand to attention. Oh, that was far too cold for the nice day. He looked around, trying to see where that had come from.

“Oh Charlie! That would be amazing!” Hank’s face lit up. “Stone and I could really do it up. Dress the part. We could bring a select group of people in, and it would be amazing!”

It was worth it just to see the excitement in Hank’s eyes, and God knew he owed Hank. Hank had been the one to believe that he was down in the coal cellar.

“All right. Fair enough then. I think we should do it. You’ll just have to let me know what, if anything, you need me to do here before the date.”

Hank shook his head. “You guys don’t have to do anything. Whatever state the house is in is the state the house is in. We’re there to see ghosts, not the house.”

Charlie’s new in-laws came wandering over, sitting down with him.

“How are you holding up, son?” Kaleb’s mom asked, and Charlie smiled.

“Good! I’m good. It’s been an amazing party. The weather’s really held out—not too hot, not too windy. Have you met my friend, Hank?”

“We have!” Mary smiled at him. “You really have made Kaleb very happy, you

know. We never thought that he would settle down. He never seemed to find the right person. I think we both thought that we'd both be grandchildren-less."

Kaleb's mom just cracked up. "Well put, dear."

Maman looked so pretty in her little bohemian summer dress, sandals peeking up from underneath the flowered hem. "Mary's not lying, though. We are tickled to have you join the family."

Charlie nodded and smiled. He had no doubt that they were telling the truth, although he had this suspicion that having the grandbaby didn't hurt.

"Are you going to be having a baby shower?" she asked.

"Of course he is!" Hank exclaimed. "We're thinking September—that should be early enough that he can enjoy it and late enough that the pictures make him look gigantic."

"Oh thanks." He rolled his eyes, patting his stomach, which had never been this big or this round. He couldn't imagine what he'd be looking like in two or three months...

"No problem, buddy. That's half the fun."

"Do you know what the theme is going to be?" Mary asked.

"Charlie's got a bit of a registry, but the nursery is decorated in woodland animals. It's adorable—the only room in the entire house that's not done up in Victorian." Hank was almost as excited about this baby as he was about his own child. Of course Hank wasn't pregnant, which was apparently his least favorite part of the entire experience, and Hank the godfather was notorious for being generous and eager.

“Not exactly. This week I thought we could explore the house and then, of course, the town. We could do some shopping. I know Kaleb has a lot of plans, so that we can all get to know one another.” If he was completely honest, Charlie was already feeling a little pooped, but not tired enough that he would disappoint his new in-laws. He wanted to be a part of their family. After all, they had bothered to come, they’d been supportive, and they’d been kind and willing to fold him in. He could do no less than the same.

He looked over the party. All these people had come up here to celebrate with him and Kaleb. All of them, and they were both new. Charlie had been here in Secret Springs for so short a time, and Kaleb had been here even shorter.

It didn’t matter to all of these people.

They were here to celebrate them, to fold them into this little town like they were meant to be here. Hell, to fold their child into this space.

Thank goodness Joe had been there to save him.

He looked up into the tower room and, sure enough, there was a face there again, staring out and looking down at the party as if he was confused. It was as if someone was questioning why anyone would be here, and Charlie wanted to go up and tell them it was okay. They were here to celebrate a wedding.

He didn’t of course.

The last thing he needed was for his in-laws to think he was a nut case.

Sixteen

Kaleb put the last touches on the plates of pancakes and fruit, trying to make sure he made them look really nice. Then he covered them with cloches King had suggested he get, put them and glasses of orange juice, and cups of tea and coffee on the tray, then put the tray in the dumbwaiter.

Time to see if the thing was really going to work in any practical way.

He headed out of the kitchen to climb the wide main stairway, the gleaming newel post and baluster so damn nice now that the wood was all refinished. He just... The house was amazing, and Kaleb had to admit, it was Charlie who had really brought it to life.

He couldn't imagine doing this without his lover.

His husband.

Wow. That still had the nicest ring to it, even a month after the wedding.

Kaleb made his way down the second-floor hall toward the big suite at the end, and he stopped at the door for the dumbwaiter, opening it so he could crank the mechanism up and watch as their breakfast-in-bed magically appeared at the opening.

He anchored it in place and grabbed the tray, setting it on the side table Charlie had thoughtfully placed there so he could loosen the anchor and shut the door. That way it would run again from anywhere in the house.

Whistling, he walked, tray in hands, to the bedroom, where he'd left the door open just enough for him to get in. The dogs had their doggie door set up now, and they came and went at will. They weren't big wanderers, preferring to stay in the yard he and Charlie had designed over the summer, or in the temperature-controlled house.

His babies were spoiled.

Which meant, he had no doubt, that they would be up nosing around for bites of food soon. He needed to get Charlie his tray before that happened.

Man, he could see how a house like this had needed a staff...

He and Charlie had compromised on that. They had a cleaning crew that was going to come every two weeks to really deep clean part of the house, and then they were going to look at hiring someone local, come spring, as more of a housekeeper. But they needed time to establish what role they wanted that person to play.

He slid into the bedroom, smiling at the lump Charlie made under the covers. Up this far, it was getting chilly at night now, and Charlie liked to pile up under the blankets and snuggle.

"Morning, sunshine," he called, giving some warning. "I brought breakfast."

Charlie popped up, light brown head tousled, blue eyes filled with sleep. "Oh! Yum. Let me pee."

"Ah, the pregnant one's refrain." As Charlie got bigger, the baby pressed on all sorts of things, and he had to pee a lot more.

"Yeppers." Charlie rolled out of bed, then yelped when his feet hit the floor. "Eeek. Cold. Running now."

“Careful.” He watched Charlie sprint, as much as he was able, for the bathroom. Then he got the little bed table out and set it up with their breakfast, leaving the cloches on to keep things warm.

Once the baby was born, he was thinking of making up a coffee station in the bedroom with a little K-cup maker, just so they didn’t have to make that trek down to the kitchen when they wanted coffee or tea first thing.

“That smells amazing.” Charlie slipped back into bed, pulling the covers up to his nose.

“I skipped the meat.” Charlie was still iffy on beef, bacon, and sausage, despite the morning sickness having really let off.

“Mmm. I appreciate it. Did you use the dumbwaiter?”

“I did. And it didn’t spill the drinks!” It had taken them forever to get that mechanism back up to speed, but it was smooth as a baby’s butt now.

“Yay!” Charlie laughed, the sound delighted. “What kind of tea do I have?”

“Ginger and cinnamon.”

“Oh, perfect. You spoil me.” Charlie lifted the cloche on his plate.

“That’s my job.” Kaleb crawled into bed, settling in and grabbing a napkin. “Man, this is nice. I had dreamed about stuff like this when I bought this house, but now I know I just needed you to make it true no matter where I am.”

“Aw.” Charlie’s eyes glittered when he looked at Kaleb. “Thank you.”

“You are very welcome. Look. I tried to make a swan.”

Charlie studied his banana-strawberry monstrosity. “I see... Nessie.”

“Close enough. Aquatic bird, lake monster. Who can tell the difference?”

Charlie nodded, his expression studiously serious. “I think it’s lovely.”

“Oh good.” He might never have a career as a fruit carver, but if he could make Charlie happy, that worked for him.

They poured syrup and got to eating, and by the time Neo and Trin showed up, sniffing around the edges of the big bed and waiting for permission to come up for a bite, Kaleb thought he might be ready to face the day.

“So what are your plans for the day, baby?” Kaleb asked.

“One of Kynan’s guys is coming up to meet me about the plans for the new spa room at the hot springs pool. And then I thought I might go out and look at the sheds.”

That caught his attention, and not in a good way. “The sheds? Why?”

“I want to look for that cradle.”

“Charlie...” Charlie wanted to find the cradle from the old nursery, as well as the pram, and he was convinced it was on the property.

“You could come with me.” Charlie gave him a bright smile.

“If you go looking, you don’t do it without me, okay?”

He felt a whisper of cold air on his neck, and he thought someone else agreed with that thought.

Maybe Augustus, who seemed mostly quiet these days.

Neo lifted his head to woof, as if to say, “You better listen, Charlie-dad.”

“No, no, of course not.” Charlie shook his head, raising a hand to touch his arm. “I know those sheds aren’t cleared for safety yet.”

“Thanks, baby.” He leaned over to take a kiss. “I just want you to be careful.” That cold brush of something ghostly happened again, and then it was gone, leaving him with goose bumps rising on his arms.

“I’ve made peace with the house, Kaleb,” Charlie said with absolute certainty in his voice. “I’ll be fine.”

“Mmm.” Kaleb wasn’t going to argue about that. Charlie did seem to have a real affinity for the old walls and floors of this place. So he just put his hand on Charlie’s belly and felt for his daughter’s kicks. She did like pancakes.

Charlie chuckled, the sound as rich and warm as the sun coming in the windows, livening up the chilly room. “Okay, I hear you. I do.”

“I love you, baby.” He turned to stare into Charlie’s eyes, the blue so clear and bright. “So much.”

“I love you too.” Charlie licked syrup off his fork. “Almost as much as pancakes.”

“Happy fall!” Hank bustled into the solarium, his arms piled high with wrapped presents. “Stone and I are here to get the party started!”

An embarrassed sort of pleasure warmed his ears and his cheeks. Charlie laughed from his big chair, which felt a little throne-like, but his ankles had swollen up like balloons this morning when he got up, and Kaleb had insisted he sit as everyone arrived.

“Hey, Hank!” He held out his arms, suddenly needing a hug. This was his baby shower. He was married to Kaleb and he was having a baby...

Soon.

Hank set down his packages and came to hug Charlie tight. “Hi. Oh, honey, congratulations.”

He sniffed, his whole body filling up to his eyebrows with swirling emotions.

“Yay, Charlie.” Stone walked over to hug him too, and more people started to arrive, Kaleb playing butler to let them all in.

Hank immediately took on the task of organizing gifts, and when Ryan came in, food started to appear, nibbles and drinks and cake.

“What’s all this?” Charlie pointed to the plates and cups. Half of them had a woodland animal theme, like the nursery upstairs. The other half were...baseball themed?

Hank chuckled, his cheeks going pink above his tight-cut little beard. “We’ve decided she’s going to be a softball girl. She’s going to have a wicked fastball like her dad.”

“Oh.” That caused the tears to spill over, and he tried to blink them away, but he couldn’t quite get his eyelids to move fast enough.

“Honey, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Hank rushed to him, grabbing his hands.

“You didn’t. That’s just so sweet.”

“Ah, my little walking hormone.” Kaleb brought him a hankie. He loved that Kaleb carried a hankie.

“Thanks.” He blew his nose a little, then wiped up with the other side of the cloth. “I just didn’t expect that.”

“We even all signed a softball for her,” Stone said. He held out a box to Charlie. “You should open it now, just in case it makes you cry again.”

He had to laugh at that. “Thank you.” Charlie lifted the lid on the box and stared down at the softball with all of his friends’ signatures scrawled on it. “You’re all so amazing.”

“We love you, Charlie. And we can’t wait to meet your little girl.” That was Ryan, coming to kiss his cheek. He had a little extra bond with Stone and Ryan, who had also lived in the omega apartment above Lukas’s shop. They got what it was like to find a home in Secret Springs.

“Me too!” He laughed, his shoulders relaxing. “Okay, bring on the games and stuff! My little one wants cake, so we need to power through.”

“I brought you cheese puffs.” Ryan brought him a plate of goodies, no charcuterie in sight. “Start with that.”

“I will, thanks.” He nibbled, watching everyone find a chair, the first-day-of-fall sun still warm enough to make the solarium pleasant.

“Neo! Get your slobbery head off my table!” Ryan went running to save the food, making everyone chuckle.

Charlie searched for Kaleb, meeting his silvery-gray gaze, getting the happiest smile when their gazes met. And he knew in that moment, gratitude rose up in him, because he knew he was the luckiest man on earth.

The bubble popped between them, the party coming back into focus, and he laughed at the antics of the dogs, who were fascinated by the pile of brightly wrapped presents.

Ankles be damned, he was going to have a good time.

Page 17

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Seventeen

“You ready to head to town, baby?” Kaleb poked his head into the bedroom, where Charlie was dressing to go down into Secret Springs for Halloween.

“I guess?” Charlie sat on the bed, legs out, and wiggled his toes at Kaleb. “I can’t get my socks on.”

“Oh, baby. You should have hollered.”

“I texted.”

Kaleb dragged out his phone, but there was no signal, which was an occasional hazard up here.

“That’s it. I’m ordering us walkie-talkies.” He wanted Charlie to be able to get him wherever Charlie was in the house without all this no-signal nonsense.

“We have a house that requires walkie-talkies and intercoms.” Charlie’s chuckle seemed a little breathless.

“Are you sure you want to go to town, baby? We can always just hide out up here. Our suite is off-limits to the tour anyway.”

Hank was already downstairs, setting up the refreshments and such for the tour. Jack had sent a couple of hands from the ranch to help plow and sand the road up to the house, because they’d had their first heavy snow two days ago.

Charlie had worn himself out making sure the house sparkled for Hank, so maybe they should just stay home.

“Oh. Do you think anyone would be disappointed?” Charlie flopped gently back on the bed, arms out. “I would love to just be lazy.”

“I don’t think anyone will mind a bit.” He would call and see if someone could deliver their supper from the hotel. He’d put in an order ahead of time, but there was always a high school kid willing to make money delivering up to them.

“Okay. Then let’s stay home.” Charlie lifted his head just enough to look over his mound of belly. “But I would still like socks.”

“You got it.” He helped Charlie sit up, then got a warm pair of socks to roll onto those poor chilly feet. “Okay, let me wander until I get a signal so I can call the hotel. And I’ll get the dogs up here, huh?” He’d planned to take Neo and Trin into town with them, so they were downstairs harassing Hank.

“Thanks, love.” Charlie scooted back against the pillows. “I’ll get us a movie to watch.” He grabbed the remote and the big throw blanket that lay on the bed.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” Kaleb headed downstairs, where he found Hank arranging a big vase of Halloween-themed flowers on the table in the middle of the grand foyer. “Hey, Hank. Looks like we’re staying in. I’m going to get dinner delivered. Will that put a kink in your plans?”

“Of course not! It’s your house, love.” Hank grinned. “Fuel or the hotel?”

“The hotel. Bridget was making a special meal for us.” Charlie hadn’t really had cravings, so to speak, but he could eat his weight in cheese puffs, white lasagna, and cake.

“Ah, well, Noah is coming up for the tour. The waiter that hired on a few weeks ago? So he can bring it up. I’ll call him.”

“Oh, that would rock. I just need to call the hotel and tell them we’re not coming. That way they can sell the room if they need to.”

He took the dogs out to go potty while he called, then dried them off and herded them back upstairs so they could all snuggle up and enjoy their evening in.

A rush of cold air washed down the stairs at him, like a gust of wind through an open window.

Ezekiel.

“Whoa.” It had been a while since he’d heard what he was sure was Augustus’s voice. “It’s okay, man. It’s just a tour. No one is coming to hurt the house.”

The wind almost knocked him off the stairs, and down below, he heard the front door slam. He also heard Hank’s wordless cry, and then, “Stone, get the meter! I think we have activity.”

“I hope you’re just putting on a show,” Kaleb murmured, but he would take the warning, too. Whatever it was that Augustus was worried about, he would watch out for it.

The dogs just rushed upstairs, waiting at the door to the master suite to be let in, so he hurried up to check on Charlie.

Who was asleep, remote in hand.

He grinned, then tiptoed over to the other side of the bed while the dogs jumped up at

the foot. They'd gotten the extra-long king bed for that reason.

"Looks like we need a nap until supper gets here," he whispered, and Neo and Trin settled right in, Neo's head on Trinity's back. Their stalwart protectors.

"Did I miss the movie?" Charlie asked, his voice blurred with sleep.

"No, baby. Rest. I'll wake you up when dinner comes."

"Mmmkay." Charlie lay back against the pillows and started to snore lightly.

This might be their very last Halloween in a long time that they got to just sit at home and not be down in town trick-or-treating on Main Street.

Either way, Kaleb knew he was going to be a happy man.

As long as the ghosts behaved themselves.

Eighteen

God, he was tired.

Charlie stood in the third-floor nursery, staring out the window at the snow.

Kaleb had run down to Secret Springs for his alpha breakfast and to pick up some supplies. The sky looked steel gray, but no new snow came down yet. The forecast called for a storm to roll in this weekend, but nothing had shown up yet.

They were going to have a few days snowed in together, relaxing and snuggling on the sofa. He grinned. That was his very favorite thing right now, and he knew he needed to enjoy it.

Soon it would be three a.m. feedings and lots of diapers and...

A wave of sorrow washed over him. And it wasn't his.

"Hey, Ezekiel, man. Is that you? You doing okay? I'm still hunting for a crib to keep up here for you and your baby." Charlie talked to Ezekiel now all the time, feeling a great sense of kinship with the lost omega.

The chill that touched his neck was intense, but not...mean. This was just Ezekiel letting him know he'd heard, Charlie thought. A little communication.

So Charlie kept talking. "It's going to snow again. Hard, they say. I'm looking forward to some toasted marshmallows." He chuckled. "Did they have that when you

lived here? Marshmallows? I don't know the history of?—”

His gaze landed on one of the old sheds, right at the edge of the tree line. He could almost see inside. Charlie frowned. Was the door open? None of them should be open. Kaleb had been pretty clear that he didn't want the dogs in there. Damn.

Speaking of which, where were Neo and Trinity?

He frowned and leaned into the window, trying to see. What the hell...was someone in there?

No. There weren't human footprints, but he recognized the Saint Bernards' sure enough. Dammit.

Charlie checked his watch. Well, shit. Kaleb would be gone for another hour, at least. Okay. Downstairs... Why didn't they have an elevator?

He waddled down the three flights of steps, then tried to decide how much actual winter clothing he needed to walk to the tree line.

Boots, coat, hat...gloves? Scarf?

He finally decided boots, because he didn't need cold feet. The hat and scarf were right there and he couldn't find his gloves.

That was what coats had pockets for. He grabbed the flashlight by the door, just in case the dogs were in the shed and hid from him. Neo loved to play hide-and-seek.

He grabbed his phone and shoved it in his pocket, then started trudging to the shed. “What are you hooligans doing in there? Are you hunting? Neo? Trinity? Come on!”

He heard a soft woof, he thought, so he kept going over, pulling his feet through the snow. It was heavy, and the crust sounded like he was breaking through ice. Scary.

It felt like the shed was twenty miles away, and once he got past the part that they called the yard, the drifts were deeper, the snow wetter.

Why had he thought this was a good idea? He whistled. Maybe he could get the dogs to come to him and leave the shed for Kaleb to close up.

They didn't come, so he hurried on faster. "Guys? Is everything okay?" It would kill him if something happened to the big lugs.

He grabbed the flashlight, holding it almost like a club. "Answer me! Come on."

Charlie stepped into the shed, shining the light around, frowning at the sight of a dusty old cradle, filled with feed sacks, just sitting there. "Oh, there it is!"

He'd been hunting for a cradle, and there it was. Waiting. Maybe someone had meant for him to see it in the shed. "Oh, Ezekiel! I found it!"

A loud round of barking came from behind him, startling him, and Charlie spun around, unbalancing.

He knew he was going to fall. He knew it, and when he went down, something in his ankle snapped.

He landed hard, hands finding the edge of the cradle, and he hit the floor hard, the feed bags and wood landing heavy on top of him, trapping him under the weight.

And as soon as he knew there was no way he could move anywhere, a hot rush of wetness burst free and ran down under his legs.

His water had just broken.

Oh.

Oh, no.

“Oh, someone. Help.”

“Okay,guys, I need to hit the road.” Kaleb looked at the big fat flakes of snow that were falling, shaking his head. Good thing he’d picked up his load of supplies before he’d gone to breakfast. He’d had a feeling the storm was going to break before he was done, and he was right.

“Drive safe,” Jack told him, coming to the cash wrap of the diner with him. “I need to do the same. Get back to the ranch.”

He lifted a hand to the townies, who could hang out over coffee, then clapped Jack on the back. “Later, man.”

He headed out, frowning at how dark the clouds were up above, where his house wasn’t even visible for the snow. Crap. He would bet he’d have to chain up when he left the main road. The storm had just crashed over them, not waiting a day as forecasted.

Still, they had enough food to feed an army and all the baby supplies on his lover’s list.

It was a long list.

Sure enough, he had to pull off and put the chains on, and by the time he headed back on the road up to the house, he felt...urgent. Something was pushing him, the hair on

the back of his neck rising as the snow deepened by the minute.

“Call Charlie.” He didn’t like this. He didn’t. The phone went to voice mail, so he called again.

This time, the phone went live and he exhaled. Oh, thank goodness. “Hey, babe, I?—”

“Ezekiel!”

“Charlie?” That wasn’t Charlie. What the fuck?

“Ezekiel!”

Fear speared through him. Something was terribly wrong. “I’m coming, Augustus. I’ll help him.” He didn’t know what else to say, but he hung up because he had to drive as fast as he could without sliding off the damn mountain. Something had happened to Charlie.

Augustus wasn’t a murderer—he believed that, wholeheartedly, and so did Charlie—and if he was able to contact Kaleb? Something was wrong.

He called Mark, the alpha who was the police chief in Secret Springs, who he’d just left at the diner.

“Hello?”

“Mark? Something is wrong at the house.”

“What happened? Is Charlie okay?”

“I think I’m going to need help.” He had no idea what kind, but he could feel it.

“Okay. Okay, what kind of help?”

“I don’t know. But I know I need help, and this snow is bad.”

Mark blew out a hard breath. “Okay...should I bring Devon?”

“Please? I just need help.” He was freaking out, but he had to hold it together for Charlie. “Bring chains.”

“We will. We’re coming.”

He could see the house now, and the tower room light was on, the only sign of life in the house. Had Charlie gone up there?

Fallen?

Bile rose in his throat and he pushed it a little farther.

He parked in the big circular drive, but when he got out of the SUV, he hesitated. Charlie would never turn off all the lights just to go to the tower room. Right? And if the tower was lit up, the power wasn’t off...

He ran inside the front door just long enough to see that Charlie’s coat wasn’t hanging there.

Then he heard Trinity’s barking, the sound loud and sharp and clear as a bell.

Also, not inside.

“Trin! Where are you? Show me!” If she was with Charlie, he didn’t want to call her away too far, but he needed a direction. The snow made sound echo.

Trinity came barreling up, and there was blood on her fur. Oh god. Oh god.

She didn’t let him catch her though. No, she wheeled around and ran back toward the tree line, bounding through the snow like the hardcore rescue dog she was born to be.

He followed, amazed at how deep the snow was off the shoveled paths. Damn it. She kept stopping to look back, barking like a fiend.

“Coming, Trin! Find Charlie! Find Charlie, baby girl!”

Trinity danced as if to say, “Come on, idiot man.”

He waded behind her, wondering how Charlie had managed this trek. But then, it had been snowing, and who knew how long—No. He just had to put one foot in front of the damn other and find his husband and get him safe.

The shed with the open door appeared out of the storm so fast that he actually slammed into the door.

“Help me.”

Ezekiel, no! You can’t be gone. I’m sorry. The storm...

Oh, God. Had Ezekiel frozen to death in a storm like this?

A low growl filled the air.

“Neo! It’s me, boy. It’s Daddy.” He waded into the shed, pulling out his phone to

shine light on the floor. “Charlie! Oh my God. Baby. Can I pull the cradle off you? Is anything sticking into you?”

Charlie’s face was filthy, streaked with tears. “The baby...she’s coming. Please...promise me you’ll save her. Tell me you’re real.”

“I’ve got you. Help is on the way with Mark. I need to get you to the house and get you warm.” He couldn’t see broken wood on the cradle, so he eased it off Charlie. It looked like feed sacks had cushioned the blow of the furniture.

His lover was soaked, blood-tinged liquid coating his legs. “This is their cradle.”

“I see that.” He held back all the questions about why Charlie was here; those could wait. “Is anything broken besides your water?”

“My ankle hurts, bad,” Charlie admitted. “I want to go to the house. Please. I need to go inside. The baby is coming.”

“I know, baby. I just want to be sure I can move you without damaging you more.” He checked Charlie over, then took off his coat to wrap it around him. Nothing had bone sticking out, and the only blood he could find was mixed with the fluid Charlie had lost when his water broke... But that was bad, right?

“Kaleb.”

“I know. I got you. I’m going to lift you now.” He didn’t think Charlie was going to be able to hobble it, and he didn’t have any kind of sled or even a tarp to pull him. The feed bags weren’t going to do it.

“I’ll stand up. I’ll try to. The contractions are coming fast, but I’m so cold, and dirty. She can’t be born like this.”

“Well, no. We need to get to the house.” He couldn’t wait for Mark, who would have to stop and chain up at the road.

“Okay. Come on. The dogs stayed with me. I can do this. I can do this. I lived. I will not lose my baby. I lived, goddamn it.” Charlie grabbed him, screaming as he hauled himself upright. “I LIVED.”

“You can. I have you.” He put Charlie’s arm around his shoulders, and his arm around Charlie’s waist. “Let’s hit it.”

And off they went toward the house.

Nineteen

Charlie was in agony—his bad shoulder, his ribs, his ankle—and none of that was comparable to the clenching and cramping of his belly.

He was in labor, but fear filled all the places in his heart. What if he'd hurt the baby? What if something was really wrong?

The dogs bounded along ahead of them, clearing the snow out of the way, and the house blazed like a beacon of light to his blurred vision. Every light in the place was on. Kaleb carried him once they got to the more cleared path, and in the distance, he could hear a siren wailing.

"I want to go home." He could see the outline of someone beckoning them inside the house. Which one was that? Ezekiel or Augustus? "I found your cradle! I found it!"

"We're here, baby." Kaleb forged up the stairs to the front door, then closed out the storm. The foyer was freezing, but there was a fire burning in the main parlor fireplace, and that was where Kaleb put him, pulling blankets down to cover the couch and lay him out. "I'll move you upstairs when Mark is here to help, baby."

He wanted to be clean, to have a bath, but another contraction hit him and he screamed, the pain tearing into him. "Kaleb!"

"I'm right here, baby." Kaleb knelt next to him and held his hand. "I promise. I'm not leaving. I love you. They're almost here. I can hear them."

“I thought the dogs were in the shed. The door was open. I thought the dogs were trapped!” He could barely breathe, but he needed Kaleb to know he hadn’t been stupid. Not really. He’d been trying to help.

“Oh, love. I’m so sorry. I have no idea how they got in there. I mean, I’ll check the security cameras, but I didn’t see any evidence that anyone besides you had been in there. Well, and the dogs.”

“No. No, it wasn’t them. I think I was supposed to find the cradle, but the dogs were outside. They startled me, and I fell.” The contraction was easing some. Charlie panted, trying to get his breath back.

“So is the damn ghost trying to kill you? I mean, shit, baby. I was just telling myself he wasn’t a murderer!” Kaleb was starting to sound all alpha-y.

“No. I told him that I was trying to find the cradle. I think he was helping. I would have waited for you, but I thought the dogs were trapped.”

“I understand, love.” Kaleb stroked his hair with his free hand. “I do.”

The sound of the police SUV squealing to a stop made him grunt, and he nodded. “Good. Okay, good.”

“Let me let them in. I’m just ten feet away if you need me.”

He needed this boot off. He needed a bath. He needed?—

Another contraction hit and he jerked violently, trying not to scream.

“Devon is here, baby. Mark is going to help me get you upstairs.”

“There’s no way we can get down the mountain safely right now,” Mark said. “So let’s get you up and get you comfy.”

“Okay. All right. I’m dirty. I want to be cleaned up. Please, don’t tell anyone how gross I am?”

“I won’t say a word.” Mark got on one side of him, and Kaleb lifted him on the other. Together, they got him up the stairs to the bedroom, where Kaleb held him while Mark quickly fixed the bed.

“Let’s get him undressed and showered. He’ll be more comfortable, and it’ll be more hygienic.” Devon had a load of towels, and started the water. “Can you help, Kaleb?”

“I can.” Kaleb was so gentle with him. So sweet.

They got him clean, and Mark bandaged his ankle up once he was in bed.

“Once we have this baby and it’s safe, we’ll head to the hospital, okay? But it doesn’t seem broken, just twisted.” Mark shook his head. “I’m going to make some calls and get your supplies up here, huh, Dev?”

“Sounds perfect, Mark. Thank you. All right, let’s have a look, Charlie.” Devon’s calm was like a balm.

“Does everything look all right?” Charlie needed it all to look okay. He didn’t feel like the whole space was kosher.

“Well, you’re going to have a baby. There’s no question there. In fact, we are going to have a baby in very short order. Had you been in labor?”

“No, no, I swear. Not even any real pangs. Not until I fell and everything. The cradle

and all the bags tipped over on me. Did I hurt the baby?" A pure agony hit him, square between the shoulder blades.

"Stop it. She's going to be fine." There was a quiet peace in Devon's voice, and Charlie took it as the truth. He had to. There was no other choice. Not right now. "She's just ready to be here. She's what? Not even quite two weeks early?"

Charlie shook his head. And that's when Kaleb popped in with, "And we don't know for sure the actual date that you got pregnant, Charlie."

He glared over at his husband. "Did I ask for your opinion?"

"Nope. Not even a bit. Not saying another word."

"Excellent idea." Charlie rolled his eyes as another contraction hit and his legs drew up. "It hurts so much. Is it close? Is it time to push?"

The urge to bear down was huge.

"Almost," Devon said, "Not quite, but almost. I'm going to go get a couple of things from my kit. Kaleb, can you run and get him some ice chips to suck on? It will help."

Charlie shook his head. "I don't want him to go."

"It won't be but a second," Devon told him. "He's just going to run down and get some ice chips. Be right back. You won't be alone but for a minute, I promise."

They left before he could really argue, so he squeezed his eyes shut.

Please, he prayed. Please don't let anything be wrong with my baby. I know your ending was harsh? But please. Help me. I know Augustus didn't kill you. I don't want

to lose my baby.

Someone took his hand and Charlie looked up and gasped, seeing a young, lean man standing there. Ezekiel was holding his hand, a tall, broad-shouldered man standing behind him.

They were both nodding and looking at him with very serious expressions.

Look. I tried. I found the cradle. I'll fix it. I'll bring it upstairs. Please, I know that you both loved each other. Another pain hit, and he held on tight as the strange light filled the room, making his eyes widen.

He just needed to hang on. He could do this.

"This is happening very fast." Devon's face was extremely serious.

Kaleb felt his heart drop. "What do we need to do?"

Devon held his gaze. "There's nothing we can do. We deliver the baby. If it's in crisis, we run it as fast as we can down the mountain. You have to understand, though, there is a chance that the baby will not survive."

Kaleb's knees tried to buckle, and it was Mark that caught him, held him up. "No. No. We can't lose either one of them."

"I'll do my best, but it's early, and this is too fast. This is not how labor progresses. There is a very good chance that your daughter will not be born alive." There were tears in Devon's eyes and even Mark's hands trembled. "I'm so sorry, Kaleb. I'll do my best; you know I will."

He shook his head. "What about Charlie? Is my Charlie going to be okay?"

Devon nodded. “He’s young; he’s healthy; he doesn’t seem to be terribly hurt...”

Oh, God. He thought he got what Devon was telling him. Kaleb swallowed hard and forced the words out of his throat. “Save my Charlie. Save both of them if you can, but if you can’t, you have to save my Charlie.”

Devon nodded, and suddenly a sharp scream split the air even as the image of a huge man appeared in front of him.

Augustus motioned back up the stairs toward the bedroom.

They hadn’t gotten far outside the bedroom, but even the dozen steps it took to get back there seemed to take too long. It was like they were running but nothing was happening.

Time had stopped and he could see Augustus standing there. “I didn’t kill Ezekiel.”

Kaleb nodded. “That I know, Augustus. I believe you. You loved him.”

The entire world seemed to shudder, to shake around them. “I did not kill our baby.”

Kaleb nodded again. “Please. Charlie’s—Charlie needs me. I don’t want to lose my baby. Please.”

Augustus offered him a sad, sweet smile that made him want to sob, and then time sped up again.

He hit his bedroom door, going ninety to nothing. Charlie was sitting up on the bed, a young, glowing man holding his shoulders as he pushed and struggled.

Devon didn’t even hesitate. It was as if he never saw Ezekiel. But Kaleb did.

Kaleb refused to believe for a single moment that this was not all meant to be. His baby was going to be okay, and so was his husband.

“Okay, Charlie, push. Come on. The head is out. Let’s go. Come on, man. Let’s get this done. Let’s bring it home.”

“I am home.” Charlie grabbed Kaleb’s hand, staring into his eyes. “They promised. I am home.”

Kaleb looked down and saw the still, quiet red baby in Devon’s hands. He shook his head. “No. No. No. I will not lose our baby. Augustus would have said.”

“What’s wrong with her? Is she okay? Kaleb, you have to tell me she’s okay!”

He opened his mouth to lie when she opened her mouth and took this huge breath. Natalia let out a wild, absolutely furious scream that seemed to ring from the rafters. “She’s perfect. Right, Devon?”

Devon’s eyes were huge. “So far so good, guys. Ten fingers, ten toes. Two eyes, lungs like a champion. Let’s get her wrapped up. It’s damn cold in here.” There were tears on Devon’s cheeks, the midwife sobbing quietly. “I think I want to get an ambulance up here, guys. I think I want both of you to get checked out at the actual hospital. Is that all right, Charlie? Just to make sure.”

Charlie nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I wanna hold her. As long as Kaleb comes, and I can hold her. We can go get checked out. And then we have to come home. We have lots of work to do.”

“I’ll make some calls. I’ll get search-and-rescue up here.” Mark disappeared, and he was sure that Devon hadn’t left.

But it didn't matter, because his Charlie was holding their baby.

Kaleb glanced behind the bed to see Augustus and Ezekiel standing there. "Thank you guys. Thank you. I'll get the cradle cleaned up, and I'll get your room set up for you. You have my word."

Then he went to hold his husband. And their little girl.

Twenty

Charlie led the way to the tower room, holding Natalia Quinn in his arms.

She'd been tiny, a preemie who had needed a few days in the NICU unit. But she was growing fast now and had all the attitude that she was going to need to be a thriving little girl.

Charlie could already tell she was going to take over the world.

Mark, Jack, and Elliot were helping Kaleb carry the cradle up the stairs. Kaleb had spent hours working on it, cleaning it. Repairing it. Polishing it.

It was the last piece to go into place.

Hank asked him about the ghosts, and Charlie had been honest.

He knew without a shadow of a doubt. Augustus and Ezekiel had saved their little girl, had blessed them with Natalia where they hadn't been able to save their own baby.

He felt at home now and he felt as if they were welcome.

"But what about the murder?" Hank had asked.

Charlie had told the truth about that too.

There had been no murder.

Charlie had decorated the tower room for Christmas. He'd even put a little Christmas tree decked in time-appropriate ornaments so that Augustus, Ezekiel, and their little one could have something to watch.

There were two rocking chairs by the cradle, and it was perfect. It felt amazing. It felt right.

The big armoire that stood there had been found along with the cradle in the shed. And Kaleb had insisted that it be brought up.

The little room was finished and warm, happy and full of sparkling lights. Natalia watched with wide eyes.

When the cradle was put into place, everybody—even the most stolid of the alphas—had sighed with satisfaction.

“I wish we knew what the baby’s name would have been,” Kaleb said. “I would like to put a sign up here so that everyone knows whose room this was.”

A wind blew through the room.

Not harsh, not cold, but a quiet little wind.

A piece of paper flew from on top of the wardrobe, floating down, then skittering across the floor.

Kaleb bent down and picked it up, and then he smiled and handed it to him.

There, in old-fashioned handwriting, was a single word.

Isaiah.

End