

1003



THE  
*Scarlet*  
HOTEL



A CONTEMPORARY M/M MPREG ROMANCE

TRISHA LINDE

**Room 1003**

**The Scarlet Hotel**



Trisha Linde

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# About the Book

**BEHIND CLOSED DOORS AT The Scarlet Hotel, anything can happen... maybe even repairing a broken heart.**

Omega Shane loves his job as a cartoonist; it allows him to work from home, which is especially important since the death of his husband two years ago, as he wants to be there for their six-year-old son. Shane has been trying his best to keep the memory of him alive for their child, even if that means purchasing their dream house without him. Even if that dream house has seen better days... or centuries... Oh boy, this renovation is going to take all the help he can get.

Alpha Ben is a bear—almost literally—but he prefers to see himself as a gentle giant. His size is deceptive, considering his job as an electrician usually requires a delicate touch. Just as he's wrapping up a job repairing a hotel elevator, he comes across the all-too familiar scent of burnt wires and follows it to its source. He finds himself staring at a man and his son,



clearly in need of a hand, and nothing could stop Ben from offering whatever they might need. He meant for it to be a job, a paycheck like any other. Soon, though, he finds he's willing to take a different kind of payment for services rendered—he'll gladly take Shane's heart.

*Room 1003 is the eighth standalone book in the m/m mpreg romance series, The Scarlet Hotel, from bestselling author Trisha Linde. Each book features a new couple and begins and ends in a different room at The Scarlet Hotel. Room 1003 revolves around an omega struggling to make ends meet, an alpha willing to help bridge the gap, a single parent, a stand-up stepdad, a precocious child, an adorable baby, and proof that family can come in all shapes and sizes.*

# Prologue

## THE STAFF

*WHAT AM I EVEN doing here?* It was a rhetorical question, of course, because where else would Emerson Holland be? The Scarlet Hotel was his family's legacy, after all, and one day, it would be his to run as he saw fit. For now, though, he was subject to his father's rule. And in this case, that meant cutting corners, to everyone's detriment.

The hotel had once been a landmark in the city, known for luxury, lavish accommodations and high-class dining. They had rented the VIP suite to celebrities, business moguls, and even royalty! In recent years, though, their high standard had begun to slip.

*This never would've happened if I was allowed some control over the budget.*

Emerson was itching to punch something, to yell and rant, but he was the leader here, and that meant putting on a cool façade, all while swearing up a storm inside his head. The elevator was broken. No, to say that would imply that it wasn't working, but it was *so* much worse than that. The damn thing

had nearly plummeted ten stories, with two guests inside it. Never mind the PR nightmare that would've been, but the guilt hadn't stopped chewing at Emerson's insides since it happened. He could taste the stomach acid crawling up the back of his throat.

"Sir?" Roland peeked into Emerson's office, knocking softly on the jamb. "The electrician's here."

"Finally!" he burst out, shoving back from his desk and hurrying to meet him. A fifteen-story hotel without an elevator was bankruptcy waiting to happen. As it was, they would be offering room discounts, and it was a cost they couldn't afford.

He came to a screeching halt when he laid eyes on the electrician in question, leaning with one elbow against the reception desk. "Gods," he breathed, but it must've been out loud because Roland replied, "Right?"

The man was a bear. He was probably nearing seven feet tall, with gargantuan shoulders and a barrel chest. Chest hair peeked out from the top of his button-up shirt, which he wouldn't even be able to button to the top, thanks to his thick neck. His forearms, where he'd rolled up his shirt sleeves, were also covered in a layer of dark hair, and he sported a heavy beard, neatly trimmed. Overall, he quite literally resembled a bear.

"Uh... hello, Mister..." Emerson began, holding out a hand to shake.

He smiled, and it made his brown eyes shine, softening his whole face. "Just call me Ben." His voice, too, was kinder than

Emerson had been expecting. He might've been prepared for a roar, instead of this gentle, deep purr.

“Well, Ben, thank you so much for coming on such short notice. I'm afraid it's a bit urgent, as we have a woman in a wheelchair currently stuck on the fourteenth floor. I was really hoping we wouldn't have to carry her down all those stairs.”

“Of course, it's not a problem. I hope for everyone's sake that it's an easy fix.”

Ben's presence was starting to gather some attention, as a man his size had a tendency to do, and a small crowd of staff was beginning to collect. Everyone was craning their necks to look up at him, their eyes wide with wonder. Emerson was short-staffed as it was, he couldn't afford them all standing around, so he decided to move things along. “If you'll follow me?”

“Sure, lead the way.” Ben picked up his huge metal toolbox as if it weighed no more than an exhaled breath.

One short flight of stairs brought them to the basement, which housed the control room. The door was marked with a red lightning bolt and bold block letters that read:

Authorized Personnel Only Risk of Electrocution

As soon as the door opened, they were met with a hot, burning smell. “Oh gods.” Emerson clapped a hand over his mouth in shock. He should've checked for fire, but it hadn't even crossed his mind. His first step had been to call an electrician, and this man had come highly recommended.

“Don’t worry about the smell,” Ben told him, apparently reading his reaction perfectly well. “If there’d been a fire, the alarm would’ve gone off. This is just your standard stench of shorted wires.”

“Right...” His concern wasn’t entirely assuaged. This was his nightmare, right here. The hotel meant more to him than he would ever admit. It wasn’t just a collection of walls and doors; it was a piece of this city’s history, and ever since he’d started working here as a young man, it was more his home than his own apartment was. He saw his staff as a family, of sorts, like children he needed to protect. All except Roland, of course... There was nothing familial about the way he saw *him*.

Speaking of Roland, he appeared at Emerson’s side, peeking over his shoulder through the narrow doorway as Ben crouched down in front of the elevator’s engine, unscrewing the housing to take a look inside. “Huh.”

“What?” Emerson asked, turning his head to the side and breathing in the clerk’s scent.

“Oh, well...” He blushed but didn’t pull away. “I guess I just assumed he’d show some crack when he bent over.”

Emerson went to answer, but before he could, a second voice piped up. “No, you’re thinking plumbers.” It was Emily, the reception supervisor, and she was hedging Emerson in on the other side. There was barely room for the three of them in the narrow space, and they kept bumping together as they jostled for a better view.

Both of them had their eyes secured firmly on Ben's behind. Emerson frowned. "Shouldn't you both be working?"

"I'm on break," Roland said on his right.

"My shift hasn't started yet," Emily said on his left.

Then they both went right back to their gawking.

"This is terribly inappropriate," he scolded, but as Ben shifted his weight and pivoted to open up a control panel, Emerson felt his own gaze drifting. The man truly was a specimen, and those jeans were tight enough to be doing him all kinds of favors, hugging his tree-trunk thighs every time he bent down.

Ben hummed then said, "Here's your problem." He tossed a boxy piece of metal onto the ground. "The relays protect your motor from fluctuations in current."

"Tell me more," Emily said, practically moaning.

"Uh-huh," Roland said, nodding like he was listening as Ben described the inner workings of the elevator, but his eyes were glued firmly to Ben's ass as he bent down to pull a new part from his toolbox.

A flare of jealousy had Emerson's mouth pulling down in a frown. He'd never been anything less than professional toward Roland, but he couldn't tamp down his curiosity before the question wormed its way past his lips. "Is... Is that the kind of man you're into?" he asked quietly, clearing his throat.

"What?" Roland turned his head so quickly that their noses nearly brushed, and Emerson could almost taste the mint from

the gum he was chewing. “Oh. No. My type is more... or rather, less...” His jaw worked, trying to put words together.

“His type,” Emily supplied, “is lean, not too tall, with wavy blond hair, ice-blue eyes, and an adorable cleft in his chin. You know, exactly what you see every time you look in the mirror. Sir,” she added at the end.

Roland’s eyes widened a fraction, but he didn’t break Emerson’s gaze. “Yeah. That,” he said, his voice breathy.

Emerson’s eyes flitted down to Roland’s mouth, watching with rapt attention as his tongue darted out, tracing a wet path across his plump lower lip. Emerson found himself leaning in, craving a taste...

Then there was a loud bang, and they jumped apart with a gasp. Guilt flooded Emerson’s body, heating his cheeks. This was his staff member, and he was expected to show him the utmost respect. Emily chuckled. “Get a room already,” she muttered.

Ben approached, wiping his hands on a cloth. “I’m all finished here. Your elevator should be in working order for now, but I’d like to come back for a full tune-up when I have more time. On an elevator this old, regular maintenance is important to keep it in working order.”

“Yes. Of course. Do you have a card? I’ll give you a call and we can arrange an appointment.”

Ben reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card, passing it over.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Stalma... Salta—match...”

The electrician laughed, shaking his head. “It’s a mouthful, I know. Like I said, just Ben is fine.”

“Well, thank you, Ben, for being so quick and efficient. You really helped us out of a jam.” Emerson reached out a hand to shake, but Ben shook his head and held his palms up, which were covered in grease.

“I don’t want to mess up your nice, clean uniform, but I appreciate the gesture.” He packed up his toolbox, and Emily let out a wistful sigh. “I’ll send the invoice as soon as I get back to the office. Is e-transfer okay?”

“Yes, it will be fine,” he said, meanwhile debating about how he could wring the money to pay for it out of his father, as it was very much a necessary expense. Likely, Emerson would have to pay for the repair out of his own pocket.

The electrician left, and their day continued on like normal. Roland’s break ended, and he headed back to the reception desk, and Emily followed behind him, ready to clock in for her shift, and she threw one last sly look over her shoulder at her boss, giving him a little wink. Her words had left Emerson reeling as he lingered over her description of Roland’s type, and he spent the rest of the day dreaming what-if.

*What if this hotel, and Roland, were mine...*



1

# Shane

I WAS HOVERING SOMEWHERE between being exhausted enough I could fall asleep where I stood, and so stressed that I was at risk of running down the street screaming into the night.

*This is not what I had in mind when I bought this house.*

“How about now?” I called upstairs. “Anything?”

“Nothing yet,” Dad yelled back.

I drew in a deep cleansing breath then flipped another breaker switch. “Now?”

“Nope.”

The fuse box looked like it had been added to a few times, with a combination of old screw-in fuses and more modern breakers, which only made sense when a house was over a hundred years old, updates were bound to happen. But none of the labels were accurate. When I flipped the one marked “kitchen,” the basement lights went off. The one marked “living room” was linked with a bedroom on the second floor.

There were a few without labels at all and one where the writing was so illegible that it could've read "banana," but I chose to believe it was meant to be "bathroom"—not that it was linked to the bathroom, of course.

The cold concrete floor was chilling my toes right through my socks, and there was a whole host of spiderwebs that I chose not to look at too closely. I had expected our first official night in the house to involve a little more sleeping. All I had wanted was a cup of tea before bed, but when the kitchen lights hadn't come on, this journey began. I had assumed it would be an easy fix, but I was starting to dread that nothing about this house was going to be easy.

"One more," I grumbled. "This one for sure." I was quite certain I'd flicked them all at least once, and there were only so many possibilities.

The final switch was stubborn, and I had to use both hands. Fingers straining, knuckles turning white, I heaved. With an almighty clank, I got the switch flipped. "Did that do it?" I called up.

There was no sound from upstairs.

"Dad?"

Still nothing.

I strained my ears to listen, thinking maybe Kit had gotten out of bed and Dad had gone to tuck him back in, but then, I heard his feet walking over the creaking floor above, and his

voice came down the basement stairs. “Uh, Son? You’d better turn everything off.”

“What? Everything?”

“Everything!” he shouted, a hint of panic in his voice.

My father didn’t stress about anything, so to hear him anything other than totally calm got me into action. I flicked all the switches off, throwing me into pitch blackness. I pulled out my phone and turned on the flashlight, running back upstairs. Halfway up, I caught the first whiff of smoke.

Shit.

“Dad! Where are you?” The flashlight beam lit up the curls of smoke swirling near the kitchen ceiling. I couldn’t see any sign of fire, but if it was electrical, it could very easily be somewhere in the walls. My heart was hammering in my chest. One. Day. Just one day in the house, and I was going to burn it to the ground.

“Here!” my dad called, and with a thunder of footsteps, he came jogging down the stairs from the second floor, Kit in his arms.

My son lifted his head off his grandpa’s shoulder. “Papa? What’s going on? What’s that smell? Is that smoke? Is there a fire?”

“It’s okay, buddy,” I told him, taking his sleep-rumpled body from my dad’s arms. “We’re just going to have a little adventure. That sounds like fun, right?”

“Uh-huh,” he agreed, rubbing a fist into his eyes.

We needed to find the source for the smoke, but first, better safe than sorry. We headed out onto the front lawn, not even stopping for shoes. I made my way quickly across the grass. The whole block was still and quiet, most windows dark. I really hoped we weren't about to change that with a bunch of sirens and flashing lights. Not exactly the best first impression to make on our new neighbors.

I stopped next to the For Sale sign at the sidewalk, boasting that the house had been SOLD! I dropped to my knees, soaking my pants in the dewy grass, and put Kit down on his feet. He giggled and squealed at the feeling on his bare feet. His corkscrew curls bounced.

“Kit, I need you to stay here with Gramps for a minute, okay? I'll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

I chuckled nervously. “Look,” I said, pointing down at our feet. “We forgot our shoes. We can't go on an adventure without shoes. What if we cross the desert? We'll get sand between our toes. Or if we swim across the ocean, fish might decide to take a nibble.”

He tilted his head back and laughed, and in the glow from the streetlight, I could see the gap from his missing tooth. “You're so silly, Papa!”

I shared a look with my dad, and he nodded his reassurance. Then I ran back into the house to see what I could find. The smoke didn't seem to be getting any thicker, so I took that as a good sign. I ran around and opened all the windows to clear it

out, checking for signs of fire. The smoke had been thickest in the kitchen, so I started there. I found a black sooty mark around an outlet, and I tested the wall around it carefully, checking for heat, but it was cold to the touch. I glared up at the silent smoke alarm and made a mental note to change the batteries.

On the way back out, I grabbed our shoes, plus my keys and wallet. I wasn't about to risk anyone's life sleeping in here tonight. Besides, I wouldn't get a single wink of sleep, for worrying. I would call someone tomorrow to come and take a look at the electrical work. "All right, everybody in the car," I said, passing out footwear.

"Where are we going?" Kit asked, eyes wide.

"To a magical place called a hotel." I tried to infuse my words with as much awe and wonder as I could.

"Wow," Kit said, looking suitably excited.

I got him buckled into his booster seat, then closed the car door, straightening up and leaning on the side of the car for a second, taking a breath to myself. I let my eyes drift shut and felt the usual weariness tugging me down.

"You okay?" Dad whispered, too quiet for Kit to hear.

"Yeah," I answered. "Just... tired." He knew what I meant when I said that. It wasn't just the kind of tired you felt at the end of a long day. This was a soul-weary exhaustion of never-ending grief. "I thought buying the house would help. Like it would feel like he was here with us."

“He is here,” my dad said gently. “Here, where it counts.” He tapped his finger over my heart.

“I know.” I reached inside and tried to feel him in there, but the truth was, he was fading. It had been two years since my husband passed away, and I was desperate not to lose him completely.

Dad turned to glance up at the house, wary. “Will the house still be here when we get back?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think we’ll be turning the lights on anytime soon.” I shook my head, chuckling.

“It’s not too late to change your mind, you know,” he said. “Just because it was Embry’s dream house, that doesn’t mean it has to be yours.”

“I know, but I want this for Kit. A place to call home. There’s a great school down the street, lots of kids in the neighborhood. And you have to admit, the price was right.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Yeah, a real steal, and I think we now know why.”

I bit back my groan. He was right. On first glance, the old Gothic-revival house looked grand, its brick given a facelift with a fresh coat of paint, but now I wondered if it wasn’t concealing all its faults beneath. I should’ve taken the time to get an inspection done, but this was Embry’s house! He’d had his eye on it for years before he died, so when it hit the market, nothing would’ve dissuaded me from buying it, not even some much-needed repairs.

“Come on,” I said, heading around to the driver’s side. “Our adventure awaits.”





# Ben

BY THE TIME I finished with the elevator repairs, it was pretty late. I stuck around long enough to make sure everything was running smoothly, then I called it a night. While the lobby was still bright as day, the chandelier overhead sending out refracted light to all four corners of the room, the windows showed that it was full dark outside. I glanced at my watch. Past midnight.

Being an electrician was typically a nine-to-five kind of job, but I had the freedom to set my own hours, and it was emergency calls like this one that made the real money. It was worth missing out on a little sleep. I was able to charge a premium rate for my time, making a full paycheck in just one night. It wasn't like I had anyone waiting at home for me. Just my cat, Dmitri, but he slept most of the time anyway. He wouldn't even notice me missing until his food bowl was empty.

“Thank you again,” the manager gushed. He'd been thanking me nearly non-stop since I got here.

“Really, it’s no trouble,” I assured him. “Yours is not the first elevator that’s broken. These things happen.”

He nodded, his hands clasped at his waist, wringing his fingers together. “Yes, of course, but I suppose I worry that, with a building this age, there will come a time when something cannot be fixed.”

“Nah, they don’t build hotels like this baby anymore.” I patted the counter, solid beneath my palm. “Her structure is sound. She just needs a little TLC, and I can tell you love her.”

The stress that had been pinching his face relaxed into a genuine smile. “I really do.” When he smiled like that, I could understand what the clerk saw in him. It changed his whole face. The poor guy just needed to relax, laugh a little. Life wasn’t meant to be so serious. “Well then... I should let you get home.”

I could see if I didn’t leave now, he would launch into another round of effusive thanks, so I quickly said good night and headed for the exit. As I crossed the lobby, however, I caught a familiar scent in the air. My steps slowed, until I was simply standing still in the middle of the room, spinning in place. This was not a smell that belonged here, among the city’s perfumed elite. Hot, smoky, burning wires.

At first I was worried I had missed something, that the elevator was shorting out again, but I was nowhere near the elevator, which was clear on the other side of the reception desk. I glanced nervously up at the chandelier, but it looked stable, not a single flicker in the warm glow. Then, just as a

couple of people were walking past me, the stench flared up, ebbing as they passed.

I turned, my eyes following them. It was an older man with salt-and-pepper hair and a second younger man around my age, with a child in dinosaur pajamas limp in his arms, the boy's face squished against his shoulder. They were dressed in plaid flannel pants and ratty t-shirts, like they'd just rolled out of bed. It was a look I'd sported myself once or twice, but it was out of place in the fancy hotel.

Something about the threesome tugged at me. It was none of my business what they'd been through tonight. I didn't know them, they didn't know me, and I should just mind my own business. Except, it seemed that at least a small part of myself didn't get the memo, and it was that part of my brain that was currently behind the wheel.

Before I knew what I was doing, I called, "Excuse me," taking a step in their direction. What the hell was wrong with me? They didn't want me butting into their lives, especially if it was something traumatic that had happened. For all I knew, they'd survived a horrific fire tonight, or even worse, maybe not everyone had survived.

That thought made my stomach plummet. I forced myself to stop following them, telling myself that I would just leave. They probably hadn't even heard me anyway. Except, the younger man turned to look back, and that was the moment when I knew there would be no walking away.

“Yes?” he asked, tilting his chin to look up at me. His eyes were a warm amber, but he looked beyond tired. His hair stuck out in all directions, like he’d completely given up trying to tame it. I wondered if that was before or after whatever happened this evening.

“Um, yes, sorry. I just—I smelled you on the way in.” His eyebrows jumped and his jaw dropped. I backpedaled quickly, holding my hands up in defense. “Wow, no. That sounded creepy. Not what I meant. I just meant that I recognize that smell, the smoke and burning wires, and I think I can help you.”

The little boy on his shoulder stirred and lifted his head to check me out. “You’re big,” he said, in that way children had of saying exactly what came to mind without any concern for societal rules.

The man who must’ve been his father winced. “Kit, some people don’t like to have attention brought to their bodies,” the omega said gently. “It might hurt their feelings.”

“Oh,” the kid said, his little face scrunching up as he thought that over. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” he told me.

“That’s okay, I don’t mind. It’s true, I am big,” I told him, giving him a wink.

The older man joined us and asked, “You said you can help? What is it you do?”

“I’m an electrician,” I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out a business card. As the omega had his hands full

with the child, the older man reached out and took the card, reading it. He had those same eyes, and I suspected this was three generations of the same family—grandfather, father, and son. The man’s lips moved silently, and I knew from experience that he was debating how to pronounce my last name, so I beat him to the punch. “Just Ben is fine.”

His lips twitched. “Nice to meet you, Ben. What a coincidence to run into you tonight. My name’s Zack Smith, and this is my son Shane and my grandson Kit,” he said, offering introductions. “We just bought a house, and I’m afraid we might be in over our heads. We *may* have started a little fire.” He held his fingers up, just a fraction of space between them.

Shane shook his head. “But probably not. I mean, it might’ve been a tiny fire. Like, a baby fire, but it put itself out. Hardly worth mentioning.”

Kit cranked around in his arms and piped in, “You shoulda seen all the smoke!” He wasn’t at all afraid of the potential fire, more excited than anything.

“Well, then I really hope you guys give me a call. I’m even available first thing tomorrow morning if you need me out there to make sure everything is safe.”

The two men exchanged a look, a whole conversation I couldn’t decipher passing between them. I had to admit, I was a little jealous of that kind of wordless communication with someone. It was a far closer relationship than I’d ever had with anyone.

“No pressure,” I told them quickly. “It’s late, and your son is probably exhausted.”

“No, I’m not!” he said, wiggling to get out of his dad’s arms. “We’re on an adventure. I could stay awake for *days!* Not Gramps, though. He falls asleep on the couch every night after we eat supper. He snores so loud.”

Shane blinked, long and slow, sighing. He was on his last legs.

I cleared my throat and decided I needed to extricate myself from this conversation right now, before I found myself offering to carry Kit upstairs for them. “Call me. Or don’t,” I said, backing away. Shane’s eyes didn’t leave mine. “Either way, I hope your problem gets resolved.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, his voice barely louder than a whisper, but I heard him all the same.

I thought about him while walking all the way to where I parked my truck down the block. His eyes haunted me the entire drive home, and as I unlocked my front door and stepped into the foyer of my small one-bedroom bachelor’s bungalow, I found myself wondering what his real scent was, when it wasn’t masked by smoke.

I kicked off my shoes at the door and turned the living room light on. Dmitri blinked his yellow-green eyes open, gave a muffled mew and a stretch, then buried back down into his blankets.

“Come on, buddy. I need a cuddle tonight.” I scooped him up off the couch, and he muttered a little half-hearted complaint, but when he found my arms a warm spot to be, he settled back down against my chest.

He was a stray that showed up in the neighborhood one day, and while I’d always had every intention of bringing him to the shelter, I guess I never found the time. He wormed his way into my heart, and at this point, it was safe to say he was here to stay.

I plopped Dmitri on the bed, then kicked off my clothes and crawled under the covers. My cat nuzzled closer, kneading my arm until he was satisfied, then he tucked his paws under and began to purr. It was a small bit of comfort to have him here. It wasn’t nearly the same thing as having an omega to call my own, but for now, it was enough.

“You’re my family, aren’t you, buddy?” I asked, giving him a scratch behind the ears.

He gave a little rumbly meow in reply, which I decided meant, “Of course I am, Ben. I love you more than anything. More than a clean litterbox, more than taking a nap in the patch of sun on the floor, even more than wet food. Almost as much as catnip. You’re a close second.”

“Thanks, Dmitri. That’s sweet of you to say.” Then I closed my eyes and fell sleep, dreaming of amber eyes and untamable hair.





# Shane

BY THE TIME I finally fell asleep, it was pretty much time to wake up. It didn't seem to matter that Kit hadn't had a full night's sleep; he was always up at dawn, like he had a little built-in alarm clock. And that meant I was up too.

For now, Kit was content watching an episode of *The Beetlebops* on my phone. The volume was turned all the way down, and I could still hear the tinkle of their annoying voices from here.

I was sitting at the small table in front of the oversized window, gazing down at the street ten floors below. The sun hadn't risen above the tops of the buildings yet, the sky a burnished bronze color, but already the morning commuters had begun to fill the street. I was cupping my mug of coffee between my palms, willing myself to perk up. The room came with one of those single-cup coffee makers, with the pods. I'd always thought they were a bit wasteful, but right at this moment, I was considering changing my opinion. This was damn good coffee.

Dad dropped down in the chair across from me, sighing. He looked better than I probably did. I hadn't dared to look in a mirror yet, but I was sure it wouldn't be pretty. "What's the plan?" he asked.

"Plan? Who said anything about a plan?" I was only half joking.

He chuckled, then dropped something on the table between us. My eyes went to the small square of cardstock. The electrician's business card. "You think we should call him," I said. It wasn't a question.

"Of course we should call him. It was fate that we ran into him last night, right when we needed him."

I scoffed. "Fate? Please. It was a coincidence, nothing more."

He grumbled a sound in the back of his throat. "Coincidence or something more, either way, I think we can both agree that we're in over our heads here. We might be able to handle some simple DIY repairs, but this kind of electrical problem is more than we can handle. There aren't enough how-to videos in the world for the kind of help we need. We need a professional." He reached down and planted his finger on the card, sliding it closer to me. "Oh look, a professional," he said, heavy on the sarcasm.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose against the impending headache. In the background, I could hear the Beetlebops' final singalong. We only had a couple minutes of quiet left. "You're right, okay? But I already dropped all my

savings into the downpayment on the mortgage, and my next paycheck won't cover a massive cost right now."

"Well, we certainly can't afford to stay in a hotel indefinitely," he replied tartly. He frowned a little. "You know, I have a little left in your pop's insurance payout."

I shook my head firmly. "No, that's your money. I can't take it."

He leaned across the table and took my hand. "You're not taking it. I'm giving it to you. Would it help if we called it a loan?"

The life insurance from my pop's death was always supposed to go toward my dad's world travels. It was what Pop had wanted, but everything was put on hold when Embry died suddenly in a car accident. Dad moved in with me to help out with Kit, who was only three at the time. In truth, we had helped each other through our grief. It had been a difficult time for both of us, but we made it through the worst of it. Dad hadn't given up his dreams of traveling yet, but it was put on hold until Kit was a bit older.

I reluctantly picked up the card, fingering the embossed lettering. "Ben, huh?" There were too many Cs in his last name. I wasn't at all sure about how to pronounce it. "Okay, but I'll pay you back," I said finally, "with interest."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kit toss the phone onto the bed beside him. The show was over, and his short attention span was searching for a new target. He rose up and started jumping on the mattress. "I'm bored. What's next?" he asked,

leaping with his arms and legs flailing about, as if trying to touch the ceiling.

“Next part of the adventure,” my dad said, pushing up from his chair, “is a *bath!*” He added jazz hands, trying to spruce it up. “Isn’t that exciting?”

Kit stopped jumping and made a face. “No. I have baths all the time. That’s not an adventure.”

“Ah, but you’ve never had a bath here before. There are jets in the side of the tub that shoot water at you, and I bet if we add some bubble bath, the bubbles will get so deep that I might not be able to find you. Maybe we should tie a rope to you so you can find your way back.”

“Really?!” Kit’s eyes got big.

“Mm-hm, and then, as long as you don’t get lost in the suds, we can go downstairs and eat pancakes with a whole mountain of whipped cream and strawberries.”

“Yippee!” Kit whooped, leaping off the bed with a thud and skipping to the bathroom. Dad looked back at me and gave me a wink.

“Thanks, Dad,” I told him, and as he followed Kit off to the bathroom to ensure he didn’t flood the hotel with bubbles, I got up to grab my phone from where Kit had left it.

Perching on the edge of the bed, I dialed the number on the card. It wasn’t until it was ringing that I thought to check the clock beside the bed. Shit, it was still super early. Sometimes I forgot that most people slept past 6am.

I was about to hang up, my thumb reaching for the red button, when a voice came over the line. “Hello?”

Bringing the phone back up to my ear, I winced. “Hi, Ben? This is Shane, from last night. The hotel. I am so sorry if I woke you up.”

“No, it’s okay, I was up. I have a cat,” he said by way of explanation, and somehow, I understood exactly. His cat was probably just like Kit, waking up hungry and bored and needing attention immediately.

I laughed lightly at the mental picture of the massive man being bossed around by a tiny furball. “Well, I’m still sorry to be calling so early. I hope you’ve at least had a cup of coffee.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m already on my second cup,” he said lightly, his deep voice a pleasant rumble through the phone. “I assume you’re calling about the probably-maybe baby fire?”

“Yeah. I bought this old Gothic-revival house in West Academy, got a great deal on it. It’s got a lot of character, but...”

“Mm, with character comes character flaws,” he said.

“Yeah, something like that.” Or exactly like that. “We just moved in, and we haven’t had a chance to figure out all the work it’ll need, but I can take my time with the cosmetic stuff. I just need to make sure it’s safe for my family first. I won’t risk my son.”

“I understand,” he said, and even though I couldn’t see his face, I knew he got exactly what I was saying. “I’m available

whenever. Do you need to work today? I can come over this evening if that works better.”

“I work from home, actually. I’ll drop my son off at school, then maybe you could come over around nine o’clock?”

“Sure, that works.”

“I really appreciate it. Seriously.” I could feel the all-too-familiar sting of tears behind my eyes, but I’d had years of practice at keeping them under control.

“It’s my pleasure,” he said, and I almost believed him.

I gave him the address and a quick description of what happened when I flipped the breakers so that he would have some idea what kind of supplies he needed to bring, then I wrapped up the call. Just in time, as the bathroom door opened, and Dad came out with a towel-bundled Kit slung over his shoulder.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” he said with mock sadness, “but I seem to have lost your son. I pulled the plug, and *bloop!* There he went, straight down the drain.”

“Oh no!” I said, playing along. “I don’t know what I’ll do without my beloved Kit.” There was a muffled giggle from somewhere in the towels. “Oh well, I guess I’ll have to eat all those pancakes by myself. It’ll be tough, but I’ll manage somehow.”

Kit was squirming now. “No, Papa! I’m here! Please don’t eat my pancakes.”

“Oh! There he is,” Dad said, heaving him off his shoulder and flopping him down onto the bed. I then tickled him, just enough that he was gasping for breath. I felt bad getting him dressed back in his pajamas, still slightly scented with smoke, after he’d just gotten clean.

“Okay, let’s head downstairs and have a quick breakfast. School starts in just over an hour, and we have to swing by the house for a change of clothes first. Then I need to get back to the house to meet the electrician.”

“Is there going to be another fire?” Kit asked while I helped him with his shoes. “I wanna see the firetrucks! With sirens and lights and ladders and a Dalmatian.”

“No fires today, sorry,” I said, booping his nose. “Maybe next time.”

I crossed my fingers behind my back, hoping there wouldn’t be a next time.





# Ben

THE HOUSE WAS GORGEOUS. I could tell why Shane had bought it. Its steeply pitched roof rose to a peak at the front, with arched bay windows, a wide porch, and intricate gables, and there was a stained-glass window above the door. This house was an absolute gem. I had to admit, I was halfway in love with the house myself.

But when I placed my foot on the bottom step, the threatening groan that rose from the boards beneath my feet had me wary. Gorgeous, yes. Entirely stable? No.

With caution, I made my way up the remaining stairs to the front door. Shane had literally put out the welcome mat, and I smiled down at it. Balancing my toolbox in one hand and a tray of coffee in the other, I managed to extend one finger to press the doorbell... and nothing happened. I sighed, shaking my head at myself. The power was out, of course.

I dropped my toolbox to the side and knocked. A moment later, I heard footsteps approaching on the other side and saw movement through the textured pane of glass.

The door swung open, and there was Shane, just as adorable as the first time I saw him. “Hey, right on time,” he said with a smile.

“I come bearing gifts,” I said, holding out the tray for him.

“Coffee!” he moaned, pressing his face close and inhaling deeply, eyes drifting closed. I tried not to envision anything erotic about it, but it was hard not to, the way he licked his lips. “You didn’t have to, but I’m *so* glad you did.”

I laughed and followed him inside as he stepped aside to let me in. “I figured if your power was out that you might not have a coffee maker, and I knew you didn’t get much sleep. I wasn’t sure what you’d like or if anyone else would be here, so I got a few things to choose from.”

“Just me today. My dad had some errands to run, and Kit’s at school.” I noticed he didn’t say anything about his partner, but as he turned toward the kitchen, motioning for me to follow him, I couldn’t help but notice the gold wedding band on his left hand. He was taken, because of course he was.

I went to kick off my shoes, but Shane shook his head. “Don’t bother. The place is a mess, and I have a sneaking suspicion that it’ll get a lot worse before it gets better.”

As we passed through the kitchen, I caught a faint whiff of smoke still lingering, but there was a cool breeze passing through from the open windows. It was a bit dim, with only a small amount of sunlight coming through the narrow window at the back of the house, overshadowed by an overgrown tree, but I could see that the classic architecture continued here too.

“Um, you’ll need a flashlight,” he said, grabbing one off a nearby counter.

“Way ahead of you,” I said with a laugh, pulling one from my toolbelt and clicking it on.

“Yours is bigger than mine,” he huffed, teasing, and we both smirked, an unspoken joke about how size didn’t matter hanging between us.

We squeezed through a narrow door half hidden in the back of the kitchen, then down a steep set of stairs. Most of the newer houses in the area didn’t have basements, but the ones built in this era had low stone-walled cellars. The temperature dipped as we descended into the ground, and there was a faint damp odor. I hoped that didn’t mean there was water seeping in along the foundation.

We passed a boarded-up coal chute at the bottom of the stairs, and I panned my light around the small space. Someone had updated the furnace at least. I was busy checking out the walls, and since I was distracted, I wasn’t watching where I was going. My head connected with a low-hanging beam with a thud.

“Dammit!” I cursed, ducking down too late. I wanted to say a lot worse, but I kept my language clean when I was around clients. It wasn’t good to offend potential paying customers.

“I’m so sorry,” he gasped, even though there was nothing to apologize for. It wasn’t his fault I wasn’t paying attention. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I huffed, rubbing at the sore spot. I was going to have a lump, for sure, but at least there wasn’t any blood. “It comes with the territory when you’re this tall.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he joked, passing a hand over his head with ease. There were several inches of clearance.

We finally made our way to the corner where the fuse box was, tucked in behind the furnace and hot water tank. Putting my toolbox down on the stone floor, I pulled out my head lamp and clicked it on, so I would have light hands-free. I grunted when I opened the panel. “Oof, what a mess.”

“Don’t believe anything those labels tell you. They’re all a bunch of liars,” he said, aiming for levity, but I could sense his underlying stress.

I squinted my eyes, then pointed at one label in particular. “Does that say banana?”

“Yep. I keep hoping I’ll stumble on a hidden room filled with bananas, but I haven’t found it yet.” He was trying—and failing—to keep a straight face.

“Don’t give up hope,” I said, grinning. The original plan was for me to install a breaker panel, so I dug out my parts and tools I’d need. “This’ll take me a while, so if you want to get back to work, go ahead.”

“Thanks. Call me if you need anything.” He lingered for a second, seemingly reluctant to leave, but after a moment, he turned and headed back up the narrow stairs, his flashlight

beam bobbing out of sight. I could track his path upstairs through the creaks in the floor above me.

It was almost lunchtime by the time I got the new breaker panel installed. The whole job hadn't been as simple as it could've been, but it was a good start. The problem, though, was that he still had a long way to go. Before I went upstairs, I inspected the exposed wiring I could see between the ceiling joists, and it wasn't good. Coming back upstairs, I felt a bit grim.

"I'm in here, Ben," Shane called. I found him in the dining room, papers and colored pencils spread out across the dining room table. I didn't know what kind of work Shane did, as he hadn't mentioned and it wasn't my business to ask, but as I came closer, I was drawn to take a peek at what was on display. It wasn't at all the boring paperwork I expected.

"Wow! These are really good," I praised, leaning over and checking out what he was working on. They were sketches of cartoon characters, and one in particular looked familiar. "Hey, I know this one. Do you have a comic strip in the Saturday newspaper?"

His skin tinted with a blush, right to the tips of his ears, and he cast his eyes to the tablet in front of him on the tabletop. He gave a little shrug. "Yep, that's me. Shane Howe, at your service."

"That is so cool. Now I can say I met someone famous."

"Oh, no, I'm not famous," he quickly replied, shaking his head so hard that his unruly curls teetered. "It's just the local

paper, nothing major.”

“So far,” I corrected him. “You’re obviously really talented. I’m sure people are bound to notice.” Since he didn’t seem to mind my looking at them, I walked around the table, admiring his work. On the other side of the table, I found a sketch of another familiar face, but this time, from real life. I reached for it, unearthing it from the pile. “It’s Kit,” I said unnecessarily, in total awe. “This is... beautiful. It’s so detailed, it almost looks like a photograph.”

His shoulders crept up to his ears, his eyes still downcast. It was clear I was embarrassing him. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.” I put the drawing back, then cleared my throat, ready to get down to business. “So, do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

He grimaced, and he looked more like he would rather I didn’t have any news at all. “Good, I guess.”

I walked over to the light switch and flicked it on. The overhead fixture turned on, and Shane tipped his head up, his eyes glistening. “Light!” he cried. “You did it!”

“I’ll rewire that plug before I go, but for now, you have a brand-new breaker box. I left all the labels blank for now, so you’ll still have to figure out which one goes where, but it’ll be nice to have a clean slate.”

“You’re amazing, thank you!”

“Don’t thank me yet. You haven’t heard the bad news.”

He seemed to brace himself, drawing in a long, slow breath.  
“Okay, hit me.”

“Your house is old, and unfortunately, it looks like, while someone did a few minor upgrades, most of the wiring hasn’t been touched. You have what’s called knob and tube wiring, which is safe as long as it’s properly maintained, which yours is not. You’ll want to upgrade it.”

“How urgent is it?”

I pondered how to answer his question. I didn’t want to scare him. “Well, I can’t tell for sure without seeing what’s inside your walls, but based on the near fire you had and what I can see in the basement... well, I would say it should be a priority.”

He was gnawing on his lower lip and twisting his wedding ring around. It was a reminder for me to try and keep myself in line, since I wasn’t the type of guy to lust after someone who was married, but my thoughts wandered, just as my eyes did.

“How much will it cost?” he asked, gaze unfocused.

“A ballpark, it could be anywhere from three to ten thousand.”

He closed his eyes and rocked back on his heels, as though I’d physically struck him. He couldn’t afford it, that much was clear.

For me, this was a job just like any other, and I couldn’t afford to work for free. But if he didn’t hire me, he would look for someone cheaper, and there was a chance that meant



someone not as qualified to take care of the problem. I couldn't just abandon Shane and his family...

"Would a payment plan help?" I offered. This wasn't something I usually did, but when his shoulders sagged in relief and his face lit up with gratitude, it felt so good to know that I'd been the one to provide that for him.

"That would be amazing," he gushed, reaching out and laying a hand down on my forearm. His touch was warm, but that didn't explain how it coursed through me, far beyond skin-deep. "This house is... well, it's a dream come true, but I feel like it could just as easily become a nightmare if I let it."

I got that, as old houses like this were often balanced on that tipping point and could go either way. "I can come back tomorrow, if that works for you."

"Oh. Do you have to leave already? I thought maybe you'd like to stay for lunch. I mean, I don't have much, since the fridge isn't... well, you know, but I'd really love if I could repay your kindness in some way." He shrugged in the cutest way.

And against my better judgment, I found myself replying, "You know, I was just thinking about how a peanut butter sandwich would really hit the spot."

"What a coincidence," he said. "I just happen to have the ingredients for that."

I'd never accepted food from a customer before, preferring to keep things professional, but I just couldn't bring myself to

turn him down. And I felt like there was no line I could draw between us that I wouldn't cross.



# Shane

I PULLED BACK THE blanket on Kit's bed. "Come on, bud, no more stalling. It's time for bed," I called, loud enough for him to hear me from the bathroom across the hall.

Kit was currently making faces in the mirror, roaring at himself. "Dinosaurs don't go to bed," he said in a raspy, growly voice that I could only assume was meant to be a dinosaur.

It was hard to be stern when he was being so goofy. *Well, you know what they say, I told myself with a sigh. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.*

I crossed the hall, with my fingers shaped like claws, teeth bared, walking with an awkward gait. "Sorry, Son, but even dinosaurs have daddies, and those daddy dinosaurs are so scary that even a ferocious T-rex like you will be glad to hide under the covers. *Roooooar!*"

He squealed, laughing, and tried to run to bed, but I was too fast. I scooped him up and spun him around, pretending to eat

his belly. “Nooo! Papa, no!” I just about clocked an elbow to the face with his frantic wiggling.

Pulling back, I gave him a mock glare. “Are you ready for bed then?”

He nodded, and I carried him over to bed and tucked him in. “Will you tell me a story?” It was probably just another stall tactic, but he was growing too fast, and I knew that soon enough, he wouldn’t want his lame dad putting him to bed anymore.

I lay down bedside him and snuggled close, until he was breathing his minty toothpaste breath in my face. “Sure, buddy. Have I ever told you about the first time your daddy laid eyes you?”

“Yeah, but you can tell me again.” And I did. It was love at first sight between those two.

Kit was so young when Embry died, and I did everything I could to keep his dad’s memory alive for him. I told him stories, showed him pictures. It broke my heart thinking about everything Embry had already missed—the first day of school, learning how to ride a bike—and there were still so many milestones to come.

“You look like him, you know,” I whispered, tugging on one of Kit’s curls, so much like mine but with his alpha dad’s distinctive blond color.

He sounded half asleep when he said, “I know, Papa, you tell me all the time.” Some days I felt lucky for their resemblance,

because it was like I got to keep a piece of Embry forever. Other times, it was hard not to cry for how much it made me miss my husband.

I extricated myself from under the blankets and kissed him on the forehead. “Love you, buddy.”

“Love you too, Papa,” he mumbled.

I turned off his light but left the door open a crack, just the way he liked it. I made my way down the groaning staircase to the living room, and the electric light changed to a flickering orange of candlelight. Ben hadn’t managed to get this portion of the house working yet, but he promised he would get started on it tomorrow.

“Nightcap?” Dad asked, holding up a bottle.

“That is the best offer I’ve had in a long time,” I said with a sigh, dropping onto the couch and propping my feet up on the low coffee table.

Dad poured us each a glass then sat down beside me, mirroring my pose, and passed me my drink.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

I strained my ears to listen, but after a minute, I shook my head. “No, what?”

“Silence,” he whispered. “No traffic, no noisy neighbors. Just... silence.” Neither of us felt the need to fill the void. We simply sat together, sipping our drinks, and basked in the peace and quiet.

I turned my head and looked at my dad's profile. He looked older than I remembered seeing him. Maybe it was just the way the candles cast their shadows, but from my own experience, I suspected it was the weight of grief. I wondered if I too had aged beyond my years.

"This is exactly what I wanted for Kit," I said, finally breaking the quiet. "A neighborhood with lots of other kids. Friendships, a community where he could grow and explore." I scoffed out a sarcastic laugh. "I just didn't expect it to cost quite this much."

"I admit, it would've been different if Embry were here to live out this dream with you, and not just because of the second income."

"He was good at this kind of stuff," I said, reminiscing. "He could fix anything. Not like me." I held up my soft hands, not a callous in sight.

Dad lifted his glass. "To Embry," he toasted, and I lifted my glass to clink with his, ice cubes tinkling.

"And to Pops," I added.

He smiled sadly. "Yes, to your pops."

I pursed my lips in thought, looking at the walls. "What do you think about green?" I asked.

He glanced at me in confusion. "Like, the color? I guess I'm a fan. Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking that this room would look nice if we painted it green. Not too dark or anything, but if we

stripped down the trim to the natural wood, I think it would be warm and inviting. What do you think?”

Dad nodded. “Yeah, I could see it. We need an area rug here, but keep the hardwood floors. And maybe we could tuck an upright piano in that corner, so Kit could learn an instrument. I saw a sign down the street for a woman teaching piano lessons from her home.”

“I like that idea. Let’s ask him what he thinks tomorrow.” The house was largely unfurnished, since we’d come from a small two-bedroom apartment into a massive space. It was fun to imagine what it would look like one day, once we’d had the time to furnish it properly, paint the walls, pick out some décor.

“So... that Ben is quite the guy, huh?” Dad said with a suspicious tone to his voice.

“Dad, don’t,” I said in warning.

“Don’t what?” he asked innocently. “I’m simply pointing out that he seems like a nice guy.”

“Uh-huh, that’s where it starts, but soon you’ll be asking if I noticed how large his hands are, and that is not a conversation I want to have with you. Not now, not ever.”

“Right, sorry.” We lapsed into silence once more, until he leaned over and said, “Does that mean you noticed?”

“Dad!” I scolded. “If you think he’s so nice, why don’t *you* date him.”



“Don’t think I won’t,” he teased, but I knew he was just joking.

I didn’t want to admit that of course I had noticed Ben’s hands. How could you not? A man that size was hard to ignore. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and yes, large hands, because that was how proportion worked. Although, that led me to wonder what other parts of him were large...

It was strange, though, that I wasn’t at all nervous around him. I hadn’t even hesitated at being alone with him today, even though he was a total stranger. Omegas were taught from a young age to be wary of alphas, larger and strong enough to overpower us, to take what they wanted. We all had our own horror stories, heard the cautionary tales. But never once today had I been uncomfortable around Ben. That didn’t guarantee that he wasn’t dangerous, but he just had this way about him, like a big, squishy teddy bear you just wanted to squeeze.

My throat felt tight just thinking about it. Embry had been gone for more than two years. It was only natural to feel lonely, so of course I noticed Ben. There was nothing wrong with that. I mean, I wasn’t going to be alone forever, that was just a fact, but I wasn’t ready to move on. It wasn’t time yet.

Dad, as usual, was a master at reading my thoughts. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked gently, glancing at me sidelong.

“No,” I replied firmly, and I knew he would respect my privacy.

He tipped his drink up and drained the last of it, leaning forward to set his empty glass on the table. “Well, I think I’m going to head up to bed.” He patted my knee before heaving himself off the couch with a groan. “Don’t forget to blow out the candles before you head upstairs.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to start a fire,” I assured him.

“*Another* fire,” he corrected, and even though his back was to me, I could hear the smirk on his face.

“There were no flames, so it didn’t count,” I called after him, and his chuckle echoed up the stairs as he headed to bed.

I knew I should get to bed too, but I could feel nightmares haunting me tonight, even before I’d closed my eyes. Dreams of a future that would never be, of a love lost too soon. I looked down at my wedding band, gleaming in the flickering light.

“What do you think, Embry? Green?” There was nothing but silence in reply.



# Ben

*IT'S JUST A JOB* , I told myself not for the first time. If I repeated it often enough, maybe I could pretend I was only here for the paycheck and could ignore the ulterior motive lingering deep down inside myself. I wanted to see Shane again.

*He's married. Taken. Off-limits... And I'm a glutton for punishment.* It was with that bitter reality that I found myself standing on his porch, reaching for the doorbell. It was obvious he needed me, and I couldn't force myself to walk away. I had already decided that I would do whatever I could to help, even if I never saw him again after this job was finished.

I pressed the doorbell and listened, but there was no responding *ding-dong* from within. I frowned. After fixing the breakers yesterday, this should've been working. Unless, of course, they'd had another short. So, I tried again. This time there was a faint, dull clank sound. That wasn't right either.

*Third time's the charm*, I decided and pressed the button once more. "Yowch!" A spark jumped from the button to my finger and traveled up my arm to my shoulder. My entire arm was left tingling. It wasn't the first time I'd been zapped, considering my profession, but I was smart enough to cut the current before working on a circuit. It seemed this house had a few surprises in store for me. Lesson learned.

The door swung open, and there was Shane. "I thought I heard someone out here. Why didn't you ring the doorbell?"

"Believe me, I tried," I said, biting back the groan. "I think I'll stick to knocking."

"Well, come on in. I made breakfast if you haven't eaten. Nothing fancy, just some French toast and fruit salad. And coffee, of course. Brewed fresh, thanks to your quick work yesterday." He beamed at me, eager to please, and I almost felt guilty for having eaten breakfast before I left the house this morning.

"Well, I'll never say no to coffee," I said, feeling surprisingly bashful. "Maybe you could save me some of that French toast for lunch?"

"Of course!" Shane looked especially delectable this morning, with his rumpled shirt and the pillow creases across his eye and cheek. He looked like he'd just rolled out of bed; I had no idea how he'd had time to cook breakfast.

"Rough morning?" I asked, then realized he probably wouldn't appreciate me calling attention to his appearance.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—” I began, but he cut me off with a laugh.

“Yeah, is it that obvious? I couldn’t get to sleep last night, and when I finally managed to drift off, I had the weirdest dreams about every room in the house being filled with bananas. My dad took Kit to school this morning and let me sleep in.”

“That was nice of him,” I said, but again, I found myself wondering about Shane’s wedding ring. Where was his spouse? Why didn’t they take their son to school. Were they separated? This level of curiosity was *not* healthy.

I cleared my throat and headed straight to the living room, putting a bit of distance between us. I could feel Shane following me. “I’ll need to make some small holes in the plaster, I hope that’s all right. It’ll be up close to the ceiling, and I’ll patch it when I’m done. I need to fish the new wires through the walls down to the basement.”

“Sure, whatever you need to do. I trust you.” His words probably shouldn’t have struck such a chord within me, but they did. Trust was usually hard-earned, but I could tell he meant what he said. I had no idea what I’d done to deserve something so precious. “What about the old knobby wires?”

I smiled. “Knob and tube. It’s okay to just leave them where they are. Once the new lines are connected, it won’t be a hazard anymore.”

“Okay...” He nodded, but his mind was half elsewhere. He hiked a thumb toward the dining room, backing away. “I’ll just

get to work then. I'll be in the next room if you need anything." I wondered if he always worked in the dining room or if it was only because he didn't have an office yet. Maybe that should be the next room I worked on.

First step was to drill a hole in the wall. I made a couple trips out to the truck, bringing in a ladder and spools of 14-gauge wire, then I slid on my safety glasses and climbed up the ladder with my drill. Everything started out fine. I started making a small hole, just like I'd done a hundred times before, but this time, the plaster seemed to be crumbling too easily. The drill bit punched through, as if through wet sand. Then, before my eyes, a series of cracks spiderwebbed out from the hole.

"Uh-oh..."

I watched with growing horror as a large crack lengthened, extending upward, through the crown molding, and across the ceiling over my head. Plaster dust rained down on me, and I tilted my face away just in time for a large chunk of plaster to fall directly onto the back of my skull, then dropping to the floor and skittering across the hardwood.

"What was that sound?" Shane called, and I heard his footsteps approaching at a clip.

I coughed a few times, blinking my eyes open carefully, halfway expecting the rest of the ceiling to follow. When it seemed safe enough, I peeked down at Shane. He was staring up at me, his jaw gaping. "I'm sorry, that's never happened to me before." I straightened and reached up to press a finger

gently to the plaster. It was soft, almost spongy. “Oh shit. There’s been some water damage. Let me guess, the bathroom is right above us?”

“Yeah...” No matter how calm he seemed about the situation, I could see the emotions flitting across his eyes, starting at a dawning horror, through panic, then straight to dread as he calculated the added cost of repairing water damage. We didn’t even know how extensive it was yet. Hopefully it was just on the surface, and that the supporting beams were still solid. His throat bobbed with a heavy swallow. “How bad is it?”

“Um, let me take a look, okay?”

He nodded, but his eyes were turning glassy as tears began to pool.

Shit, my heart was breaking for him. I couldn’t just stand here and watch him cry. I scrambled to find something to say to make it better. I came down the ladder and approached him. “Hey, don’t worry, I can fix this.”

He gave a wary chuckle, devoid of humor. “Seriously?”

“Sure. I may be an electrician, but I’m pretty handy. I can do all sorts of things. Plaster repair is child’s play.”

He looked skeptical, and he wiped his shirt sleeve over his eyes to catch any remaining tears. He wrapped his arms around his waist in a protective gesture, as if trying to hold himself together and keep from falling apart like this house.



“I’m sorry,” I said carefully, “I know it’s none of my business, but why did you buy this house? It’s beautiful, sure, but it’s obviously going to cost you more than you bargained for. You could’ve bought a little bungalow for less than half the cost.”

He gave a deep sigh, his entire body sagging under an unseen weight, and I wished I could take back my question. “It was my husband’s dream house,” he whispered, and a new sense of regret filled me. It hadn’t escaped my notice that he said “*was*,” as in past tense. “We used to drive past it sometimes in the evening when Kit was a baby and we were trying to get him to fall asleep, and Embry would say, ‘One day, we’re going to live there.’ And so, when it went up for sale, I felt like it was Embry giving me a sign.” He sniffled and wiped at his eyes again. “I know, it’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not,” I quickly said.

He scoffed. “Really, it’s okay. If Embry knew what a money pit this place was, he never would’ve bought it. Gods, what was I thinking?”

My eyes darted down to where he was twisting his wedding ring around and around. “You miss him,” I said simply. “This makes you feel like he’s still here.”

Shane offered me a gentle smile. “Yeah, I guess.”

We both started when the front door opened, and we turned to see Shane’s dad, Zack, come in. “Oh! Ben, good to see you again,” he said, offering me a wide grin. Then his gaze shifted

over to Shane, taking in his son's red-rimmed eyes and tear-dampened cheeks, and his smile melted. "Everything okay?"

In response, Shane pointed up at the ceiling. Zack followed his direction and looked up, hissing as he saw the damage. "Oh boy."

"Yeah," Shane moaned, dropping down onto the sofa.

"I'll get the vacuum," Zack said, disappearing down the hall. If sucking up some of the mess made him feel more in control of the situation, then I was all for it, but I suspected the mess was about to get a lot worse.

I didn't like towering over Shane, so I lowered to the couch beside him. "Where did you want me to start?" I asked softly. "Maybe if I loosen the damaged plaster, I can check out the extent of the damage, and we should definitely double-check that whatever was leaking is fixed. Then while the ceiling is open, I'll rewire the living room, before we fix the plaster. How does that sound?"

"That... sounds like a good plan." He seemed to have regained control of his emotions, and when he looked up at me, he actually laughed, his eyes focused somewhere above me. "Come here," he said, reaching for me. "You look ridiculous."

I got the gist about what he wanted, and I bent forward. He ran his fingers through my hair, loosening chunks of plaster from my locks. I nearly moaned at the sensation of his hands on me, no matter how innocent it was intended to be. I closed

my eyes and basked in the attention. No one had touched me in too long, and I wished it could mean so much more.

Too soon, my hair was clear of debris, and he pulled away. I blinked my eyes open and tried my best to appear unaffected, though I could've sworn he looked a little unsettled too.

With a clatter and stomping feet, Zack returned, with the vacuum cleaner cord disappearing into the dining room where the plugs were working. "Well, let's get to it, shall we?"

Shane looked grateful, and he stood up and began rolling up his sleeves. "Just tell us what to do, Ben. Put us to work."

So, I climbed up the ladder and got to work on the demolition, while they stayed below and kept the mess under control, Zack with the vacuum and Shane putting the larger chunks in a garbage bag. While I typically worked alone, I had to admit, this was kind of nice. We chatted about nothing in particular, then Zack propped his phone in the corner and put on some music, and I laughed watching the two of them dancing away. I may have even sung along to a song or two.

I told myself not to get used to this kind of teamwork, but I could feel a shift happening. Too soon, this job would be finished, and then it would all be over. And I already missed them.

7

# Shane

I WAS ACHING IN places I hadn't even known could ache. I was dusty and sweaty and hungry. It had been a long day, and it wasn't anywhere near over yet. There was still dinner to make and my son to play with, plus the bedtime routine, of course. And since I hadn't gotten any work done today, what with the unexpected living room wall and ceiling demolition, I would have to squeeze in some work before finally crawling into bed myself. I still had hours left to get through, and the mere thought of it was exhausting.

Despite being such a catastrophe, the day had been... kind of nice, actually. Beneath the panic, the stress, the overwhelming depression, there was this peace that settled over me. Working with my dad and Ben, laughing and dancing, it was almost familiar somehow, and it worked its magic on me, like a kind of therapy.

It had helped that Ben finally gave me some good news. Once the damaged plaster was down, he was able to inspect the full extent of what was going on, and he said the structural

support was stable. The water damage was probably part of the cause for the wiring issues in that section of the house too, so it was good we were getting it taken care of.

I'd given Dad the first shower, then he went to pick up Kit from school. Now it was my turn at last. "I'm just going to run upstairs for a quick shower. Are you okay for a few minutes?" I asked Ben.

"Yeah, for sure. If it's all right with you, I'd like to keep working for a little while. I'm pretty close to getting you some light for this room."

"So I can get a clear look at the gaping ceiling?" I sassed, raising an eyebrow.

He chuckled. "In that case, maybe leave the lights off for another few days. Don't worry, we'll get there, probably sooner than you'd think."

It felt good to be able to joke about the fiasco. If I didn't laugh, I'd cry. "I'll be right back," I told him with a wave, then jogged up the stairs, the risers complaining with creaks and groans with each step.

The bathroom was actually huge, and I could imagine how beautiful it would be one day, but for now, it was just kind of sad. There were tiles missing from the floor and walls, probably part of the water damage from downstairs, and while it did have a massive clawfoot tub, it was stained and chipped.

My poor aching body was craving a scalding-hot spray. I scowled at the narrow showerhead, clogged with limescale,

knowing the chances of either hot water or a decent spray were slim, but I wasn't ready to give up just yet. My dad said it was fine.

I pulled across the shower curtain and cranked on the tap, keeping my fingers crossed. With a clank of pipes from somewhere beneath my feet, the water sputtered and chugged but eventually came up with something resembling a shower. Blowing out a sigh of relief, I got undressed while waiting for it to warm up.

The heavy cast-iron basin was so thick that when I climbed in, the metal was still chilly under my feet, but at least the water was hot. I blew out a long sigh, feeling some of the tension release from my shoulders.

Well, Kit said he wanted an adventure, and this house was certainly turning into exactly that. Embry would've laughed so hard at everything that was going wrong. It was like a row of cascading dominoes, one thing after another. I could almost hear it, his wheezing giggle when he really got worked up, tears spilling down his cheeks. He had a great laugh. Ben had a nice laugh too, but it was deeper, a rumbly kind of vibration in his chest.

I nearly gasped at how easily my mind had taken me from one man to the other. There was nothing similar about them. Besides, I had no business thinking about Ben in any way, shape, or form other than how qualified he was for the job. He was the electrician, and that was it.

Flustered, I grabbed the shampoo from the little basket hanging under the showerhead and got my hair lathered. Dad would be home with Kit any minute, and then the real chaos would begin.

With my fingers buried in my soapy hair, suds dripping down my face, that was the moment I felt the spray on my back stutter. I froze, holding my breath. The water hiccupped. Then it choked. Then it died. The pressure went from 60 to zero in 1.3 seconds.

“No!” I shouted, quickly trying to shove my head under the last trickle of water, attempting to rinse my hair before it could give out entirely, but I was too late. “Come on,” I groaned, flipping the shower back down to the faucet, turning the taps on and off.

For a second, I thought it was going to come back. There was a thunk, then a whine. It was through stinging eyes that I watched a thick, black goop begin to trickle from the faucet. “Fudge on a stick,” I cursed, constantly aware of little ears.

The slime plopped out across the bottom of the tub. “No, no, no,” I chanted, my eyes burning, fumbling with the taps as I tried to turn it off.

My first mistake had been thinking I could take a shower without anything going wrong, but that wasn't where my mistakes ended. My heel slipped in the sludge, my right foot going one direction, my left another. My entire world tilted as I was thrown back. I reached blindly for anything to grab hold of on the way down, my fingers latching onto the curtain. It



slowed my descent for only a second, before the curtain tore, followed by the curtain rod detaching from the ceiling.

My forehead came down on the rim of the tub, and I must've shouted, but I couldn't say for sure. I saw stars, and my ears were ringing. I was distantly aware of someone yelling and the thud of heavy feet headed my way.

The door swung open with a bang, and the doorway was filled with a wild-eyed Ben. "Shane! What happened?! Are you okay?" One wide step brought him to my side, and he hovered there, scared to touch me.

I had enough wherewithal to cling to that poor torn shower curtain, keeping all my important bits covered. "I-I slipped," I stuttered, trying to look up at him, but I could barely open my eyes, with shampoo still dripping. I used the crook of my arm to try to wipe it away, but with all the muck in the tub, I didn't know if I was doing more harm than good.

"Oh gods, Shane!" Ben sounded worried. "Your head, you're bleeding!"

"I am?" Reaching up, I poked at my forehead, hissing at the sharp sting, and sure enough, my finger came away painted red. I pointed to the cabinet. "There are towels under the sink."

He grabbed two. With the first, he gently wiped my eyes clear, then put pressure on my forehead. The second one, he passed to me. "For your waist..." he explained, and even under his beard, I could tell he was blushing. To his credit, he seemed to keep his attention trained above the waist. "Let's get

you out of there and cleaned up. I've got a first-aid kit in the truck."

While he ran to grab his kit, I took the moment of privacy to carefully climb out of the tub. Now I didn't just ache, I *hurt*. It seemed my head wasn't the only thing I hit on the way down. My elbow was throbbing, as was my hip. There would be bruises tomorrow, I was sure of it.

I left brown-black footprints across the bathmat, then secured the towel around my waist. I hissed when I caught sight of myself in the tarnished mirror. I was a gory mess, like something out of a horror movie. The blood was mixing with the drying shampoo to make a pink paste. "Shit," I muttered, immediately feeling guilty for the bad word, even though Kit wasn't home to hear it. I pinched my lips shut.

The heavy tread of Ben's work boots came back up the stairs, slower this time. "Are you decent?" he called from the hall.

"Decent enough," I said, confirming the towel was tight, with no gaps in awkward places. "Come on in."

He kept his eyes on the kit in his hands. "I've got some rubbing alcohol and gauze. We'll get it cleaned up before we decide if you need stitches."

With a gentle nudge, he guided me to lean on the edge of the sink, then began to clean the cut. I barely felt the pain from the disinfectant. For someone as large as he was, he had a remarkably soft touch. I put my trust in him and closed my eyes, focusing on the pressure from his leg against mine, the

flutter of his fingers over my skin. He smelled good, a mixture of sawdust and a spicy cologne.

My musing was interrupted by the sound of the front door closing downstairs and Kit's excited voice saying, "Wow! There's no ceiling!"

I blinked my eyes open and found myself looking into Ben's warm gaze. We stared at each other for a long moment, neither one of us breaking contact. Then he drew in a deep breath and shook his head, taking a step back. I felt cold suddenly without him pressed against me. "No stitches," he said, distracted. "Um, I'm sorry, I don't have any smaller band-aids." He held up a massive patch. "I guess I'm too prepared."

"Don't worry, I have that covered." I reached behind me and pulled on the edge of the mirror to reveal a small cupboard behind it. I didn't have much in there yet, but when you had kids, band-aids were a necessity—even when the boo-boo was entirely imagined. "Who's your favorite Beetlebop?" I asked Ben, making a face.

"What?" He quirked an eyebrow in confusion. It was clear he didn't have kids of his own.

I pulled out three different patterns. "I've got Bart, Beebee, or Blaze."

He laughed and plucked the yellow one from between my fingers. "Whichever one this is."

"Beebee, a good choice. She is by far the least annoying of the three. Kit will approve."

Ben carefully peeled off the backing then brushed my hair aside so he could stick the bandage on. “There you go. Good as new.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far...” I said warily, peeking past him to the disaster that was my bathtub.

“Yeah, there is that.” He pursed his lips, taking in the scene. “Plumbing... okay. We can handle plumbing.” He didn’t sound overly sure of himself, but I’d trusted him this far. Why stop now?

“Sure. Okay. We got this.”

This house was clearly out to get me, but maybe it was enough to know that I wasn’t going down alone.



# Ben

I WAS IN WAY over my head. I lied. I didn't know a thing about plumbing. I couldn't explain what had come over me in that moment except that I had Shane there in front of me, wearing only a towel, banged up and bleeding, and I wanted to make everything better. And once I'd said it, I couldn't seem to take it back. Plumbing... Sure, it was kinda like electricity, right? How hard could it be?

I had been staring at these pipes for about ten minutes without a clue what I was looking for. The water wasn't running in the bathroom, but it also wasn't working anywhere else in the house either. There were no puddles of water or drips anywhere on the basement floor. I really hoped that didn't mean it was pooling somewhere I couldn't see.

“What are you doing?” a little voice asked. I glanced back at the curly-haired boy who'd snuck down the basement stairs to watch me work. His honey-colored eyes were wide and curious, and I could tell nothing got past him. Shane had his work cut out with this one, I could tell.

“Well,” I said, debating what kind of answer to give him. I had a suspicion he wouldn’t be content with a simple explanation. “Did you dad tell you the water isn’t working?” He nodded. “So, clean water travels all over the city through these massive pipes under the ground, called water mains. From there, it comes into your house, then there’s a whole maze of more pipes hidden inside the walls of the house, bringing the water everywhere you need it, like the kitchen sink or your washing machine.”

“But there isn’t any water in the house,” he said, simplifying our current problem perfectly.

I looked around the basement. “No, you are exactly right,” I said. “There is definitely a leak somewhere. But if the water isn’t here, then where is it?”

His little face scrunched up as he tried to figure it out. Then his eyes lit up and he gasped. “Maybe it’s on the moon,” he said with complete seriousness.

It was nearly impossible not to laugh. “Well, unless I go up there and check, I can’t say for sure that it’s not.” He grinned at me, and I saw so much of his father in him in that moment. “Come on, let’s go see if we can track down that leak. Think you can carry the flashlight for me?”

“Yes!” He snatched it from me, brandishing it like a light saber, complete with sound effects, the beam arcing back and forth through the gloom.

When we got back upstairs, Shane was just coming into the kitchen. “There you are. I was looking everywhere for you,”

he scolded lightly. “You shouldn’t bother Ben when he’s working.”

“I wasn’t bothering him,” he piped up. “Look! I’m helping him carry his flashlight!”

“It’s no problem,” I confirmed. “He’s gonna help me figure out where the water went. Aren’t you, bud?”

Kit swung his arms up over his head in a victory pose, nearly launching the flashlight straight into his dad’s face. “Don’t worry, I got this.” Then he went running around the house, peeking under the table and behind the couch, saying, “Water? Are you here? Nope, guess not. How about here? Hello, water, where are you?”

“Thanks for including him,” Shane said, a soft wistful smile on his lips. “I feel like I’m always too busy to play with him the way he needs.”

“No problem. Besides, he might do a better job than I am. I hate to admit it, but we might need to call in a plumber.”

He sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

At the back of the kitchen was a door leading out to the back yard, and it opened with an angry creak, and Zack came in with a grim expression. “Well, I talked to the neighbors, and their water is working fine, but the pressure is low.”

“Huh,” I grunted, frowning, trying to connect the dots. No water in the house, low pressure to the neighbors... A sinking feeling unfurled inside me as I turned and headed for the front door.



“Where are you going?” Shane called after me.

I turned to look back at him over my shoulder. “I just want to check a theory I have.”

As I made my way out the door, I found I had a bit of a parade behind me; first Shane, then Zack, and in the rear was Kit, asking his grandpa a whole string of questions, all beginning with “Why—?”

At first glance, everything was fine, but when I strained my ears, I thought I heard a strange shushing sound, suspiciously like leaking water. And sure enough, when I took one step out onto the lawn, it made a very mucky *squish*. “Oh, shi—” I cut my curse off just in time, feeling Kit’s eyes on me. “I mean, sugar.” I took a few more steps, each one progressively soggy. The lawn was entirely saturated.

I found the culprit halfway across the lawn. There was water literally bubbling up out of the ground. “Ah-ha!” I yelled, pointing at it as evidence, but it seemed nobody had been keen on following me this far. They were all huddled back on the front steps. “There’s a burst pipe under your lawn. We need to call the city, and they’ll send someone to shut off the water. Then they’ll have to dig up your yard to fix it.”

Both Shane and Zack seemed to cave in at the news. Only Kit seemed excited by the prospect, but I suspected his priorities were a little more skewed toward large equipment and lots of noise and activity; he didn’t care so much about the money part of the equation. “Neat!” With that, he leaped off

the bottom step onto the lawn, his socked feet sinking into the wet grass.

“Kit, you’ll get wet,” Shane said, trying to stop him, but it was too late.

“So?” Kit said, stomping around in a circle and sending up little splashes.

Shane couldn’t seem to come up with a good argument, since he had bigger worries right now. “All right, play in the water, but I’m making you strip down to your skivvies before coming back in the house.”

I wondered if he would make me do the same...

Zack went inside to call the city. I walked back toward the house, my boots making a slurping, sucking sound with each step, and it made Kit giggle. “Your feet are farting.” Oh boy, kids and their potty humor. Except Shane snorted a laugh too. It seemed we never really grew out of it.

When I took another step, it made a particularly rude sound, and now all of us were laughing.

I reached down to the grass and scooped a little bit of water off the surface and flicked it in Kit’s direction, teasing. He squealed and retreated, but it seemed I’d opened the door on a new game. Clearly, I’d issued an invitation to splash me back.

“Kit!” Shane gasped as his son took a great big scoop from the lawn and slung it at me, except it wasn’t only water, but also mud.

I stared down at the brown slop all down my chest, and Kit froze, looking guilty. He was waiting to see how much trouble he was in. I didn't yell, though. Clothes were washable, and it was just mud. Instead, I peeked slowly up at him and narrowed my eyes in a pretend glare. "You'd better run," I warned him.

His face broke into a wide grin, and he took off across the grass, squealing in glee and stumbling on the shifting surface.

I chased him around the yard in circles, letting myself get close but never quite catching him. I got ready to lunge and timed it perfectly, so that when he zagged to the left, I pretended to trip, my fingers closing on air. I came down on my stomach in a puddle, setting Kit off in a fit of hysterics.

"Oh, you think that's funny, do you?" I reached out and snagged him around the waist and brought him down in a controlled belly flop. He was almost as wet as he could get.

"Papa! Papa, come play with us!" he called to his dad.

"Yeah, Shane. Come play with us," I joined in, goading him.

Shane hesitated, but I knew by the way his mouth quirked that it was only a matter of time. The love and devotion he had for his son meant he would do anything for him, even roll in the mud. "Okay," he said, stepping down from the safety of the porch, "but you'll have to help me catch up. I'm way too dry."

Kit was more than happy to oblige.

By the time Zack emerged from the house, we were all completely drenched and smeared with mud. "What

happened? I was only gone for ten minutes.” He laughed, taking us in.

Kit ran over to his grandfather to give him a muddy hug, and Shane peeked up at me, his curls dripping. “I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head but grinning all the same. “He can be a real handful.”

“Are you kidding? This is the most fun I’ve had in years,” I admitted, then before I could stop myself, I closed the gap and took hold of the loose curl, tucking it carefully behind his ear.

Shane’s whole body locked up, like a startled deer, and for a second, I thought he might bolt. I shouldn’t have done that, but it seemed when it came to Shane, I was doing all kinds of things I shouldn’t. The line between electrician and client seemed to have been washed away in the lake that used to be his yard.

He cleared his throat and stepped back with forced ease. “Um, I’m going to go ask the neighbor if we can borrow their hose. Maybe if I grab a bar of soap, this can count as Kit’s bath.”

I watched him go, and even though every part of me wanted to follow, I forced myself to stay put. When I looked over toward the house, I found Zack watching me with a knowing look. If only I understood half as much as what he seemed to know. Maybe he could fill me in.



# Shane

ANOTHER DAY WAS COMING to a close, and we seemed to be making negative progress. At least when we first moved in, we'd had ceilings and running water. Now the house was halfway to being condemned! I halfway expected it to be a pile of rubble by next week.

“Hey, it'll be okay,” Ben assured me, and I wondered if he was tired of consoling me. He should probably include a therapist fee on his invoice. “The city will have this taken care of in just a few days.”

I sat down on the front steps, my wet jeans clinging tightly in all the wrong places and leaving me with an uncomfortable chafing feeling. “I'm generally a patient guy, but what am I supposed to do until then? If it were just me, it wouldn't be that big a deal, but you can't expect a six-year-old to manage without a working toilet.” I scrubbed my palms into my eye sockets until I saw stars, then I blew out a long, slow breath. I could do this. I'd been through worse. “It's okay. We'll go

back to the hotel for a few nights. Kit will love it.” My bank account, however, would not.

Ben sat beside me, his wide body folding awkwardly, and his shoulder was close enough to touch if I just leaned a little to the right. His beard rippled as he gnawed on his lower lip, his thick eyebrows descending in a frown. “Just a thought, no pressure, but you guys could always bunk with me for a few days. My place isn’t huge, but it’s safe and free of charge. I have a cat, and I make a mean Belgian waffle.”

Before I could politely decline, my dad piped in, “We’d love to.”

“Dad!” I snapped, whipping around to look at him. I hadn’t heard him come out of the house.

He speared me with a glare. He didn’t look away as he said to Ben, enunciating carefully, “*Ahem*. It’s a very generous offer, Ben. We appreciate it. Thank you.”

My father would always be able to put me in my place. He was reminding me I shouldn’t be too proud to accept a little bit of help, and even though it might’ve been considered inappropriate by some, there was just something about Ben that spoke of safety and comfort. I felt heat color my cheeks. “Yes, thank you, Ben.”

And that was how we found ourselves pulling up in Ben’s driveway behind his truck. He’d gone home ahead of us while we packed a few belongings, with a day’s change of clothes and our toothbrushes. The house was kind of cute, with its blue-and-white shutters and little postage-stamp yard. It didn’t

have the same character as our house, but I could guarantee the roof wouldn't cave in on us in the night.

I hesitated with my hand on the car's door handle. "This is a bad idea," I whispered to my dad.

"I refuse to believe that," he said firmly. "Ben is one of the good ones." And my heart echoed in agreement. "Come on, Kit. Let's go meet his cat."

Ben met us at the front door, his cat in his arms to keep him from sneaking past us as we filed into the entryway. "Welcome to my humble abode," he said. "Make yourselves at home."

"Careful," I teased, "you've seen my home. I might accidentally knock out a wall or start a fire."

His eyes twinkled with mischief. "I take it back. Sit down and don't touch anything."

His cat was pushing off his chest trying to get to Kit who was bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement. "He's so beautiful. What's his name?"

"This is Dmitri," Ben said in introduction, plunking the cat into Kit's open arms. The cat was absolutely perfect for Ben. While he'd looked tiny against his chest, when compared to my son, the cat was massive. He probably weighed close to 20 pounds! He was black with patches of white on his chest and paws.

With all that weight, Kit had to sit down right there on the floor, and the two of them got to know each other, which seemed to involve lots of nuzzling and purring.



Ben indicated for me to follow him. “Sleeping arrangements might be a little tight. I had a foam mattress I use for camping, and that gave me an idea.”

My jaw dropped in amazement when I saw the living room. “Ben! You did all this?”

He shrugged in embarrassment, but I could tell he was pleased by my reaction. “It was nothing.”

It was far from nothing. The living room had been set up like a campsite, with the foam mattress and sleeping bag inside a whole blanket fort. The couch also had blankets and pillows set up as a second bed.

Here was apparently the dilemma. Ben rubbed the back of his neck, and I could see a blush creeping up from under his beard. “The, uh, bedroom has a king-size bed. I could take the couch, and you and your dad take the bed? Or I bet all three of you could fit in there. Heck, I’d even sleep in the tent. However you all want to work it out.” He cleared his throat and disappeared into the kitchen, likely to give us some privacy to discuss it, even though he was only ten feet away and could probably hear every word. I couldn’t help but notice he’d left out one particular sleeping combination, one where he and I ended up in bed together, but that didn’t stop my imagination from going there.

It was obvious to everyone that Kit would take the tent, because he climbed straight in, calling to Dmitri, who followed him obediently. I didn’t press the issue on brushing his teeth before bed. It was getting late, and we were all tired.

Dad and I exchanged a look, and I wrung my hands. “Um, so I could...”

He chuckled, patting me on the shoulder. “I’ll do you a favor. I call dibs on the couch!” he called, loud enough for everyone to hear. He took his bag and flopped down on the couch, sighing as he relaxed back on the pillow. “Good night, Son.”

Why did I feel like this was a set-up? Maybe because it was. Instead of feeling betrayed, though, I couldn’t ignore the tingle of anticipation that coursed through me, and the corners of my mouth tipped up involuntarily.

I tried to say good night to Kit, but when I peeked into the tent, I saw he was already passed out, Dmitri barely visible inside the sleeping bag with him. Oh man, he was totally going to start asking me for a cat now.

Ben appeared in the doorway, his shoulders hunched. “Come on, I’ll show you where you can sleep.”

He took my bag for me, and I followed him down the short hall. It seemed strange to see such a large man in such a tiny house. The hallways were narrow, the ceilings low, but he seemed perfectly comfortable, at ease in the space. The bedroom was small too, no surprise there, and most of it was taken up by the bed. We both stared down at it, a fresh wave of tension settling over us. My stomach began to churn.

“I could sleep on the floor,” Ben finally said, ever the gentleman.

I eyed the narrow gap between the bed and the dresser and snorted a laugh. “Yeah, I’d love to see you try.” He laughed too, and the sound of it made me bold. “We’re both adults. I’m sure we can handle sleeping in the same bed.”

With confidence I didn’t quite feel, I strolled over to the other side of the bed and pulled back the blanket, sending a wave of his scent wafting over me. My body reacted instantly to the aroma, and I swallowed down the groan before it could escape. I crawled under the covers quickly before he could see evidence of how it affected me. Then I turned on my side on the very edge of the bed, facing the wall. “See? I don’t take up much space. You’ll hardly even know I’m here.”

The mattress dipped as he crawled in, and I could’ve sworn he muttered, “Trust me, I’ll know.”

Ben turned off the bedside lamp, throwing us into darkness, and we lapsed into silence. No matter how soft the bed was, my whole body was stiff as a board—and that included my dick. There was a whole chasm of space between us, but I swore I could feel his body heat, like a roaring fireplace. I began to sweat, and I wished I could just peel off my shirt and cool off, but that was *not* a good idea. I needed every barrier between us before I did something I might regret.

It had been years since I slept in a bed with another man, but it felt all too familiar, yet entirely new at the same time. I missed Embry every single day of my life, and I imagined I would love him forever. He was my first true love, my husband, my son’s alpha father, and he was also a future that

would never come to pass. But when I closed my eyes now, it wasn't Embry that I saw. For the first time in my life, I saw an entirely different future open up before me.

And it all started here in this bed.

I could tell Ben wasn't sleeping either. He was fidgeting, trying to get comfortable, and his breathing was too shallow, uneven. If I was going to be staying in his bed for a few days, I had to find a way for us to get some sleep. "I-I'm not taking Dmitri's spot, am I?" I asked, rolling over to peek at Ben. It was too dark to see much but the barest outline of his profile.

"Are you kidding? I swear you're already taking up less space than he does. He's such a bed hog. I wake up with a mouthful of fur, no blankets, and my legs half off the bed."

"Well, he'll have met his match in Kit then. That kid is like a windmill in his sleep, his arms and legs all over the place."

Ben rolled toward me, closing the distance. "And what about you? Do you kick? Snore? Any annoying habits I should know about?"

"Nope. I'm perfect," I joked, but instead of laughing, he whispered, "Sure seems that way..."

In the cover of darkness, I let his words sink in. I didn't feel self-conscious because I knew he wouldn't be a witness to the emotions on my face—the flattery, the excitement, the lust, and last of all, the guilt.

When you married someone, in your heart, that was it. You just knew it, they were the only person you would ever love.

You didn't plan for divorce or separation, and you certainly didn't expect for them to die suddenly before they were even 30 years old, leaving you adrift. But life didn't always work out how you planned.

I never dreamed that I would crave this kind of attention from another man, but I reminded myself that it was okay to think about moving on without Embry, because I was the one left behind.



# Ben

THINGS COULD'VE BEEN SUPER awkward that first morning, what with my massive boner, but luckily, Kit's giggling from the living room had Shane waking up with a gasp, and he hurried out too quickly to notice the tent I'd pitched beside him.

The second morning, he'd been the one sporting a bulge, and while I politely pretended I hadn't seen it, I couldn't help taking a peek. Then, of course, I'd had to hide my own.

Things only escalated from there...

The third morning, I woke up with Shane in my arms. There was zero possibility of extricating myself without waking him up, so I did what any man would do... I enjoyed it while it lasted. It felt too good, the way he fit so perfectly, like a puzzle piece I'd been missing my whole life but hadn't noticed until just that second. And now that I'd seen the whole picture, to know I would have to live without it seemed more than unfair. I laid like that for half an hour, listening to the cute noises he made, falling in deeper with him the longer I tortured myself.

And that was exactly what this was—torture, the ultimate temptation. Shane was everything I'd ever wanted in a partner. He was fun and adventurous, brave and talented, and he'd already proven he was a great father. And he needed me. The only obstacle was that he was mourning the loss of his husband. I didn't know how long it had been since he died, or the circumstances, and I certainly had no clue what kind of timeline it would be before Shane was ready to date again, but with his sweet scent addling my senses, I knew I would wait. It didn't matter how long it would take; I would be here when he was ready.

Finally, he stirred, nuzzling against me, and I closed my eyes, feigning sleep. I could tell the exact moment he realized where he was. His whole body went rigid, and he had to untangle his fingers from my t-shirt, moving at a snail's pace. I didn't want him to feel bad for cuddling up to me, so I kept my breathing deep and even, letting him believe I hadn't noticed. But I had to wonder... was it just habit that had him seeking me out in his sleep? Or had he enjoyed it as much as I did.

We took turns in the bathroom—which meant me going last, insisting that everyone else got priority, since they were my guests. The hot water tank was running on empty by the time I got in the shower, but it was just as well, since I most definitely needed cooling off.

Since it was the weekend, we decided to take it easy. I made waffles for breakfast, as promised, piled high with cut fruit and whipped cream I bought special for this. And if the



expression of complete awe on Kit's face wasn't enough, the gratitude on Shane's made it more than worth the effort.

"If you keep spoiling him, he'll never want to leave," Shane teased, but his words twined through me, and I had to admit to myself that the idea wasn't at all bad.

After our lazy breakfast, I put Dmitri on the leash and let Kit take him to play in the backyard. Shane plopped himself down in the sun with a sketchpad and pencil. He barely looked down at the lines he made, his hand sweeping across the paper, with his eyes trained on his son. I watched him wordlessly, but my curiosity finally got the better of me, and I moved to sit beside him. When he didn't shoo me away, I leaned in.

"You're incredible," I whispered. When his startled eyes flicked up to mine, I floundered, backtracking. "I mean, you're an incredible artist. Truly." It wasn't a lie, though in my heart, I had meant so much more than that.

"Oh. Right. Thank you." He took a deep breath, then got back to his drawing, though I could tell by the stiffness in his shoulders that he hadn't let it go entirely.

We were interrupted when Zack stepped out on the back concrete pad, phone in hand. "I just got the call to say the pipe is all fixed. We can go home."

Shane's smile slipped. "That's... great." Was I mistaken, or did I see a hint of disappointment behind his eyes, gone too quickly to register it properly? "You're in luck, Ben. Looks like you'll get the rest of your weekend to yourself. We'll pack

up and get out of your hair.” Before I could invite him to stay forever, he pushed off the grass and called to Kit.

I watched, helpless, as they got ready to leave. It didn’t take them long to pack up their few belongings, though everything took longer when a six-year-old was involved.

Once they were ready to go, they made their way to the door, and Zack bent down to help Kit with his shoes.

Shane cleared his throat and pulled a piece of folded paper out of his pocket and held it out to me. “What’s this?” I asked, unfolding it. My smile bloomed when I saw the drawing of Dmitri and Kit he’d been working on. “I can keep this?”

“Of course you can. It’s a sorry way for me to show my gratitude, but I figure it’s a start.”

“Would it be rude of me to put it on the fridge?” I asked.

He laughed, his eyes sparkling. “Of course not. My fridge is reserved for only the finest of Kit’s artwork. It’s an honor.” His lips tightened as he passed me a second piece of paper. “This is probably a better thank-you.”

“A check? I told you it was free to stay with me.”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s a payment for all the work you’re doing on my house. I just got paid from the newspaper, so it shouldn’t bounce.”

“Oh. Of course. Thank you.” I stared down at that piece of paper in my hand. I folded it back up and tucked it into my shirt pocket. I would put it with the last check he’d given me, neither of which I had any intention of cashing.

“Well... I guess this is it,” Shane said, standing in front of me awkwardly, bag hiked over his shoulder.

“Yeah, seems like it.” I shuffled my feet, stuffing my hands in my pockets.

“Thank you for having us. Seriously.”

Zack eased past us on his way out the door, following Kit to the car, and he stopped long enough to roll his eyes. “You guys are acting like you’ll never see each other again.” Then he turned to me. “We’ll see you Monday morning. Thanks again.”

“My pleasure.” I infused the words with as much sentiment as I could, gazing down into Shane’s warm eyes.

He backed away without breaking eye contact, until his foot clipped the doorjamb and he staggered. I reached out and caught his arm just in time. There was a spark between us, just a bit of static, but it felt as potent as a high-voltage current, and my heart gave an erratic *ka-thump* in my chest. Shane’s breath caught, like he felt it too. “S-sorry, thank you,” he stuttered, then he turned on his heel and jogged to the car.

I stayed there watching them until they disappeared down the street.

Oh boy. I was in so much trouble, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.



AFTER THEY LEFT, THE house was too empty, too quiet. Even Dmitri seemed unsettled by the sudden loss. He prowled

back and forth between the rooms, looking for Kit.

“I’m sorry, baby. He’s not here,” I told him. He either didn’t understand or didn’t care, as he continued his search, his meows pleading.

I ate an early dinner of leftover waffles, then turned on the TV for some kind of noise in the background, but it wasn’t the same, and I knew with certainty that I could never go back to the way it used to be.

When I started taking down the blanket fort, Dmitri complained. Loudly and repeatedly. He attacked my hands, biting and scratching, but no amount of violence would bring them back now. Only time.

My hands were bleeding by the time I was done, and Dmitri had gone limp on the floor. He didn’t complain when I scooped him up.

“I know. I miss them too,” I told him, scratching him behind the ear and planting a kiss on his forehead. I cradled him against my chest, both to comfort him and myself, but he wiggled away. When I put him down, he hopped up onto the couch and hid his face in the corner of the cushion. He was in the mood to sulk, and I couldn’t even blame him. I was too.

I climbed into bed, even though it wasn’t even full dark outside yet. The sooner I went to sleep, the sooner it would be time to see Shane again. The bed felt larger than it did just a few short nights ago, but everything about my life had been flipped on its axis. My entire body ached for Shane. My cock

was hard and weeping, and even though my hand wouldn't be anywhere close to what I craved, it would have to do.

I closed my eyes, stroking my length, and I imagined it was Shane's smooth, slick channel squeezing my shaft, or maybe his hot mouth, but the callouses on my palm disturbed the image. This wasn't at all what I wanted, but leaving my balls unmilked would be a painful alternative. I moaned in frustration. Finally, I rolled onto Shane's side of the bed and buried my face into the pillow, and his scent, like ice cream and sunshine, both comforted and destroyed me. Gripping the pillow, I rutted into the mattress, imagining him beneath me, building friction between the sheets.

When I came, I cried out his name in longing, a promise to my heart that he would one day be mine. I just hoped it was a promise I could keep.



# Shane

*“ARE YOU SURE YOU can handle all of me?” Ben asked from behind me, his voice husky with need. “I don’t want to hurt you.”*

*“I can take it,” I whimpered. “Please, give it to me. I need you.”*

*Ben’s hands were so large that he had no trouble taking one ass cheek in each palm, and he spread me wide. I could feel my slick dripping down my thighs, and his purr rumbled through me as he took in the sight. “Oh, Shane. What a vision.” His thumbs inched toward my quivering hole, massaging and stretching me in preparation for him.*

*My whole body was aching, desperate, my skin on fire. I’d never needed anything so much in my life as I needed him to fill me. I could feel the head of his cock as he lined himself up. As he eased forward with extreme care, my breath came in panting gasps. It seemed to go on forever, the way his thick bulbous head nudged in, before he finally breached my tight hole. He was massive, just like the rest of him, and even with*

*the attention he'd lavished on me with his fingers, it was a tight squeeze.*

*He moved his hands from my cheeks to my hips, holding me in place. "Are you ready?"*

*"Gods, yes!" I was about to beg if he didn't start moving.*

*But then he surged forward with a smooth thrust of his hips, and I cried out. He hit somewhere deep inside of me that felt like virgin territory. I gripped the bedframe hard, fingers protesting. "Ben, holy shit," I cursed. "You're so big!"*

*He chuckled, the vibration traveling straight to my clenching balls. "Just wait until I give you my knot." It was both a warning and a promise.*

*He moved too slow, too careful for how I wanted him, but I knew he wouldn't be rushed. I was sweating and feverish, gibbering nonsense as my climax crept up. "I'm close," he grunted. "Come for me."*

*And so I did.*

*As I cried out, my body in the throes of bliss, my eyes flew open. I blinked in the weak light, disoriented for a moment, catching my breath. I was in my bed at home, but Ben was not. My pleasure was doused with a dose of disappointment—followed by surprise. "Oh, shit," I muttered, rolling away from the sticky mess I'd made on the sheet beneath me. "Seriously?"*

*I hadn't had a wet dream since I was a teenager, since... before Embry. I blinked up at the ceiling, clinging to the dream*



as it drifted away, but it wasn't mine to keep, and too soon, I was wide awake and in desperate need of a shower.

The dream hadn't been about my husband. I waited to feel guilty about the betrayal, but there was nothing. Nothing except the yearning for more, for more with Ben. It was such a foreign idea to my brain and body, and while part of me balked against it, a much larger part of me welcomed it.

I looked to my left where I'd woken up to find Ben the past three days, and my bed felt cold and empty in his absence. It seemed like my mind had decided to take the next step without me. And I had to admit, it was a nice dream. Too bad it wasn't real.



WHEN BEN SHOWED UP at my door just before 9am, I couldn't even look him in the eye, the memory of the dream still lingering. "I hope you're ready to drool," he said in a teasing voice.

"What?!" I squeaked, jerking my head up to look at him, my eyes wide with shock.

He frowned, confused by my reaction, and held up a cardboard box. "I brought donuts. What did you think I meant?"

"N-nothing," I said sharply, shaking my head and attempting to offer him a relaxed smile, though I suspected I looked like a loon.

He laughed. “Okay, well, I’ll be here all day if you decide you want to talk about it.”

“Mm-hm,” I murmured, taking the box from his hands and bringing it through to the kitchen. “What’s on the agenda today?” I asked, rerouting the conversation to safer territory.

“I was thinking now that we had the loose plaster dealt with —”

“And the broken water pipe,” I added.

“Yes, let’s not forget that. Now that we have all the surprises out of the way, I’ll get back on track with switching out the wires.”

I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

“Said what?”

“The part about all the surprises being out of the way. You’ve just invited further disasters into our lives. It’s Murphy’s Law. If anything can go wrong, it will.”

He snorted. “You’re not superstitious, are you?”

I raised an eyebrow and jabbed my finger into his—*gulp*—very firm pec. “You just wait and see,” I said.

Ben snatched up my hand from his chest and held it in his warm grasp. “No matter what surprises lay ahead, we’ll take care of them—together.”

I opened my mouth to say something terribly witty in reply, but nothing came out. Instead, I stood there, jaw hanging

slack, body overheating. My entire focus was on that point of contact between us, his calloused hand firm on mine. In the end, I just nodded.

He started and released my hand with a gasp, like he'd been shocked. "Uh, sorry. I'll... I have work to do." He hiked a thumb over his shoulder and backed away quickly.

"Yeah, me too. I'm getting my office set up upstairs, so if you need me—"

"I'll find you," he finished for me. I was sure he meant, like, if he needed to ask me a question, but the way he said it, with this firm confidence, his gaze boring into me, it sounded more like a long-term kind of search. Lifelong.

With his voice still ringing in my ears and in my heart, I made my way upstairs. I needed to put some distance between us, because there was no way I could keep my head on straight when I could peek at him whenever I wanted—which was too often to be productive with my time—not to mention his scent, which I swore invaded my senses no matter what room of the house I retreated to.

I trudged up the stairs on autopilot, my brain spinning.

What did all of this mean? Sure, I was attracted to him, and if his morning wood the other day was anything to go by, then he felt the same, but did that mean it would extend beyond physical attraction, to a relationship? It felt like such an inevitable conclusion, like one plus one equals two. But even then, I wasn't the only one to consider in this equation. Me, my dad, and Kit, we were a package deal. So, in the extreme

unlikelihood that Ben was still interested, even with all the baggage that came with me, I still had to tread carefully. I wouldn't bring another man into Kit's life until I was certain it was serious. His poor heart couldn't handle losing another father.

I rounded the corner to the room that would be my office. I'd already set up a standing desk and given the window a wipe to let in as much light as possible. It wasn't much of a view, angled toward the neighbor's roof, but at least that meant no trees shading the window.

As distracted as I was, I didn't hear the ominous creak beneath my feet. I didn't pause as I walked straight across the room toward my desk. The only warning I had was a slight shift of my balance, before gravity took over. With a splintering crash, the floor caved in, and I plummeted down. On instinct, I threw out my arms, barely catching myself in time. I halted with a thud, the jagged edge of the hole digging into my armpits. There was nothing beneath me but empty air.

"Help!" I yelled, my voice pitched so high only dogs could hear me. I kicked my legs uselessly.

"Shane! Hold on!" Ben shouted from somewhere beneath me.

Wedged as I was in the floor, I had confidence that I wasn't going anywhere, but that was before I felt a crawling sensation across my stomach where my shirt had hiked up. "Um, Ben?" I called uneasily. "Please hurry."

I heard him coming up the stairs, but the tickling feeling was getting worse. It felt almost like thousands of itty-bitty feet marching across my skin. I was torn between staying still so I didn't fall the rest of the way through the floor, and flailing with utter panic because *something was crawling on me!*

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chanted. I wasn't one for having a potty mouth, but this scenario definitely called for it. “Ben!”

“I'm here,” he gasped as he rushed in, dropping to his knees beside the hole. The floor groaned with the added weight, and he froze. “This was a bad idea. I should've lowered you down from below, but I didn't want to scrape your sides going through the floor.” He bit down on his lip, debating how best to get me out of this mess.

“There's no time for that,” I moaned, just as some teeny-tiny jaws bit down, and I yelped. “Ouch! Something bit me. Get me out of here!”

Ben lumbered out of the room and came back with a drop cloth from the bathroom. He tied one end to the old radiator, and the other end he passed to me. “Just in case the floor caves in, don't let go.” It seemed a sorry safety line, but I wasn't in the mood to split hairs.

Using the fabric to help pull myself up, Ben hauled me out of the floor. As soon as I was clear, he dragged me farther from the hole, and we collapsed, gasping, in a heap. My heart was pounding, adrenaline coursing through me, and I allowed myself a moment to revel in feeling safe—but that godsawful crawling was still there!

“Shirt! Off!” I started swatting at the little black insects scurrying over my skin, and Ben caught on right quick to what I was attempting. Within seconds, he had shucked my shirt up and off, and my pants down, until I was standing in front of him nearly naked, for the second time in a week.

“Oh my gods!” he shouted, stomping on any of the ants within reach—until he realized how much skin I was showing. His stomping slowed, and he dragged his eyes up. He swallowed thickly. “Oh, um... are you okay?”

Short of a small scrape along my ribs and a couple insect bites, I seemed relatively unharmed. “It could’ve been a lot worse,” I said, peeking through the hole in the floor to the dining room far below.

Feeling the chill over all that bare flesh, I crossed my arms over my chest self-consciously and narrowed my eyes at Ben. “You just had to invoke Murphy’s Law,” I griped.

His face scrunched up in a wince. “Do you want me to say you were right?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” I said smugly, and I was surprised to find that I could still smile.

Ben held a hand over his heart. “You were right, and I was wrong. I will never doubt you again, for as long as I live.”

I laughed, but it was short-lived. I reluctantly examined the nest of ants we’d uncovered living in my floor. “Any chance you’re an exterminator too?”

“No such luck, but we’ll handle it.”

“Together,” I reminded him, and I felt hope blossoming in the place of dread.





# Ben

THERE WAS A KNOCK at the front door. Shane's voice echoed down the stairs. "Can you get that? I'm not dressed."

Uuuuugh, I really wish he hadn't told me that. "Got it," I called back, heading for the door, brushing off my hands on my jeans.

I tried very hard to expel the image of Shane naked from my mind, or I would be answering the door with a hard-on. I'd seen him in all sorts of undress, but not the one I was craving the most, and my imagination had been working overtime trying to fill in the gaps. No matter how creative I was, there was no doubt the real thing would be a million times better.

Pulling open the door, I found myself face to face with a tall alpha with tawny skin and lean muscle cording his forearms, exposed where he'd rolled up his sleeves. "Hey, you must be Roman," I said, holding out my hand in greeting.

"Yeah, and you're Ben?" He accepted my hand, squeezing it just a bit harder than necessary. Alphas often found my large

size a little intimidating and tried to compensate by posturing. I was used to it.

“Nice to meet you. I appreciate you coming by on such short notice.”

“Not a problem at all. I was in the neighborhood anyway.” Roman was a friend of a friend, which was how a lot of our business was often passed on. Word of mouth and recommendations among colleagues. Finding an insect infestation in an old house like this wasn’t uncommon, so tradespeople likely often dialed his number. “Care to show me the problem?”

I led him upstairs, but before we could get far, Shane came out of his bedroom, straightening his shirt, his hair extra tangled. “Oh! Are you the exterminator? My name’s Shane. I’m seriously so glad you’re here. I barely slept a wink last night, imagining there were ants crawling all over me, eating me alive.”

Roman’s body language changed, and I could almost see the swagger descending over him. His eyes lit up in interest as he took in the omega. “I’m Roman, and it’s absolutely my pleasure,” he drawled. “Anything I can do to help you sleep at night.” His voice had gone down an octave, and it sounded like he was offering extra *services* for no added cost. When he shook Shane’s hand, he didn’t let go straight away, his touch lingering.

A flare of possessiveness flared in my chest, and I found my fists clenched of their own accord. I was not an aggressive guy

by any means, but maybe that was only because I'd never had anyone to fight for. When Shane's lips flatlined and his gaze flicked to mine, I could've sworn it was a wordless plea for help. Without hesitation, I stepped over beside him, placed my hand on his lower back, and staked a claim, even when I had no right to it. Shane inched into my side, peeking up at me, and even though there hadn't been anything declared between us, Roman got the drift.

Roman released Shane's hand and stepped back, clearing his throat. "Right. Ben, why don't you show me that nest."

"For sure," I said, smoothing my metaphorical ruffled feathers. "Shane, you can get to work if you want. I'll take care of this."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep, absolutely." I knew he was stressing over his deadlines, with all these unexpected mishaps throwing off his schedule. Besides, I wanted some distance between him and Roman, or I wouldn't be able to concentrate.

Shane thanked me, placing a hand on my arm and giving a gentle squeeze, and I watched him head back to his room where he'd set up his desk. Then I led Roman to the scene of the most recent disaster.

"Yep, you guys have got carpenter ants. They can make a real mess of your structure." I didn't correct him when he lumped me in with Shane, saying *you guys*. It felt good to be tied to him like that. "How long have you two been together?" Roman asked casually, not making eye contact as he leaned

closer to check out the extent of the damage, his poking setting the ants on the defensive.

I didn't answer him, because honestly, what was I supposed to say? We weren't together but admitting that didn't feel quite accurate. There was something there between us, and to deny it felt wrong.

Roman saved me the trouble of coming up with an answer. "Never mind, it's none of my business. Sorry if I overstepped my boundaries there. I didn't know."

"It's all good," I told him, rolling my shoulders to work out the tension. "A good man is hard to find."

"And a hard man is good to find," he said, chuckling, making me blush as I thought about Shane... hard.

He rose up to standing and finally turned to me. "They're persistent pests, but we should be able to get rid of them with some diatomaceous earth. It's a powder I put down, and as they walk through it, it essentially causes them to become dehydrated. It'll start to work within a day or two."

"Oh. So no fogging under a big tent or anything? They don't need to leave for a couple days?" Damn. I'd hoped I would have an excuse to bring Shane back to my bed. Guilt followed behind the disappointment; I should be glad they wouldn't be uprooted more than necessary.

"Nah, it'll be quick and painless."

He should speak for himself. I was feeling plenty of pain, and the only cure was Shane.

I let Roman get to work. He put on some protective white coveralls, gloves, goggles, and a mask, then he headed up to the nest to get started. Meanwhile, I headed back to my electrical work. It almost felt weird to make progress on the job I'd been hired to do. And if I was being honest, I'd been glad to drag out the job for as long as I could. Hopefully there would be more delays, to prolong the torture I felt at being so close to Shane all day.

When Roman was finished, I made sure to show him out, and I paid him myself. Shane would want to pay me back, but I could at the very least lie about how much it cost.

Shortly before four in the afternoon, the front door opened, and it sounded like a stampede of elephants came in. Turned out to be just one six-year-old, though.

“Hey, little man,” I greeted him, holding my hand up for a high five. “Where’s your grandpa?”

Kit leaped up to smack my hand. “Gramps dropped me off and went to the store. He told me to come straight inside. Did you bring Dmitri?” This kid changed gears faster than I could keep up.

“No, not today, but maybe I could bring him with me later this week, as long as your dad is okay with it.” I would wait until the ant poison was cleaned up. I didn’t want to risk my cat getting into it.

“Hey, Papa! Can I have a snack?” he yelled in his dad’s general direction.

Shane didn't answer, probably because he hadn't heard his son's bellowing from the other side of the house. Kit filled his lungs to shout again, but I put a hand on the top of his head. "You know, your dad's been busy working all day, but I'm sure I can manage a snack. What do you like?"

His eyes lit up, like this was the opportunity he'd been waiting for. "Um, my dad always gives me cotton candy after school. And, uh, a chocolate bar and a can of pop."

I knew a scam when I heard one. "Oh, I see," I said, nodding, playing along. "That certainly does sound delicious. Let me see what we have in the kitchen." I headed down the hall, Kit skipping along behind me. I pulled open the fridge and rifled through. "Hmm, looks like we're fresh out of cotton candy." I emerged with a head of broccoli and grabbed a can of kidney beans from the cupboard. "This is as close as we get, I'm afraid."

"Not broccoli," he groaned, slapping a hand over his face. "Fine, I guess a peanut butter and jelly sandwich will just have to do." He sighed dramatically.

"A wise decision," I agreed, putting the beans and broccoli back where I found them.

While I made Kit a sandwich, he chatted away about his friend Terry at school and how he brought olives and stinky cheese for lunch. Kit seemed kind of sickly fascinated by the bizarre food.

"We all have different tastes," I told him, passing him the plate. "And you'll never know what you're going to like if you

don't try it. Maybe you would be surprised to find you like them too." I went back to the fridge and found a jar of sliced olives. I fished one out with a fork and put it on the edge of his plate. "What do you think, should you try one?"

His face scrunched up in thought, and he bent down and sniffed it. "Ehhhh, I might taste it," he said warily, but the fact he hadn't outright shot down the idea seemed like a win in my books.

He took his plate and headed down the hall, probably going up to his room. He passed his dad coming the other direction. "Hi, Papa. Gramps went to the construction store for paint, and I asked Ben to make me cotton candy, but he didn't do it."

Shane stood there blinking after him for a second. "Um, okay?" Then he turned back to me, his eyes wide. He whispered, "Was that an olive on his plate?"

"Yep." I grinned wide. "I made you a sandwich too. I noticed you skipped lunch, and I figured you would be hungry."

"Wow," he said softly, rubbing at his chest over his heart. "That was really... thank you." He seemed to be getting choked up. I hadn't known the small gesture would be taken so seriously.

"Hey, it's just a sandwich. It was no trouble."

I held out his plate for him, and when he took it, our fingers brushed, setting off a trail of goosebumps up my arm. I expected him to pull away, but he didn't. "It's more than a sandwich," he murmured, stepping closer, both of us still

holding the plate between us. He tipped his chin up, his warm gaze glistening. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. You really saved me, saved all of us.”

“I-I couldn’t walk away from you,” I told him truthfully. “I won’t. Not until I see that you’re all okay.” I slid my finger over his in a sensual caress, and his breath stuttered.

“And what if we’re never okay?”

“Then I guess you’re stuck with me.” I leaned closer, his lips beckoning. This was it, I was going to kiss him. I could almost taste him. Moving my free hand to his waist, I squeezed gently, aching to draw him in, but the damn plate was in the way. I moved it aside, and he let me. Hooking my arm around behind him, I could finally bring him flush against me, warm and solid, soft and pliable.

I was seconds away from finally making him mine, when a tumbling of footsteps came thundering down the stairs. “Hey, Papa! Guess what!” Kit shouted before he’d even gotten into the room.

We leaped apart, and my heart was slamming against my ribs. Shane laughed shakily, rubbing his hand down his face. “What, buddy?” he asked.

“I like olives!” Kit shouted as he launched himself into the room, striking a power pose, hands on hips. “Can I have some more, please?”

“Sure, of course. Good for you for trying something new.”



When it became clear that our time alone was at an end, I made my way back to where I'd begun work patching up the living room ceiling, now that the wiring was finished. I looked back over my shoulder once and caught Shane's eye. He bit his lip, and it was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

*Oh, my little omega. There's no getting rid of me now.*



# Shane

“TIME FOR BED, BUDDY,” I said, pulling back the blanket, and Kit launched himself onto the mattress, flopping around like a fish out of water until I threw the blanket over him and tucked him in, pinning him down.

“Can we read?” he asked sweetly. “Please?”

My heart melted. In a world increasingly dominated by screens, I loved that he enjoyed books. “Of course. I will never say no to that. What do you want to read tonight?”

“Hmm...” He tapped his chin in an exaggerated way, and I knew he already had something in mind. “How about... your comic!”

I barked out a surprised laugh. “You want to read my comic?”

He nodded and clapped his hands, his curls flopping. “Yeah!”

“Okay,” I said, getting up from the edge of the bed and going to grab some of my more recent work. “But you have to read

some of the words too, deal?”

“Deal,” he said.

I came back with a stack of papers. The outlines and lettering were done, but I hadn’t added color yet. I would do that once I’d transferred it to my tablet. “Here, how about this one?” I asked, my lips tugging up into a smile.

“Hey! That’s me!” he squealed. “And is that Dmitri?”

“Sure is.” That particular strip didn’t have any words to read, but I knew he would love it. It told the story about their adventures together, a child’s imagination turning a living room camping trip into a safari, and Dmitri from housecat to wild panther as they prowled the backyard jungle. Kit traced his finger along the cat’s back, as though he were actually petting the cat.

When he was finished with that one, I passed him another, and Kit giggled. It was our playtime in the flooded yard, turning a disaster into a joy. “This was fun. We should do it again!”

“Um, let’s not. Next time we’ll just set up an inflatable pool, I think.” Our front yard was still a total mess from where the city’s crew had just dumped all the dirt back into the hole. I’d take care of it eventually, but it wasn’t a priority just yet.

“Ben looks silly,” Kit said, pointing to where I’d drawn him doing a belly flop in the puddle.

I smiled softly. “He sure does.” But in my mind, I thought he looked perfect. He was smiling, but more importantly, he’d

made me smile that day—and every other day. In fact, I'd done more smiling these past weeks than I had in the past two years combined.

Our new house, with all its disasters, had inspired me to draw this series of comics, taking all our shenanigans and turning them into something I could laugh at. It was time to admit, though, that it wasn't the house that had inspired me—it was Ben.

By the time we'd made it through the small stack of comics I brought, Kit's voice was drifting off, his head lolling against my shoulder. "All right, monkey, time for lights out," I said, moving off the bed and smoothing back his curls to plant a kiss on his forehead.

"I'm not a monkey," he slurred, nestling down into the pillow, his eyes closed. "Ben calls me a little man."

Kit's words sank into my mind and my heart, and I stood there watching my son sleep for a minute, contemplating what they meant to me. Some adults were awkward around kids, not knowing how they should act. Or sometimes they would speak down to them, but Ben never did. He'd been making him snacks and talking to him about his day, literally getting down to his level and rolling in the mud with him. While I had been busy trying to stop myself from falling apart, I hadn't noticed how Kit and Ben had been forming a bond, and it was as effortless as breathing.

I clicked off the light and made my way downstairs. I met my dad in the living room and dropped my comics on the

coffee table, sinking down into the couch with a weary sigh.

Dad nudged me with his elbow. “Hey, check this out.” He reached up and twisted the switch on the lamp, and it turned on. Then he turned it off and back on again. “Did you see? Want me to do it again?”

I laughed. “No, I think I got it, thanks.”

“I just want to make sure you realize the progress being made. Ben’s been working really hard.”

“I know,” I said softly. “And that’s not all. I’ve been doing some math with my bank account, and the numbers don’t add up. He hasn’t been cashing the checks I’ve given him.”

Dad quirked his lips, nodding. “Gee, I wonder why he would do that...” he said, leading me toward a conclusion I’d already considered.

There was something going on between me and Ben, like maybe we’d been forming a bond of our own, but I was scared to examine it too closely.

My dad leaned forward and picked up the sheets from the coffee table, sorting through them. “These are really good.” He flipped to a picture I’d drawn of Ben hauling me out of the hole through the floor, exaggerated for comedic effect, of course. “You should give him a cape, I think. Like a superhero, for the number of times he’s saved our asses.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed, chuckling.

Once he’d planted the seed, there was no stopping it from blooming. I grabbed my sketchpad and began outlining Ben

from memory, his broad chest and thick thighs, his wide shoulders, adding a hint of his chest hair at the neckline of his spandex suit. There wasn't a single thing about him that was narrow or trim, and I loved every inch of him. When he put his hands on me, it made me feel so fragile, but I trusted him entirely not to hurt me.

Since you never saw Superman with messy hair, I drew Ben's hair in a gelled swoop across his forehead. And then, as instructed, I added a cape, flapping behind him in an imaginary breeze.

Dad leaned over my shoulder, watching. "You have a skill, Son," he said. "I wish more people could see what you can do."

His praise made me feel warm. "Thanks, Dad. I don't know that there's much of a market for handyman superhero comics, though."

"It's not all you can draw," he said simply.

It was true. I didn't have much time to spend on my more serious artwork, but maybe it was time to consider making the time. Maybe I could sell a few pieces to make a little extra money, or even take commission for portraits.

I would draw Ben all day for free, though. That was all for me.

Ben's superhero took shape before our very eyes. I added some shading by smudging the pencil with my pinkie finger. Ben's tights left *too much* to the imagination, in my opinion,

but with my father watching, I stopped myself from adding the outline of his cock. Dad and I were close, but we weren't *that* close.

I spent some time adding details to his face. I loved this part, bringing a character to life; the curve of his lips in a coy smirk, the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed. The hollow at the base of his neck that I yearned to taste.

Dad was quiet for a while, and when he finally spoke, it wasn't to say anything about my artwork. It was much more personal. "You shouldn't feel guilty for how he makes you feel."

My hand paused mid-stroke, pencil hovering over the paper. "I don't. I mean, he doesn't make me feel—" Dad blew a raspberry, and I laughed. "Okay, he might make me feel something."

"I know. I'd have to be blind not to see the longing looks you two give each other. You should hurry up and make a pass at him before he finishes the job and moves on."

"Right..." I said slowly, spinning my wedding band around my ring finger. "I think Embry would've liked him. Don't you?"

I looked over at my dad, and he smiled at me, offering me love and support in our shared grief. "Yeah, he would've." He rubbed my back. "I've thought about moving on myself, you know."



That surprised me, but I didn't know why I hadn't asked him about it sooner. "Oh yeah?" I asked coyly. "Anyone special in your life?"

He waved me off, rolling his eyes. "No, but your pops didn't want me to grow old alone. And Embry wouldn't have wanted that for you either."

I nodded absently, still fingering the ring. I hadn't taken it off since I said *I do*. It was tied to my husband, but he couldn't walk this path with me anymore.

"It's time, Shane."

The ring was a symbol of my first love, but taking it off didn't mean it never happened. Nothing could erase those memories. Embry lived in my heart and always would. He lived in our son.

I wiped away the tears that had begun to blur my vision, then slid the ring off my finger. "It's time," I agreed.

Time to live again, and time to love again.



# Ben

ONCE I HAD THE living room patched up and the ants were dead, I made good progress on swapping out the old knob-and-tube wiring for a safer modern upgrade. I was tempted to drag my feet, putting off the final touches to delay moving on, but that wouldn't be fair to any of us. For one, I still needed an income in order to pay my bills, and if I wasn't going to cash Shane's checks, then I would have to go back to work elsewhere. More importantly, though, Shane and his family deserved to have their house put back in order. They deserved peace and quiet and movie nights and homecooked meals eaten around a dining room table. They deserved it all, and they wouldn't get it until I was packed up and out the door.

The day was wrapping up. I'd finished the wiring on the main floor, so now I just had the upstairs to get to. I lumbered up the stairs as quietly as I could in my heavy boots. I suspected Shane was working. I hadn't seen him all day. I hoped he wasn't avoiding me, but after the near kiss last week, I wouldn't have blamed him. He probably regretted it, though

my only regret was not claiming him when I had the chance, before I started to second-guess myself.

Shane's office door was open, the room empty. Same with the bathroom and his bedroom, where I lingered at the doorway, breathing in his sweet scent. His room was modest, just a dresser and a bed covered in a navy-blue bedspread. He'd been spending all his time and energy on everyone else, saving none for himself.

I heard a sound coming from across the hall. I moved down and peeked in the next doorway, and I found Shane on his knees, paintbrush in hand.

"Wow," I said, stunned.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, then put the paintbrush aside and stood up, inspecting his hands for paint. "Does it look okay?"

"Okay? No, it looks way better than okay. Phenomenal. Mind-blowing!" Shane had painted a dinosaur—well, a dinosaur's foot, anyway. It looked like it might've been a life-sized T-Rex foot, its leg extending upward and disappearing at the ceiling, almost as if it had stepped straight down through the roof and landed in Kit's bedroom.

Shane tensed up, as he so often did when faced with compliments, but I could tell he appreciated it. While he must've known he'd done an amazing job, he needed to hear it from someone else. "You think Kit will like it? I mean, I'm sure he'll get bored of dinosaurs soon enough, but I can always paint over it."

“He’ll love it,” I assured him, walking closer to inspect the detail. It looked like he’d layered multiple browns and greens, maybe using a sponge to add texture. “It really is awesome. I may not be as into dinosaurs as Kit is, but even I would love a mural like this in my room.”

He tilted his head to look at me and narrowed his eyes. “Oh? I could do that, if you’d like. It would be the least I can do after everything you’ve done for us.” His lips, which had been tipped in a smirk a second ago, now drooped, and his whole expression turned serious. “I’m not joking. If there’s anything I can do to repay your kindness, just say the word. Anything within my power, it’s yours.”

His eyes were tearing up, and I felt an instinctive panic at the sight. I much preferred when he smiled. “Hey, it’s okay.”

He sniffed, shaking his head, and it set a tear trickling down his cheek. He dashed it away with the back of his hand. “No, it’s not okay. I want to thank you, but words just don’t seem like enough.”

I shrugged bashfully, heat crawling up my neck. “It’s my job. You don’t need to thank me.”

He huffed a laugh. “A job implies you get paid for it, and I happen to know you haven’t cashed the checks I gave you. So, if it’s not a job... then what is it?”

I didn’t know how to answer him, because I wasn’t sure what it was either, but it certainly wasn’t a job, he was right about that. Not when I craved him like this.

He shifted closer, angling himself to try to catch my gaze. “Ben? Maybe you just haven’t had a chance to get to the bank?”

Shuffling awkwardly, I looked down at my feet. “Y-you’re not just a customer,” I finally admitted, and when I managed to drag my eyes up, his orbs were blazing with emotion, his cheeks still wet.

“Then what am I to you?” He seemed to be pleading with me, and I felt the urge to pour my heart out to him. To tell him that I dreamed of him every night, about how I couldn’t wait to show up at his doorstep every morning, eager to see his smile, because it was the only thing that got me through the day. I needed to be close to him, even if he wasn’t ready for anything more.

But I didn’t say any of those things. Instead, I reached up and brushed away his tears with my thumb. His breath hitched at the contact. I left my hand there a moment, the barest rasp of whiskers against my palm. I was close enough I could almost taste him, his second cup of coffee I knew was still lingering on his tongue.

This was uncertain ground. It would be too easy to lose my footing; I was used to being stable, and I couldn’t afford even one misstep around him. Otherwise, I might take him down with me.

My fingers slipped down as I prepared to step back, but before I could pull away, he reached up and caught my hand in his. When my eyes darted over, entranced by the way he laced

his fingers in mine, I noticed one distinct feature—or rather, a lack of one. His ring... he was no longer wearing his wedding band.

It was such a shock! I wasn't expecting this, not today, maybe not even this year—or *ever*. My mind reeled. What did this mean? Was he ready? Ready to move on, ready to be with me? It left such a distinct ache coursing through my body, my heart thundering. Did it mean he wanted me to make a move?

He dragged our joined hands down the column of his throat, his pulse thrumming under my touch, and I saw the way his skin pebbled, raised in goosebumps. Lower still, Shane brought my hand across his chest, his stomach, the waistband of his jeans... My cock hardened, straining against the confines of my pants.

There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted him. Not just physically, but for keeps. But what did Shane want? Was he just looking to let off some steam? Or was this something more? I mean, he had his son to consider. Was I ready to be a father? Because if this turned into a relationship, that was what I would become. There was this whole potential future opening up in front of me, as not just a lover but a husband and a father. And I had to admit, the way it set my heart racing, it scared me. Not because I didn't want it or because I didn't think I could handle it, but because *I did!* And there was still a vulnerability echoing in Shane's eyes.

Maybe he only *thought* he was ready...

I groaned, overwhelmed with need, my mind swirling with what-ifs and my body drawn to his, but I dug deep and forced myself to take a step back, slipping my hand away from his. He looked hurt, the corners of his eyes pinching.

“Don’t think that I don’t want...” I sighed, trying to put my thoughts into words. “Give it time.”

Shane seemed relieved when it was clear how much I wanted him. “How much time?” he asked, his mouth pulling up in a smirk. “I’m not known for my patience.”

I laughed, scrubbing a hand over the back of my neck. Now I had this image of him in my bed, naked and needy, begging me to take him. Gods, I was going to hell. I cleared my throat. “I just want you to be certain. Because once we start something, I don’t know that I’ll be able to stop.” It was dangerous to admit even that much.

Our gazes locked, and his pupils dilated, swallowing the bronze irises in black. His throat bobbed with a gulp, and his tongue swiped across his lip once, slowly. Oh, how I wished I could see what images he was painting in his mind in this moment.

“How do you know I’m not ready now?” he asked, tilting his chin up defiantly, and it almost sounded like a challenge.

“Are you?” Regardless of the future I wanted, I knew I would take anything he was willing to give, even if it was only a single hour, because I was a greedy alpha when it came to him.



There was a good chance he would jump me right here and now, caution be damned, and part of me desperately hoped he did. I was holding on by a thread. But this wasn't a fling to me, it wasn't some temporary one-night fuck, so I appreciated that he stopped himself; that meant he wanted this to be more than just sex too.

He bit down on his lower lip, his brow scrunched in contemplation. Then, moving slowly, as if he were scared to spook a wild animal, he leaned up onto his tippytoes and brushed the softest of kisses against my lips. It was too gentle, too innocent, not even a swipe of tongues. It hardly counted at all, more like a ghost of a kiss. With the exception of our lips, our bodies did not touch. My fingers itched to grab him, to pull him close, and I clenched my fists, stopping myself from reaching for him.

“Soon,” he promised, his whisper fanning over my face.

But would it be soon enough?

I was terrified. With the job soon coming to a close, I could feel a final farewell looming just out of sight, though it was obvious neither of us was ready for it to end. The problem was that neither of us knew how to make it *begin*, either.



# Shane

THE HOUSE WAS ALMOST done. The walls were once again plastered, and there were no holes in the ceiling. The shower ran without issue, and the lights all turned on and off, with no risk of starting a fire. Ben had done everything he could to get us to this point, and now it was my turn. I could handle the painting like a pro—heck, even Kit was helping with that part of it, enthusiastically running a paint roller over the bottom third of the walls—but now it was time to tackle the part I dreaded most. The furniture.

I had the pieces of Kit's new bedframe spread out across the floor, organized by size, but no matter how I stared at the instructions in my hand, I couldn't understand how they would come together to make a bed.

"I don't think this is even in English," I grumbled, feeling my blood pressure rising. I flipped the booklet upside down to see if it made more sense that way. It didn't. "What, am I supposed to just figure it out based on these vague pictures of what each step should look like? How does that help?" There

was an obnoxious little cartoon character in the top corner, and I glared at his stupid cartoon grin. Why was he so happy? Probably because he didn't have to figure out these fucking instructions.

Putting furniture together had always been Embry's job. I would run to the store, and by the time I got back, he'd have it all done. He certainly made it seem easier than it was. This was by far worse than crumbling plaster, and yes, even than an insect infestation.

My jaw ached from gritting my teeth. These were the worst moments, when I felt an Embry-shaped hole in my life, and I had no idea how to fill it. The edges of the hole weren't as jagged as they used to be, the wound less tender, but I knew it would always be there. He was such a huge part of my life. We'd known each other since high school, and he was my first love. Heck, he was my first *everything*. First kiss, first lover. I never imagined there would be a *second* person to experience firsts with.

With eyes burning, I blew out a breath. I could do this. Crawling across the floor, I grabbed one plank that was the corner bedpost—maybe—and one that would run across the footboard—probably—and then I held them together like they were in the picture, and... nothing happened. I wanted to think I was a relatively smart guy, and I knew there needed to be some kind of bracket or screw that would connect these pieces, but the picture made zero sense. There were arrows and dotted lines that represented some kind of action.

Just as I was growling out my frustration, prepared to launch the boards across the room, Kit hopped through the door, humming a tune he'd learned in school. "Hey, Papa! What are you doing?"

I huffed out a breath through my nose, forcing myself to loosen my white-knuckled grip on the wood. "I'm building you a bed, buddy." The lightness in my voice sounded stilted.

"Really? It doesn't look like a bed," he said.

"Tell me about it," I grumbled under my breath.

"Can I help?" he asked, totally oblivious to the tension in my body. He flopped down on the floor, crisscross applesauce, and started grabbing the pieces and moving them from their careful placement.

"Um, I don't know..." I wanted to be the kind of parent who said yes, but seeing him scatter the wood made a panicky feeling descend over my brain. Just when I thought I was making some progress... Oh, who was I kidding?! There was no progress! A sharp pain began to pulse behind my right eye, the precursor of a migraine, and I pinched the bridge of my nose and clenched my eyes shut, trying to regain some measure of control.

Kit's little fingers felt cool and slightly sticky on my hand where he patted me. "Are you okay, Papa?" he whispered. "Should I get Gramps?"

"No, it's okay, bud. I'm fine. I just need to get a drink of water. I'll be right back." As I unfolded my legs and got up off

the floor, I almost told him not to touch anything, but what was the point? I could be missing half the pieces and it wouldn't make a lick of difference.

In the bathroom, I splashed some water over my face and tried to get some perspective. It was just a bed, and I was 99% sure it was inanimate and wasn't out to get me. I didn't need to launch into some personal vendetta against it (although there was a good chance wars had been started over flat-pack furniture). I popped a couple painkillers against the throbbing headache, then rolled my shoulders and braced myself to get back to it, this time with a more relaxed *c'est-la-vie* mentality. I'd had enough breakdowns over the past few years. I didn't need Kit to see me cry over something so mundane.

Except, as I was walking back down the hall to Kit's room, I heard voices. Ben's deep rumble had a way of doing things to me—my heart soaring, my stomach fluttering. My pace increased until I was nearly jogging. I came around the corner and found Ben, his wide shoulders hunched, on the floor next to Kit, pointing to the instructions.

“See if you can find a piece that looks like this,” he said, and Kit jumped up and spun in circles a few times, eyes scanning the floor.

“Here it is!” he yipped in excitement, snatching up a short plank. “Now what?”

“What do you think we need to do with it?” Ben asked, tapping the picture.

Kit's cute face scrunched up, and after a moment, he guessed, "Attach it to that one with that little wooden peg?"

"You got it!" Ben cheered, ruffling his curls. "So, let's do that. I'll hold the pieces together while you use the Allen key."

My son giggled. "The key's name is Allen? That's silly." I leaned against the doorframe, watching them, and something settled in my chest. This. This was what had been missing. For the past three years, I'd been juggling too much—my career, parenting, cooking and cleaning. As a single dad, I was playing the role of both parents, and I was doing it all half-assed because there was only so much of me to go around. Everything was a struggle, and there was no end in sight. Until now. As I watched Kit get some quality one-on-one time with Ben, I felt the pieces click together. Ben didn't look anything like Embry, but seeing the two of them, it was like watching Kit with his father, and my heart melted.

This whole time, I'd been holding back. Part of me had believed that trying to keep Ben in my life was a selfish desire, but in this moment, I realized it wasn't just for me. He made *all* our lives better. He was kind and patient, smart and goofy. He was perfect.

"And if this is a key, where's the lock?" Ben asked Kit, holding up the weirdly shaped tool. "Is it here?" he asked, pretending to unlock Kit's ear. This set Kit off again, his laugh filling the room. Ben noticed me from the corner of his eye and gave me a wink, filling me with a new kind of warmth, something far less innocent.

I moved closer and sat down beside him, my arm brushing his. “What are you still doing here? I thought you went home.”

“I forgot something...” he said cryptically, peeking at me shyly.

“Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

“You,” he said softly, while Kit was distracted sorting the nuts and bolts into little piles. “I couldn’t leave without saying goodbye.” His brown eyes were warm and deep, radiating with comfort and contentment. He felt like home to me, just as much as this house did.

I’d told him I would be ready soon, but I was done waiting. “Why don’t you stay for dinner?” I asked.

“Really?” He seemed hesitant to accept the offer. Even now, he was trying to give me time and space to make my decision about us.

I brushed my fingertips over his knuckles. “Let me rephrase that. Stay for dinner,” I said more firmly, and it made him grin, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Mm, so bossy. Well, when you put it that way,” he said. “Okay. I’ll stay.”

My breath left my lungs when Kit launched himself at me, and I barely caught myself from being bowled over. I felt Ben’s hand on my back, keeping me upright. “Papa! Did you see what I made?” He held up the two pieces now attached together.



“I do see. You’ve officially made more progress than I did for the last half-hour.” I turned Kit around so he was sitting in the crook of my crossed legs. “What’s the next step?”

Ben held up the instructions for Kit. “Let’s see...” Then he turned to me. “Do you want to help?” he asked, and I shook my head sharply, pulling a face.

“Please, gods, no,” I said emphatically. “I make a better spectator, trust me.”

He wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. “Phew! I was worried we would have to share the job. Putting together furniture is my most favorite thing in the world.” He had to be exaggerating.

“Are you serious?”

“Oh yeah, it’s just like Lego! This is my happy place. You’ve just given me the best gift ever. Right, Kit?”

“Yeah!” my son shouted, giving him a high-five.

For the next twenty minutes, I sat back and watched them build a bed, and it was nothing short of magic. There was zero stress, only joy. Ben did the heavy lifting, and he was there to supervise in case anything went wrong, but he really let Kit take point. I truly believed if my husband had lived, this was the kind of father he would’ve been. Patient and caring.

I smiled softly. This time, when I felt Embry’s presence, I found it didn’t hurt so much.



# Ben

“THIS WAS DELICIOUS,” I said earnestly, wiping the corner of my mouth with the paper towel that served as a napkin. “I really appreciate the invite. I was just planning on having frozen pizza tonight. Your homemade pasta sauce is way better.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Zack said, smiling warmly at me. “It’s been nice having the company.”

Zack was sitting across from me, which was a good thing, because that meant he didn’t have a direct line of sight to what was going on under the table. Shane was sitting to my right, and all through dinner, I kept feeling his knee bump mine. At first, I thought it was an accident, due to the limited space around the table, but now, he’d made it more than clear that it very, *very* intentional.

That was his hand creeping up the inside of my thigh under cover of the table. His touch was light at first but soon turned searching. It took all my self-control to keep my expression neutral and my moans contained. My pants were getting a little

tight, and I hoped I wouldn't have to stand up anytime soon, or it might get embarrassing.

Poor Kit was practically wilting into his plate, his eyelids drooping and chin dipping toward his chest. It was past his bedtime, but he had insisted on staying up. He didn't want to miss a thing.

Shane's hand retreated, leaving me cold and missing his touch. "I'd better get Kit to bed," he said, pushing back his chair. "It's been a long day."

Zack waved his hand to indicate that Shane should sit back down. "I'll get him," he said. "You entertain our guest." His eyes twinkled, and there was a smirk pulling at his mouth. "I probably won't be back for at least twenty minutes." He pulled out Kit's chair. "Come on, dearest. Time for bed."

Kit whined some half-hearted complaints but was otherwise willing. He was too tired to mount much of an argument. He dragged his feet all the way to the stairs.

Shane turned those blazing eyes on me. "Alone at last," he said, his voice husky.

Zack had said twenty minutes, but that didn't leave us much time. The question was: what were we going to do with that time? I started stacking the plates and cutlery.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked, his brow furrowed in confusion and maybe a little disappointment.

"Whoever cooks, the other cleans. That's the rule." I headed to the kitchen with the dirty dishes and put them in the sink.

When I turned on the tap, it gave a loud squeak, but I was glad to see there was no problem with the flow of water. I added some soap, the sink quickly filling with bubbles.

Shane followed me in and placed a hand on my arm, the heat of him absorbing straight to my core. “We should let those soak,” he said firmly, turning off the tap and taking my hand. I let him tug me out of the room.

This was a whole new side of Shane, and I liked it. He was bold and assertive, taking control of the situation. I didn’t want to rush him or push too hard, and this took the uncertainty I was feeling out of my hands.

“Do you want a drink?” he offered.

“No, I’m okay.”

“You’re not... thirsty?” There was a teasing lilt to the question, and he smirked at me over his shoulder.

My heart began to beat harder. “Oh, I’m parched, all right,” I told him honestly, my eyes roaming down his body, settling on his tight ass. Gods, I could drink from him for days if he’d let me.

We’d arrived at the couch, and Shane turned around and gave me a little nudge to sit. I lowered onto the couch, feeling the pinch of my pants as it crowded my hardening cock. Even though there was an entire couch to sit in, he settled himself down next to me, close enough that our bodies were in contact all the way from knee to shoulder.

Shane turned to me, and his expression was pleading. “Ben...” he whispered, and that one word was filled with such longing. He tangled his fingers in the front of my shirt, dragging me closer.

As my lips came down on his, I felt an intense sense of relief. I sighed against his mouth, reaching for him and hooking an arm around his waist to bring him closer, but it didn't feel like enough. I wanted more. There was an explosion of emotions between us, desperation and weeks of pent-up need coming to a head. It was everything I'd ever dreamed it would be and more.

Our first kiss had been so faint, barely there. This... was not that.

Shane attacked me with a desperate need. There was nothing gentle about this kiss, nothing innocent. He opened his mouth, and I delved inside with my tongue, groaning. The little sounds he made turned me on like nothing ever had. And the way he clung to me like he needed me more than air to live, it made my head spin.

Things quickly got out of control. Shane weighed nothing as I picked him up and dragged him onto my lap, and he instinctively brought his leg around to straddle me. He moved against me like he was riding my cock, and the friction it caused had me fully thickening.

“Oh, fuck,” I panted, kneading his ass. His pants felt damp, and I drew his shirt up so I could slide one hand down the back of his pants, teasing a finger along his slick crack.

Shane jerked his hips, whimpering, before grinding his erection against mine, already searching for release. I tangled my free hand into those unruly curls that drove me wild, holding his head in place so I could thoroughly explore his mouth with my tongue, taking broad sweeps. I would dream about his taste every night from now into eternity.

“Ben, I want you,” he said through panting breath. He reached between us and rubbed his palm over my crotch. “Holy shit,” he gasped, pulling back to stare down in awe as he traced the outline of my shaft all the way to the tip. I loved the shining lust in his eyes as he took in my size.

“Like what you see?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

He nodded, licking along his bottom lip, and I couldn’t stop myself from biting that lip. I needed him closer, but there was too much clothing in the way. While I pulled his torso flush with mine, I slid my hand deeper inside his pants until I felt his puckered entrance, quivering under my touch. The angle was horrible, his pants too tight to do more than insert a single fingertip, but given another minute, I could’ve brought him to a climax like this.

Unfortunately, that was the moment we heard footsteps on the stairs.

Groaning, we broke apart, and Shane scrambled off my lap and settled back on the sofa beside me. Zack was obviously walking slower than usual, with a heavier step to make sure

we heard him. While I appreciated the warning, I really could've used another minute or two alone with Shane instead.

I quickly sucked the slick from my finger, wishing I had more time to savor the musky flavor. With my clothing tugged back into place, hair smoothed down, I looked over at Shane and laughed. There was no fixing his hair, and his lips were swollen, cheeks red from being abraded by my beard. "Oh, dear. Maybe I should shave," I suggested under my breath, dragging my thumb across his raw skin.

"Don't you dare," he hissed. "I want to feel you on my thighs." Holy fucking gods, that image.

Zack strolled into the living room, a knowing smile on his face. "Hey, kids. What do you think, should we put on a movie?" He was torturing me on purpose.

"Dad, please," Shane scolded, covering his eyes in embarrassment. It was like we were a couple of teenagers being caught by his dad. "Don't make me regret inviting you to live with us."

Tugging my pants to give myself a little extra room in the crotch, I got up of the couch. "I'd love to join you for that movie, but I'm afraid I have an early morning. I should really get going."

"Do you have to go? You could stay..." Shane whispered. There was no doubt what he was offering, and Zack looked pointedly away, pretending he wasn't listening.



Oh, the look in Shane's eyes, it was nearly enough to change my mind. I bit back a groan. "I wish I could, but I have to get back to feed Dmitri." That and masturbate for an hour or two to the memory of Shane's eager murmurs.

He got up too and followed me to the front door. "Maybe next time you could bring your cat with you," he suggested, smirking. "You know, for Kit. He would love that."

"That is the best idea I've ever heard."

We'd reached the door, and I pulled him in for one last lingering kiss. I meant for it to be sweet and chaste, but as his tongue teased at the seam of my lips, it deepened, drawing me in. I would be more than happy to drown in his man.

With reluctance, steeling my resolve, I pulled away. "Tomorrow," I said, a promise. "I'll be back to fix that squeaky kitchen faucet."

He laughed and took a step back, as if he needed the distance to stop himself from reaching for me again. "Tomorrow then."

And the next day, and the day after that... I would gladly take a lifetime of tomorrows.



# Shane

I TOOK KIT TO school, then drove my dad to a flea market across town. I wanted to make extra sure that the house was empty today, with no chance of being interrupted or overheard. I was filled with a giddy flutter of excitement. I hadn't felt this way since high school when I first started seeing Embry. The infatuation, the adrenaline, the need. I felt like I would burst if I didn't see Ben right this instant.

My foot pressed heavily on the gas pedal on the way home. I knew it was ridiculous to speed, because he wouldn't be there yet. After more than a month of working on my house, he knew my routine, and he was never there before nine. And yet, I wasn't surprised when I saw his truck parked in the driveway, and I found him leaning up against the porch railing, waiting for me. When he saw my car pull up, his grin widened, like he couldn't possibly contain his excitement either.

I didn't run to him, though I sure felt like it. I forced myself to walk casually up the sidewalk, my shaking hands tucked

into my pockets. “You’re early,” I noted. “Hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

He shrugged. “Oh, you know, only like twenty minutes.” He laughed. “Would you think less of me if I told you I was too excited to wait at home?”

“No, I’m just glad to see you.” I felt shy in the light of day, and I tried to recall the feel of him between my thighs, his rigid cock against my palm. Last night I’d been bold, and that feeling had been heady, like a drug. And I wanted to feel that powerful sense of control again.

As I got closer, I could feel his warmth, and my body gravitated toward him, but I somehow managed to keep some kind of calm, instead of climbing him like a tree like my aching hole begged me to. I inserted my key in the lock, opening the door, and he crowded me, his bulk a steady presence at my back. “Faster,” he whispered, somewhere between a purr and a growl, “or I’m going to take you right here on this porch.”

My breath shivered past my lips in a gasp. I nearly dropped the keys in my haste, my fingers fumbling and clumsy. Finally, I managed to get the door open, and we stumbled through. As soon as we were clear of the doorway, Ben kicked the door closed and hooked his arm around my waist, pressing me back against the wall. His lips came down onto mine, and my semi turned into a full-blown hard-on.

“Aren’t you here to fix the squeaky faucet?” I teased, though if he made any attempt to let go of me now, I would stop him

so fast.

He pulled away just enough so that I could see the twinkle in his eye. “Is that what you want, Shane? Or is there some other more urgent task... maybe a leak...” Those deep eyes of his trailed lower, as if he could see how slick he made me. He was right; I had sprung a serious leak.

I nodded frantically, then I grabbed his hand and practically ran up the stairs, dragging him to my bedroom. Only halfway down the hall, before we could even get to the doorway, he pulled me up into his arms, carrying me the final distance to the bed.

While Ben was all barrel chest and shotgun arms, he handled me like I was fragile, cradled carefully against his chest. He laid me out on the bed, then straightened, gazing down at me with tenderness. “Are you sure?” he whispered. “I don’t mind if you’re not ready. We can take it slow.”

“Gods, Ben,” I panted, reaching for him. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

With that confirmation out of the way, he descended on me, kneeling on the bed beside me. With a new wave of desperation, we tore at each other’s clothes, buttons popping, zippers drawn down, fabric strewn in all directions. I wanted to feel every inch of his body, bare. My breath became ragged as I took him in. He had thick chest hair, trailing down into a treasure trail, almost like an arrow directing my attention to the rock-hard staff standing at attention between his legs. My

mouth flooded with saliva at the sight. I'd felt it last night, thick and long, but I wasn't prepared to see it in person.

"I-I don't know if I can take all that," I stuttered, feeling a tendril of doubt sneak in. "It's been a while." I tried to laugh it off, but my chuckle was shaky and belied my fear.

With a finger under my chin, he tipped my face up until I was looking him in the eye. "I'll go slow, I promise. And if anything hurts, just tell me and I'll stop right away. Okay?"

"I trust you," I told him, and I did, truly. He had done nothing but take care of me since the first minute I met him, and I knew this would be no different. I laid back on the bed and bent my knees, spreading my legs to invite him in.

His eyes zeroed in on my core, and I could imagine what he saw. My cheeks were slippery with slick, likely glistening in the sunlight from the window. Ben placed his hands gently on my knees, coaxing them wider, before sliding his calloused palms down the inside of my thighs, making my balls draw up.

"Oh, Shane, you are so beautiful," he praised. "I am one lucky, *lucky* man." He said this as he lowered his face to my aching dick, and as he took a swipe of his tongue from root to tip, his beard tickled a path as his chin followed in its wake.

That beard! I was right to tell him not to shave. As he lavished attention on me, his whiskers added a whole new level of sensation. He sheathed me into his hot mouth, pumping just once, twice, his tongue massaging along the vein on my shaft, before he drew away, his saliva cooling my flesh. It was a mere tease, leaving me whimpering.

“Shh,” he soothed. “I promise I won’t leave you unsatisfied, but I don’t want you to come yet. I want to be inside you when you explode.”

True enough, holding off an orgasm was going to be difficult, when faced with his skilled touch. His mouth wasn’t finished with me yet, and he drew a line with his tongue down over my balls, skating past my taint, before probing at my slick hole. We both moaned at the same time, his sound of pleasure vibrating through me. “You taste so good,” he groaned. He rimmed me for a few moments, before I felt the pad of his finger join in.

Ben moved at a snail’s pace, working at me with one finger, before sliding a second in, scissoring his fingers to stretch my entrance. With each pulse of his fingers, I edged closer to the precipice. By the time he’d worked up to a third finger, rolling his wrist, I was panting and shuddering. “Ben, I need you. Please,” I begged, grasping at his hair and tugging.

He chuckled but withdrew his fingers, leaving me empty and wanting. “So demanding,” he teased, but he obliged, moving to hover over me in a plank, hands on either side of my body, holding his weight off me.

He got up on his knees, then with one hand at the base of his shaft, he lined himself up with my ass. Even with all the work he’d done at stretching me, when he eased the thick head of his cock inside me, I gasped, loving the sting. My eyes rolled back in my head as he moved in small, slow thrusts, each one working him deeper into my channel.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and when I didn’t answer, he stalled his movements. “Shane?”

I peeled open my eyes and realized I was fisting the blanket in my fists. “I am so much better than okay,” I gritted out, just barely holding off my climax. “Don’t you dare stop.”

With his worry assuaged, he bit down on his lip and surged forward, bringing himself fully inside me. Sweat dotted his brow as he brought our bodies flush together, fitting together like lock and key. He hit a spot so deep inside me that I saw stars. On his next thrust, I arched my hips to draw him further inside me, hooking my legs behind his back, my heels digging into his ass.

“Too good,” I muttered, clinging to him. “Gods, Ben! I’m going to—“ Instead of slowing down or stopping to prolong our session, he increased his pace, slamming into me. With head thrown back, I cried out, my thick stream of cum arcing across my torso, all the way up to my shoulder.

Ben groaned and leaned down, licking the cum from my skin where he could reach it. “Next time, I want your whole load in my mouth.” If he kept this up, I would be ready for round two in record time. With his cock still buried in my ass, I was already hardening again.

He gripped the pillow in one fist, and I knew he was trying to be careful with me, holding back. “Harder,” I urged.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said through gritted teeth.



“You won’t.” Our gazes locked, and he must’ve seen the certainty in my eyes, because in response, he drove into me hard, and I moaned in the back of my throat. “Yesss,” I hissed, gripping him and holding on for dear life.

Ben didn’t unleash himself entirely, but he gave deeper, longer strokes, and his pace picked up as he got closer to his own release. My dick, fully hard again, bobbed against my abs with each pump, my balls clenching.

I saw the change that came over his face. “Oh, fuck, Shane. You feel so good.” His hips stuttered, his mouth dropping open on a gasp. I loved watching him come undone. He let out a guttural cry, and I could feel his spasms as he unloaded deep inside me. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, I felt his knot nudging at my entrance, sliding in and expanding, filling me impossibly full. With the added pressure on my prostate, I choked out a curse as it milked a second orgasm from me.

Ben’s arms shook, but he fought to hold himself above me. He tipped to the side, rolling us so that I was draped across his chest, his skin sweat-dampened and sticky with my cum, his knot still locked in my ass. I curled my fingers through his chest hair, and I swore he purred.

“Thank you,” I whispered, feeling suddenly vulnerable.

“For the sex?” he asked, chuckling. “Trust me, the pleasure was all mine.”

“No, not for the sex—although that was perfect. I meant, thank you for being patient with me.” I propped my chin on

my laced hands so I could look up at him. It was hard to say this, but it was important to me that I gave him an out. “It’s okay, you know. I know I come with a lot of baggage, and I would totally understand if you didn’t want to stick around to —“

He cut off my words with a kiss, his tongue making a slow, lazy pass through my mouth. I nearly forgot what I was about to say. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said when he drew back, his eyes hazy. “If you think it’s baggage, then maybe I can help you unpack.”

It was just cheesy enough to make me smile, a warm sense of belonging reaching deep inside me to help fill in all those gaps in my soul.

Ben planted a kiss on each of my cheeks then my forehead, before one final peck on my lips. “Now, first order of business is a shower,” he said. “Then how about I fix that faucet for you.”



# Ben

IT WAS OFFICIAL. THERE was nothing left for me to do at Shane's house, no matter how many tiny little excuses I'd found over the past week, like a loose floorboard or a draft around a window frame. I had even insisted on going furniture shopping with them and using my truck to help transport the big stuff. That didn't mean I wouldn't find other ways to be around Shane, though, and it just so happened that when I woke up this morning and looked out my window, I found the absolute perfect excuse...

An hour later, I was knocking on Shane's front door. "It snowed!" Those were Kit's first words to me when he flung open their door. "Did you see, Ben? Snow!" He was practically vibrating.

I couldn't help but laugh at his enthusiasm, even though we'd only gotten a light dusting of snow. It was barely enough to cover the ground, with the tips of grass still poking through, and it would probably melt before the day was done, but the way his eyes lit up, it was like he'd won the lottery.

“I was wondering what all that fluffy white stuff was,” I teased. “It’s a good thing I happened to find these in my truck.” I passed over a bag, and he took it from me eagerly, stuffing his arm inside.

He frowned, having pulled out a carrot. “What’s this carrot for? Are you staying for supper again?”

“No, silly. That’s not a carrot. Don’t you know a *nose* when you see it?”

It took him a second to think that through, but when he did, his grin was back, wider than ever, showing off the gap from the tooth he’d recently lost. “A snowman!”

“You got it. And there’s also a scarf in there, and some buttons that would be perfect for his eyes.”

Over the top of Kit’s head, I caught Shane’s eye, and he offered me a wistful smile. “What do you say, Kit?” he coaxed his son.

“Thank you!” Kit shouted, jumping over the threshold to wrap his arms around my waist in a giant squeeze. “Will you stay and make it with me?” he asked, tilting his chin up and giving me those puppy-dog eyes. “Pretty please?”

“Of course I will. That’s why I’m here.”

Before I could even blink, Kit was shoving his feet into a pair of boots, but Shane was a pro at managing this kid’s wild energy. He grabbed him by the shoulders and applied the brakes. “Whoa, hold it right there, little man. You’re still in your pajamas. Go get dressed first, then you can play outside.”

Kit groaned. “But Papa...”

“No buts. The faster you move, the faster you can get out there.” Shane gave him a nudge, and Kit kicked off the boots with a dramatic eyeroll.

“Fine, but be ready when I get back,” he commanded, bolting up the stairs, his feet slapping across the hardwood.

As soon as he was out of sight, Shane turned to me, his eyes hungry. “Kiss me quick before he comes back.” I was more than happy to oblige.

With a firm hand on his lower back, I jerked him in until our bodies aligned, kissing him soundly. I would never get enough of this man. I could taste their Saturday morning breakfast on his lips, pancakes or waffles maybe, something with syrup. “Mm, delicious,” I said, licking his lips then sweeping my tongue through his mouth, devouring him. He giggled when I moved to sample his neck, my beard tickling his sensitive skin. The way he squirmed in my arms brought to mind the fresh memories of him moving against me wearing far less clothing than he was now, and just like that, I was no longer thinking about snowmen.

It was over too soon. Lucky for us, Kit wasn’t anywhere close to quiet, so we heard him coming back with plenty of time to put distance between us, though I still ached to tangle my fingers in Shane’s curls, to dig into the flesh of his ass. Today was going to be a lesson in self-control.

Before I left yesterday, Shane and I had agreed that it was too soon to tell Kit about our budding relationship. While I

didn't foresee anything going wrong between us, there was always a slim chance that we wouldn't work out. And when a child was a part of the equation, we opted to use a little more caution than we might have otherwise. There would be no diving in headfirst. We didn't want to risk too much upheaval in Kit's life, and it was too soon for him to start calling me Dad. I was ready to go all-in, though. I was just waiting on Shane to give the word.

"I'm ready!" Kit practically shouted as he shoved his socked feet back into his boots and stuffed his arms into the jacket his dad held up for him. As soon as he was dressed, Kit leaped at me, with total trust that I would catch him. Thankfully, I was prepared.

I threw him over my shoulder, and he flopped like a sack of flour against my back. "All right, let's go," I declared, taking Shane's hand and drawing him outside with a wink, our fingers interlaced. Kit giggled the whole way to the backyard, where there was at least some grass beneath the snow. The front yard disaster could wait until spring.

The backyard wasn't much yet, but it would be next year, I just knew it. There were empty flowerbeds around the outside, with a few trees and shrubs, and the whole thing was fenced, perfect for a dog. I wondered if that was something Shane might consider...

I hauled Kit back over and plopped him down in the middle of the yard. His excitement was contagious, his gap-toothed grin wide and bright. "Okay, little man. Your job, if you should

choose to accept it, is to build a snowman. Show me how it's done."

We all started working on rolling balls of snow, but Kit seemed determined to steal all the snow for himself, so Shane and I slowed down and let him have it. Shane stood up, stretching his back with his arms over his head, and his shirt rode up, my eyes locking straight in on that strip of exposed skin. My mouth watered, and I swallowed thickly, aching to reach out and touch. When I dragged my eyes back to his face, he was wearing a smirk. "Busted," he teased. "You were checking me out."

I inched closer, nudging his shoulder with mine, and lowered my voice to a gravelly whisper. "I can't help it. You're just too damn tempting."

He peeked over at Kit to make sure his back was turned, then Shane swept his fingers past mine, just the barest of touches. Even just that gentle brush of his skin set off a tingling trail of goosebumps all the way up my arm. Shane drew in a deep breath then sighed. "We should..."

"Yeah, take a breather," I agreed, and we both stepped back, using the distance to clear our heads. "You know," I said, trying to occupy my thoughts with anything not sex, "I was just thinking how this backyard could really be something. In the spring, once the snow melts, maybe I could build a little play structure back here. Just a slide and a swing, maybe some monkey bars. You know, so Kit can work off some of that excess energy, maybe invite a friend over to play."



Shane was quiet, so I turned to look at him, and he was gazing up at me with a surprised expression. “You’re planning to be around next year?” He seemed nervous to ask, but the hope he felt was written all over his face.

“Of course I am. And the next year and the one after that...”

Shane’s eyes softened, glistening, and he took a step closer and reached for me on instinct, stopping himself with his hand hovering halfway between us. He pulled back with a quick glance at Kit to see if he’d noticed. Kit, however, was too busy rolling around his little ball of snow. The ball was getting slowly bigger, but the poor thing looked to be more leaves and sticks than snow. The weather channel said it would be warm and sunny again this afternoon, so the snowman might not live out the day, but we would have a whole winter of snowmen and forts ahead of us.

We hadn’t had much time to discuss the future, but there was no doubt in my mind that we had one. All of us, together.

By lunchtime, we had a miniature snowman. Sort of. The scarf I’d brought was clearly a few sizes too large when compared to the small figure, but Kit didn’t mind. He seemed to think it might keep “Mr. Snowy McSnowpants” from melting, but with the sun beating down on us, I suspected it was a lost cause. The carrot, too, was far too big, so we broke off just the tip and stuck it into his little snowball face.

“Don’t worry, bud,” I told Kit. “Next time, we’ll have even more snow to work with. Mr. McSnowpants version 2.0 will be bigger than I am.”

“Woooooow!” he said with a gasp of awe, his eyes widening. “That’ll take a billion snow. A trillion! No, a *gadzillion!*”

Shane nudged me with his elbow. “Careful what you promise, because you know he’ll never forget you said that.”

“I’m counting on it,” I replied with a giddy grin. Playing outside with Kit had rekindled my own childlike dreams of impossible, silly goals.

The backdoor opened and Zack stuck his head out. “Come on in for some lunch, boys. I made tomato soup and grilled cheese.”

Even though the yard had been covered in snow, beneath the wet top layer was a grassy, muddy base, and Kit had managed to cover himself in all of this. The knees of his pants were drenched through, and his hands were filthy, with blades of grass stuck between his fingers. “Wash up before eating,” Shane told his son. “And maybe change into some dry clothes.”

Kit groaned, flopping his arms at his sides, trying to wipe his hands clean with no success. “But I already got dressed once. Why do I have to do it again?”

I leaned down and whispered in his ear, “This is your chance to get back into your pajamas.” He giggled mischievously and ran inside without another word.

“You’re a bad influence on him,” Shane mock scolded, but he was grinning from ear to ear. Before Shane could follow

Kit inside, I grabbed him and dragged him out of sight of any windows, pressing him against the house.

He was ready and willing to grab one last stolen kiss. He arched into me, tugging at my hair to bring me closer, and I knew this would have to be enough to last me the rest of the day. I pulled back reluctantly, out of breath, and rested my forehead on his, sharing his air.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” I said. “I picked up a job this afternoon on the other side of town.” The sense of responsibility I felt did little to lessen the regret I felt at leaving them.

“It’s okay, I understand.” He cupped my cheeks between his palms and gave me one more soft kiss. “You should come over after he’s asleep.” He drew his bottom lip between his teeth, holding off a devilish smirk.

I longed to sleep the full night with Shane in my arms, but I wasn’t in a rush. The anticipation and sneaking around was kind of hot. “I’ll be here,” I promised. For as long as he would have me.



# Shane

“SHANE? HELLLLLLOOOO, EARTH TO Shane,” my dad called, waving a hand in front of my face. It was clear he’d been trying to get my attention for a while.

“Sorry, what?” My mind had been elsewhere—more specifically, still in bed with Ben. I tapped my pencil on the pad of paper I was currently using to hide the telltale bulge in my pants as I daydreamed about my late-night romps. Ben had been sneaking over almost every night, but last night, we’d dozed off somewhere around 2am and had woken up to the sound of my son in the bathroom. We had rushed around grabbing clothes but were almost caught sneaking Ben out. It would be so much easier if we could just tell Kit about our relationship. But it was too soon... wasn’t it?

Dad cupped his hands around his morning coffee mug, his lips twisted in a smirk. “You seem awfully distracted today. Anything you want to talk about?”

“No,” I said firmly. “You know enough without needing the details.” I couldn’t bring myself to say any of it out loud, not

to my dad. That would just be all kinds of awkward. I couldn't tell him about how the sex was so good that I couldn't think of anything else or that Ben was so big that I could still feel him every time I sat down. And the dreams I'd been having about him were so vivid. Half the time I woke up in a puddle of my own cum. I'd never had to do so much laundry in my life! And now the dreams were creeping into my awake time.

“Whatever you say,” Dad said slyly, sipping from his coffee. “But if you change your mind, I’m always here for you.” I thought that would be the end of it, but as I got back to sketching out next week’s comic strip, I could sense his burning need to know the gossip. Finally, he blurted, “Is he the one?”

I smiled sadly at his choice of words. “I think if we’ve learned anything in our grief, it’s that there isn’t just *one* love. There can’t be. But Ben...” I could feel my smile widening at the mere thought of him. “I think he’s here to stay.”

Dad reached out and squeezed my hand. “I’m so happy for you. So, what’s next? When can we tell Kit? Is Ben going to move in with us?” What he was probably actually wondering was whether we would sell this house, after all the time and effort and money we’d put into it. Dad’s life was tied to my decisions too.

I sighed. “I don’t know, Dad. Those are things we haven’t talked about yet.”

He snorted into his mug. “Yeah, because there isn’t a lot of talking going on. Not when there are better things to do with

your mouths.”

“No, Dad,” I groaned, slapping my hand over my face. “Please don’t go there.”

He wasn’t wrong, though. As soon as Ben and I were in a room alone together, things tended to get very heated, very quickly.

I didn’t mean to compare my current sex life to the one I’d shared with my husband, but it was impossible not to. I’d only had two lovers in my life, so it was only natural. Embry and I had been more than happy with our time in the bedroom. He was passionate and adventurous. Ben, though... he was *voracious*. He had enough stamina to keep going all night, and that lack of sleep was affecting us both.

Hence the daydreaming.

One particular flash of a dream brought heat to my cheeks, and I got the sudden urge to capture it on paper. I flipped the top sheet of my pad over, getting a fresh page. After a few swipes with my pencil, though, I frowned. This was the wrong medium. I needed color. I needed paint.

I tossed the pad across the dining room table and pushed back my chair. “I’ll be back,” I muttered. My dad was used to this and likely recognized the fervent look in my eyes as the muse took hold. He knew better than to disrupt the creative process, so he didn’t say anything as I jogged up the stairs, heading for my office. What I really needed was a studio, though, a creative space where I could sling paint and make a mess. This image in my mind was not something I could

sketch on a small piece of paper or my tablet. I flung open the room's narrow closet and pulled out a blank canvas. I hadn't painted in too long, but the feel of the rough canvas and solid frame felt familiar, comforting.

Kicking open my easel, I propped the canvas up and dragged out my case of paint tubes. The first one I opened, a vibrant cobalt blue, hadn't been sealed properly and had dried out, while the emerald had thickened and gone lumpy. It had been ages since I felt the call of my muse. In fact, I'd barely dipped into my creative well since Embry's death. I'd forgotten how good this felt. It made my heart race, my hands pulling the brush across the canvas in broad strokes as I struggled to keep up with the thoughts in my head.

I was vaguely aware of the passage of time as I created painting after painting. There were things I should've been doing with my time—like finishing my comic strip or catching up with chores—but ignoring the draw to paint wasn't an option right now. I wasn't entirely in control anymore. Dad brought me lunch and a glass of water, offering his silent support. I stopped long enough to eat and drink, take a bathroom break, before starting back up again.

There was nothing exactly sexual about the paintings, they weren't inappropriate, but there was an intimacy I was trying to capture. Clasped hands, a bared throat. They were images from my dreams—and also my reality. And I couldn't paint fast enough.



It wasn't until I heard the sound of the front door slamming and Kit's excited voice that I finally emerged from my fever dream. I lowered my brush and looked around blearily, my eyelids like sandpaper, as if I hadn't blinked in hours.

"Hi, Dad!" Kit shouted at me on his way past the office door.

"Hey, gimme a hug, buddy," I called after him, and he scampered back in to give me the fastest hug ever. "Where are you in a hurry to?" I asked, snagging him by the back of his shirt to hang onto him for a moment longer.

"I was making a drawing in school, and I didn't have time to finish it. Can I go draw, please?"

Who was I to argue with that, since I was in the same frame of mind? "Okay, go on then. I'll call you for supper."

As Kit slipped out, his feet padding down the hall to his room, my dad appeared in the doorway. "You've been busy today. Do you mind if I take a look?"

I waved a hand at the canvases set along the floor to dry. "By all means. Let me know what you think."

He was silent as he examined them first from a distance, and then he leaned in, checking out the details from up close. Finally, he turned and looked at me with an odd sense of wonder, his eyes a bit glassy. "These are... your best work," he said. "Like, *ever*."

The relief I felt had my breath leaving me in a whoosh. "Yeah?"

“Absolutely,” he said, nodding and coming over to me. “Like, gallery good. This might be worth putting together an actual show, if it’s something you think you’d like to do.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, but maybe?” I said, shrugging and rubbing a hand over the back of neck. I couldn’t wrap my head around that yet, it was still too fresh. I needed some time and distance to get perspective. “I was just trying to put my dreams into tangible form, you know?”

Dad chuckled. “If these are your dreams, I’m surprised you ever get out of bed.”

I laughed, my cheeks heating. “What can I say? Maybe I’ve been staying up too late or eating too much cheese before bed. I’ve heard that can cause really vivid dreams.”

“Or maybe you’re...” Dad pinched his lips shut, cutting his thought off midway.

“Maybe I’m what?” I asked, coaxing him to finish the thought.

He tucked his hands into his pockets and drew in a deep breath, his smile wistful. “I was just thinking that I had really vivid dreams when I was pregnant with you...”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I stood there, my mouth gaping as I took in what he was suggesting. Could I be pregnant? Dad didn’t say anything else, just walked out and left me alone with my thoughts, but I heard him leave the house, and when he came back ten minutes later, it was with a

bag from the pharmacy. I took the bag from him wordlessly, without meeting his curious gaze.

While I wanted to take the pregnancy test straight away, I forced myself to wait. I made dinner, chatting with Kit about his day. I cleaned up and did the dishes. And all the while, I simply let the possibility linger in my mind. Pregnant. What would I feel if I was? Fear, excitement, and yes, an obscene amount of joy. Maybe more importantly, I thought about the regret I would feel if I *wasn't* pregnant. I realized my mind was already made up.

At last, when Kit was getting ready for bed, I picked up my phone. I'd missed a few texts from Ben, asking me how my day was, letting me know he was thinking about me. My heart fluttered in my chest like a caged bird. No matter the outcome of this test, I knew it was something I didn't want to do alone. I texted, *Can you come over tonight?*

He replied back mere seconds later: *I thought you'd never ask.* 😊

It was a deep dark outside by the time Ben knocked softly at the front door. I opened it even before he'd lowered his hand, his knuckles still extended in the air. "Hey," he said in that deep baritone, his whole body melting in relief at the sight of me, but then his smile stuttered. "Is something wrong?"

He could read me so well. My chuckle wavered. "That depends on you, I suppose." I passed him the box for the pregnancy test and let him put two and two together.

“Really?” he asked. I nodded, and he said, “Am I allowed to be excited about this?”

“Yes, please,” I whispered, happy tears pooling in my eyes.

He moved through the doorway and swept me up in his arms, closing the door behind him and carrying me upstairs. “We’re in this together. It’ll be okay,” he whispered in my ear.

No, it would be better than okay. It would be great.

Five minutes later, we were staring down at the little window, the plastic stick shaking in my hand as we watched first one line appear... then a second. “Oh, fudge,” I whispered, clutching Ben’s hand in mine, both of us grinning like fools. “I’m pregnant.”

“Is this a good time to tell you I love you?” he asked.

I nodded, tears dripping down my cheeks. “It’s the perfect time. I love you too.”



# Ben

SHANE AND I WAITED by the door for Kit to get ready. The child was struggling to tie his shoes, but he insisted he could do it, and he declared it with such confidence that I had no doubt he could. I figured we were in no hurry, so I left him to it, willing to help if he asked. He stuck his tongue out between his teeth as he concentrated. “Make a loop... the bunny goes around the tree and through the hole...”

Finally, he had something resembling a bow, and he straightened up, a bright smile on his face, so proud of his hard work. “Great job,” I praised, offering him a fist bump.

“Have you decided where we’re going for dinner?” Shane asked his son, holding out Kit’s jacket for him. We had decided that it was time to tell him the good news, so we were making a night of it.

“Pizza,” he said before quickly changing his mind. “No, mac and cheese. No, sushi!”

Shane and I shared a knowing look, before Shane said, “I didn’t know you’ve tried sushi before.”

“I haven’t, but I heard Danny at school talking about it. Papa, what’s sushi?”

“Well, there’s rice...” Shane began, and Kit was nodding.

“I like rice,” he said.

“And there’s fish...” Kit’s bobbling head slowed a little, a pinch between his eyebrows forming. “And seaweed.”

The nodding had stopped entirely and shifted to a side-to-side motion instead. “Never mind. Pizza.”

“Good choice,” I told him. “That’s what I would’ve picked too.” I had nothing against sushi, but who could say no to bread, cheese, and pepperoni?

Zack appeared at the top of the stairs wearing a suit. “Wow, that’s awfully fancy for Tony’s Pizza,” Shane said as his dad came down to join us in the entryway.

Zack wore an expression I’d never seen before, something like smug embarrassment, blushing and avoiding making eye contact. “That’s because I’m not coming to Tony’s with you,” he said simply.

“You’re not?” Shane frowned. This was clearly the first he’d heard of it.

I was surprised he was opting out of this evening’s celebration, since he knew what it was for. We had already told Zack the news last week, and he was beyond excited.

“You guys go on without me, enjoy your family meal,” he said, including me in the family with ease, making my heart ache in gratitude. Then he cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. “I actually have a date.”

Shane’s jaw dropped. “A date?!”

“Yes. His name is Jonathan, and he’s a retired engineer. We met at the flea market a couple months ago, and he is taking me to eat dinner at The Scarlet Hotel tonight.”

Shane crossed his arms over his chest, looking far too protective of his father. Before he could give his dad the third degree, I draped an arm across Shane’s shoulders, tucking him in against my side, and said, “Have a great time, Zack.”

His lips twitched in a smile, and he gave me a nod of gratitude. “Thank you, I will.”

Zack slid past us and out the door, and Shane called after him, “Don’t think I won’t make you tell me all about this so-called date when you get home, mister. And I expect you back before midnight!” His eyes followed Zack as he pulled out of the driveway and down the street. Shane seemed a little unsettled about his dad getting back in the dating game, and I rubbed a hand over his back.

“Are you okay?” I asked him softly as we locked up the house and made our way to the car.

He nodded and smiled sadly. “Yeah, of course, I’m happy for him. It’s just... Life marches on, you know? And I know that’s



a good thing. I'm glad my dad is moving on. It's just a bit weird, is all."

Shane was quiet on the drive to the restaurant, but it wasn't a bad thing. He just had a lot on his mind, and I would be here when he was ready to talk about it. His whole world was changing, after all. He rubbed his stomach lovingly, and when he looked across at me, his smile said everything. We let Kit fill in the silence with his bubbly chatter, and soon, we were parking down the street from the family-friendly restaurant.

Tony's was a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant, with red-and-white checkered plastic tablecloths and paper menus that came with crayons for the kids (or parents) to draw on. Shane had informed me that Tony was no longer around, but the restaurant was now run by his grandson, Duke. As soon as we opened the door, the air washed over me, scented with a warm, yeasty aroma that made my stomach grumble.

We were led to a corner booth, and Kit bounced in, immediately grabbing the blue crayon and starting on the maze on the back of the menu. We ordered drinks, and since Shane's family came all the time, they ordered "the usual," while I ordered myself that pepperoni pizza I'd been dreaming of all day. Before we came in, I could've sworn I was starving, but now, my stomach was doing flips, and I wasn't sure how much of it was hunger and how much was nerves.

Sitting here with Shane and Kit, it made me feel like a part of something. We were building something amazing, and it warmed me all the way through. I clasped Shane's hand,

giving his fingers a reassuring squeeze, and his palm was damp with sweat. We were both nervous about this next step. I didn't think Kit minded me being around, but a new baby? It would probably be okay, but what if it wasn't? If Kit didn't accept me, what then? The possibility made my stomach plummet in a freefall.

“So, Kit, we actually have a special reason for taking you out for dinner tonight,” Shane began. His leg was bouncing under the table, so I placed a hand on his knee to steady him. He loosed a breath and stilled, tightening his grip on my hand. “We wanted to tell you that... well, that Ben and I are...” His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed again and again, before he finally reached for his water glass. “Gods, this is harder than I thought it would be.”

“Are you okay, Papa? You look like you're gonna barf.” Kit's eyes went wide, then he held his paper menu up like a shield. “Not on me, okay?”

“I'm not gonna barf,” Shane said with a shaky laugh. “I'm just nervous, that's all.”

“I get nervous sometimes,” Kit said, patting his dad's hand in an exaggerated way. “Like, when it was my turn for show and tell, and I had to stand up in front of the whooooole class. Do you know what helped me?”

“What?” Shane asked, propping his elbow on the table and covering his mouth to smother his smile.

“I pictured them all holding a kitten, and then it was easy. So picture me holding a kitten,” he said, cupping his hands in

front of him. “Is that better?”

“You’re right, buddy. That’s a huge help,” Shane said. “I’m not nervous anymore, thank you.” While that part was a big fat lie, he cleared his throat again and got on with it anyway, nerves be damned. “So, I’m just going to spit it out. Ben and I are having a baby.”

There was a single beat of silence, where all I could hear was the accordion music being pumped in from the speakers overhead and some clattering of dishes in the kitchen. Then Kit let out a massive whoop, throwing his arms in the air and bouncing in his seat. For a second, I could almost see the imaginary kitten he’d had in his palms being launched up into the air.

Shane jolted in shock at the sudden noise, then jumped into action, shushing Kit and waving an apology to the tables around us where people had turned to see what the commotion was.

“Sorry, Papa, I’m just excited. Does that mean Ben is my new daddy?” Kit’s golden eyes were lit up, and he was so excited he couldn’t possibly sit still through the meal.

“Oh.” Shane’s shoulders relaxed in relief at how easy this was, and he looked to me for confirmation.

I nodded, smiling. “Yeah, bud, that’s exactly what that means,” I told Kit.

“Finally!” he said, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “I thought you guys would never figure it out.” Apparently, he’d

already told his friends at school all about me, so I guessed Shane and I hadn't been quite as discreet as we thought we were.

Kit had more questions—because of course he did. “Is the baby a brother or a sister? How stinky are diapers? I don't have to share my room, do I? Is Ben going to live with us? What about Dmitri, is he my cat now? Do I have to share Dmitri with the baby?”

While we ate pizza and drank milkshakes, we worked through every one of Kit's questions, even the ones we hadn't considered yet. The hardest one was, “Can I name the baby?”

Shane and I had talked a little bit about baby names, but we hadn't decided on anything yet. Letting a six-year-old pick their name, though, was dangerous territory. “Um...” Shane stalled, peeking at me, but all I did was shrug. This was his call. He knew Kit best, so the real question was what kind of kid was he? The type to choose the name of his best friend at school... or was he more likely to name the baby after his favorite Beetlebop? I wasn't sure which name to hope for, Bart, Beebee, or Blaze.

I knew Shane wanted to ensure Kit felt included, but was this a step too far? “Uh, how about we wait until the baby is born,” Shane suggested, buying us some time. “How are we supposed to give them a name when we haven't even met them yet. Right?”

Kit nodded sagely, agreeing. “Yeah, like what if they look like a Storm or Eagle. Or Noodle or Pizza. Ooh! Sushi!”

Shane leaned close to me to murmur, “Better make sure Kit’s not hungry when he’s naming the baby.”

I laughed and then allowed myself to do something I hadn’t been able to do yet. With Kit watching on, I wrapped an arm around Shane and pulled him closer. We’d been so careful to keep our distance in front of Kit, but when I looked over at the boy—my *son*—to see what his reaction was, he was all smiles. It seemed we had his approval.

My heart was full to bursting. I was one lucky man, and I would do everything I could to repay the universe for this gift.



# Shane

“SON OF A—“ I cut off the curse sitting on my tongue with a growl. This godsdamned jacket was too fucking small. Or more likely, my belly was just too big for anything but a toga. Or maybe a circus tent.

“Need some help?” Ben asked, his voice the gentle, soothing tone he’d taken to using around me now that I was in the later stages of my pregnancy. He lightly rested his hands on my shoulders. The way he was acting, you’d almost think I was a ticking time bomb—well, maybe I kind of was. I’d broken down in tears this morning when there wasn’t enough cereal left for a full bowl. I was a tad sensitive these days.

“There’s nothing you can do to help. I’m just fat,” I snapped at him a little waspishly before I could stop myself. I pinched my lips shut and huffed, closing my eyes and breathing through the flood of emotions. When I opened my eyes again, I met Ben’s patient gaze in the mirror. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean that. You’re too good to me. I don’t deserve you,” I told

him honestly, my eyes getting teary as I shifted from anger to guilt.

He shushed me, wrapping an arm around me from behind and pulling me back against his chest, the heat of him soaking into my body through the jacket I'd been trying to squeeze on for the past ten minutes. "Of course you deserve me, Shane. You're the only man for me. It's okay, you're just under a lot of pressure. It's not every day you have an art show at a gallery. Anyone would feel the stress, and you're growing a human being on top of it. It's a lot."

I tipped my head back onto his shoulder and let him comfort me. Ben guided me through a breathing exercise, rocking us gently side to side, and the pounding in my head slowed its incessant pulsing, then finally stopped. I didn't remember the mood swings being this bad when I was pregnant with Kit.

"Good," he whispered. "Now why don't you tell me what's wrong."

"The jacket. It's too small," I said, tugging the sides to prove that they wouldn't meet in the middle over my distended stomach. I narrowed my eyes at his reflection, daring him to tell me the jacket wasn't the problem.

Instead of taking the bait, though, he said, "Want me to fix it for you?"

Raising a skeptical brow, I said, "Don't tell me you're also a tailor."



He laughed. “Well, I could take a pair of scissors and cut down the seam in the back so you can button the front, but I don’t think that’s the kind of help you want. I was more thinking you could borrow one of my jackets instead.”

It was the most obvious solution, short of wrapping myself in a bedsheet, so that was what I did. Even with my round belly, I was swimming in it. It nearly came down to my knees. It reminded me of when my grandmother would buy clothes for me when I was a kid. “They’re wearing them big these days,” she’d say with a laugh, but she really just wanted to make sure I had room to grow into it. Better too big than too small.

“Are you sure I don’t look stupid?” I asked for the umpteenth time as we approached the art gallery’s front doors.

“You always look perfect to me,” Ben replied, like the marvelous man he was.

The art gallery was salvaged and upgraded industrial space, so it had exposed brick walls and a refurbished hardwood floor marked with years of stains. The lighting was new, though, making the large room bright and inviting, and as we walked through the doors, my eyes were drawn immediately to my paintings on display. My breath caught. This whole experience was so surreal. Artists dreamed of this day, but it always seemed to feel just out of reach. There was only a slim margin of chance where “painting for passion” and “painting for paycheck” could overlap.

We got a few weird looks when we walked in the gallery, curious gazes trailing down my outfit, but the gallery owner saw me and swanned over, stopping me from second-guessing myself. “There’s our guest of honor,” he gushed, taking my hand, entirely ignoring the jacket’s awkwardly rolled cuff. “You are just in time. The first guests have begun to arrive.”

“Hi, Dante. Thank you so much for organizing everything. I really appreciate it.”

He shook his head sharply, his face taking on an exaggerated expression of surprise. “Are you kidding? I’m just glad you chose me. You’re going to be big, I can already tell.” I had originally approached them because I’d heard they were looking to fill a gap in their schedule after a last-minute cancellation. Even if they chose me out of desperation, I was grateful for the opportunity.

I had promised myself that I would keep my standards low. If a few people showed up, maybe said some nice things, I would be happy. But as the evening wore on, people started showing up—and I didn’t even know them! *Strangers* came to my art show!

Dante brought people over to introduce them to the artist, and everyone smiled, friendly, praising my skills. It was probably just the alcohol, because of course Dante kept the champagne flowing. The man knew how to throw a party. Waiters navigated the crowd with trays of drinks expertly balanced. The guests were all decked out in gowns and tuxes,

pearls and ties. Now I really felt like a slob in my oversized jacket. I picked at the cuff, trying to disappear in the crowd.

Ben, who was so in tune with my moods, planted himself behind me so I couldn't back straight out the door. He leaned in and whispered in my ear, his whiskers tickling me in that way I loved, "Don't you dare feel self-conscious. You're a fucking star."

"I am not," I said, brushing off his praise and bumping him with my hip, but I could feel the blush taking over my face. It didn't help when Ben snuck his hand under the hem of the jacket, massaging at my hip with his fingers.

That was the other part of the mood swings—along with anger and tears, I was also horny as hell. Like, all the time. I was halfway tempted to drag Ben into the bathroom with me when I heard a familiar voice shout over the subdued hum of the crowd, "Hey, Papa!"

I turned to find Kit zigzagging through the crowd toward us. My dad was following behind him. "Papa! This is so poggers!"

I opened my mouth to answer, but I didn't know what to say. I assumed it was a compliment of some kind, but who knew anymore. Slang was forever changing. "Is that good?" I asked.

"Of course it is. It's the best!"

"Oh, good. Thank you."

Dante joined us, smiling at Kit before turning to look at me. "No, you know what's poggers? Your paintings sold."

I blinked at him owlishly. “What, like one of them?”

His smile widened, all orthodontically straightened teeth. “Nope. I mean *all* of them.”

I nearly choked on air, coughing, and Ben went and grabbed a glass of water from a waiter for me, pressing it into my hand. I sipped and cleared my throat to say, “*All* of them? Are you sure? There must be some mistake.”

“Congratulations, Shane. You’re a star.”

“Told you,” Ben said, his smirk mostly hidden by his beard, but I knew his face almost better than I knew my own. Hell, I’d been sketching and painting every square inch of his body for months.

The night progressed in a sort of dreamlike state. People liked my paintings. Not just liked but loved enough to pay a significant amount of money for them! My bank account was padded in a way I hadn’t seen in a long time. I could pay my dad back the money I borrowed—with interest! Best of all, I finally had some room to breathe.

“You’d better cash those checks now, since I can finally afford to pay you,” I teased Ben, but he just laughed. He and Dmitri had already moved in with us, and we’d set up a joint bank account for our shared expenses, so he could go ahead and cash the checks, but the money would just end up right back where it started.

“Well, kids, it’s getting late,” my dad said, steering a much-subdued Kit by the shoulder. The poor kid was done. “I think

someone's had enough of the art scene for one night. I'll take him home to bed."

"Thanks for watching him, Dad."

"Always my pleasure. Oh, and I almost forgot..." He reached into his pocket and pulled something out, passing it to me. "Why don't you two take the night off. It's my treat."

I stared down at the ornate brass key in my hand. "Dad! The Scarlet Hotel? You don't have to—"

He cut me off. "You deserve it. Both of you do. Take the night, have a little privacy..." He left that statement hanging, eyebrow arched. There was no mistaking what he was implying. Ben and I didn't get a whole lot of alone time these days, and we did our best to be quiet at night, but there was only so much a pillow could do to muffle my moans.

"Thank you," I said again earnestly, giving Dad a big hug, then I said good night to Kit.

Once they were gone, I turned to face Ben. The key felt warm in my hand where I gripped it tightly. "Have we stayed long enough?" I asked, practically panting. The benefit of an oversized coat was that it hid all kinds of things... *hard* things... and it also hid when he palmed his hand over my crotch.

Ben's eyes hardened, his nostrils flaring with restraint. He didn't even bother playing coy. He just blurted, "Yes. Let's go," and grabbed my hand so he could drag me out the door, shouldering his way through the crowd. Dante lifted his glass

in a toast in my direction, winking, but he thankfully didn't try to stop us. It was obvious to everyone that we had somewhere to be.



# Ben

SHANE FELT SO PERFECT like this, cradled in my arms. Warm and safe, his body limp and relaxed. He had the cutest little snore. I was trying to let him sleep, really I was, but the longer I watched him, the harder it was to leave him be.

Though we left the art gallery last night before it got too late, we ran into some construction on the way home and had to go on a long detour, choked with traffic. Then, when we came in through the hotel's front doors, Shane's stomach had started grumbling, loud enough to echo in the high-ceilinged lobby.

He'd wrapped his hands around his stomach to try and muffle the sound and whispered, "I'm sorry," to the guests who'd giggled, loitering outside the lounge.

"That's it, baby needs food," I declared, and Shane hadn't argued. The restaurant was closed for the evening, but the kind gentleman at the front desk remembered me from when I'd been there to repair the elevator, and he promised he'd have some food brought up to our room.



True to his word, a man showed up twenty minutes later with a tray laden with food. It was nothing too fancy, but we weren't picky. After all was said and done, my omega was practically falling asleep at the table in our room, snuggled deep into my jacket like it was a blanket. "But sexy times," he'd whined when I scooped him up and undressed him with care, before tucking him into the plush bed.

"There will be plenty of time in the morning. Thanks to your dad, we don't have any reason to get out of bed... or to keep quiet."

Which brought us to this moment. I woke up spooning around Shane, my hand splayed over his stomach in a protective position that came naturally to me. It was barely morning, with the orange glow of sunrise streaming in through the curtains I forgot to close last night. The light gilded Shane's curls and the curve of his shoulder. I carefully peeled the sheet back so I could see how gorgeous he was in the warm light.

The bed was huge, but it didn't seem to matter because we didn't use more than a quarter of the space. I would always be as close to my man as I could manage. His scent called to me, and even as I nuzzled my nose into the crook of his neck to breathe him in, I tilted my hips to slide my thickening length through his slick crack. I couldn't resist the draw I felt for him.

He murmured in his sleep, wiggling back into me. "Ben..." he whimpered, but his voice had that otherworldly sense to it, and I suspected he was still asleep. I loved that he was with me

even in his sleep, and I decided to make his dreams even better.

Sliding my hand from his stomach, I reached beneath his baby bump to find his dick, already hard and waiting for me, a bead of precum on the tip. I dragged the sticky moisture down over his shaft, pumping in time with the grind of my hips. My other arm was under his head, but if I stretched, I could just barely reach his right nipple, teasing at it with the tip of my finger.

His eyes still closed, Shane began to stir, rocking in time with me, his body on board even before his mind knew what was happening. “Ben,” he groaned, reaching over his shoulder to grip the back of my neck, his fingers entangling in my hair.

I sucked on the soft skin of his neck, tempted to leave a mark, but try explaining hickies to a curious seven-year-old. So instead, I let my whiskers do the teasing. There was no mistake that he was awake now, his breathing ragged and his balls tightening when I cupped them in my palm.

“I was having the best dream...” he whispered huskily, “but then I woke up to something even better.”

Shane’s slick had thoroughly coated my shaft after all the humping, so when I nudged the head of my cock down to his tight entrance, it didn’t take much pressure to breach his hole. He let out a throaty groan as I eased myself deeper inside him, stretching him, filling him. Shane lifted his leg and propped it back over mine, trying to find the right angle.

“There,” he choked out as I came up against his prostate. “Right there.”

I loved his gasps and whispers, but as he buried his face in the pillow to hide any noise, I dug my fingers into his hair and tugged his head back. “No, omega mine, don’t muffle it. Let it all out. I want to hear you scream my name.” I wasn’t sure when we’d have another opportunity to be loud, and I wanted to take full advantage of it.

Habits were hard to break, but I used my mouth and my hands, paired with my cock up his ass, to coax his moans out of him. Little by little, he allowed himself to open up, to relax. Once he realized that nobody was going to interrupt us this morning, it was like a whole new version of him was unleashed. Soon, he had his head thrown back, letting out the most obscene sounds I’d ever heard from him. I could come from those noises alone.

“Ben, I love your thick, hot cock,” he growled, grasping for my hips to try to urge me to move faster, but I was all for taking my time with him. “I want you deeper, harder,” he demanded loudly. “Fill me with your thick cum.”

“Gods, Shane, who knew you had such a filthy mouth.” I chuckled, keeping my agonizingly slow pace and loving how wild it was driving him.

He was writhing on my dick, searching for his release, but every time either of us got close, I backed off, keeping it just out of reach. “You’re such a tease,” he whined, but I knew he loved it. The bed was drenched with his slick, more and more

pouring out with each thrust. The room was perfumed with the stench of sweat and sex, and I wasn't anywhere near done with him. I wondered how many more times I could have him before checkout time.

“Please,” he begged at last. “Please, let me come.”

“Ahh, there's the magic word,” I praised. “All you had to do was ask nicely.” Thank gods he had, because I was just barely hanging on by a thread. Wrapping my arms around him to hold him in place against me, I picked up the pace at long last, driving in and out of his slippery hole until he shouted, “Fuck! Ben! Yes!” and unleashed his climax across the bed.

The tightness in my stomach and balls finally released as I unloaded my seed deep inside his channel, pumping him full and leaving my mark inside him. I shuddered, grunting, as I felt the orgasm all the way down to my toes.

My knot came next, swelling and expanding and making Shane curse. I knew this was his favorite part, being thoroughly claimed by me.

As Shane blew out a long sigh, trying to catch his breath, I kissed the back of his neck and whispered the words I'd been holding onto for months. “Marry me.”

He froze, and for a split second, I worried he was going to turn me down, then he shouted, “What?!” He didn't sound angry, which was good, but I couldn't see his face from here to know what he was thinking. He tried to wrench his body around, but with my knot still locking our bodies in this position and his stomach making twisting around impossible,

he grumbled in annoyance. “You ask me that now? I can’t even look you in the eye while I say yes.”

“You’re saying yes?” I gasped, my heart stuttering before soaring. I had hoped, but I didn’t know for sure how he would feel about getting married a second time. I wouldn’t have blamed him for saying no.

“Of course I am, silly!”

I propped myself up on an elbow and tried to lean over him to get a kiss, but I wasn’t exactly a limber man either, and we both ended up laughing at our pathetic attempts at sideways kisses. “Now I’m wishing I waited two minutes. Sorry, this could’ve been more romantic. I just couldn’t keep it in anymore.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s perfect.” And it was. Nothing about our relationship had been graceful, following set rules and plans, so why should my proposal be any different?

As we held each other, I tried to be patient, but I desperately wanted to get home so we could share the news with the rest of our family, and it seemed that Shane had the same idea, as he said, “I can’t wait to tell Kit.”

“Oh, he already knows,” I told him.

“He does?”

“Of course! I had to ask his permission to marry his dad first, obviously. He is the man of the house, after all.” While that last part wasn’t strictly true, it had been important to me that Kit have a say in what role I got to play in his family, and he

had wholeheartedly embraced me as his dad. He and Zack were currently decorating the house for a celebration.

Shane's body began to tremble, and it took me a moment to realize he was crying. "Are those happy tears?" I asked worriedly, trying to brush away his tears without accidentally poking him in the eye.

"You're amazing," he said through sniffles, wiping his cheeks on the pillowcase. "I can't believe you did that for me. For Kit. You are already such an amazing father."

At long last, my knot loosened enough that he was about to free himself, and with a little effort, I helped him roll over to face me. He cupped my face between his hands and kissed me with the utmost tenderness. "I love you, more than words can ever say. For me, for our son, for our unborn child—you are perfect."

We didn't often speak about Embry, maybe partly because Shane was still hurting or that he didn't want me to feel like I was the runner-up, but it wasn't like that at all. I took a moment to send out a message to the universe for Shane's first husband, wherever he was.

*Thank you, I whispered into the ether. I'll take the best care of your family for you, and I'm forever grateful you entrusted them to me.*



# Shane

THE DOOR WAS CLOSED, and it was driving me nuts. Ben and Kit had been locked in that room for two weeks now, and I had been instructed to keep out. They told me it was a surprise. The thing about surprises, though, was that as much as I loved them, it was only after the reveal that I could appreciate it. Right now, I was in the itchy, need-to-know phase. It was FOMO—fear of missing out—that needled at me. They were having fun without me, but I tried to relax; I knew this bonding time was important for them.

I pressed my ear to the door, listening, but there was nothing obvious to tell me what they were up to. Dmitri sat at my feet and meowed up at me. He wasn't allowed in either, and he was just as curious. "I know, right?" I said to him, bending carefully to rub him behind the ears. I would've picked him up, but he was too heavy for that. I'd been put on light duty, and he was over the weight restriction.

Finally, the curiosity got to me. My entire body felt poised for something to happen, tensed up and jittery. I needed to



know, like an itch I couldn't scratch, and pacing back and forth down this hallway wasn't working for me. I couldn't very well go back to the painting I was working on, not when I was so distracted. I knocked on the door softly, but as promised, I didn't open it. I heard frantic shuffling and whispering, then the door opened no more than an inch, and I looked down to see just one of Kit's eyes peeking through the crack. "What's the secret password?"

"Um... 'peanut butter and jelly sandwiches,'" I said with as much confidence as I could muster.

"Wrong. Guess again." He was toying with me. He hadn't given me a password, and I wasn't entirely convinced that a password even existed. Either way, though, I knew there was no chance that I would be admitted into the room.

But that didn't stop me from trying.

"Is it... 'Ben is a massive tease'?"

"Nuh-uh," he said, doing a poor job of stifling his giggles, and I could hear Ben's rumbly chuckle from the room beyond.

I tapped my chin, pondering what silly words I could come up with, when there was a sudden squeezing sensation in a band across my stomach. When I shifted to try to ease the pressure, I felt a trickle of fluid down my thigh.

Blinking dumbly for a moment, I said, "Is the secret password 'my water just broke'?"

Kit started laughing at the absurdity, but he quickly tapered off in confusion. "I don't get it."

Just a beat later, the door swung open. If I'd been prepared for it, I might've tried to peek into the room, but Ben filled the doorway so thoroughly that I doubted I could've seen a thing.

“The baby?!” he gasped, his eyes a bit wild. “Are you kidding?” Before I could answer, he took in my body position where I was hunched over slightly, an arm curved protectively around my stomach, my pants darkening as they got soaked through. “You're not kidding.”

Ben was immediately spurred into action. He was the man with a plan for every scenario. In his job, he was used to electrical fires and dubious structural integrity. This wasn't anything he couldn't handle. Except while he directed Kit to find his grandfather and ushered me to the bedroom to get changed into some dry clothes, I could see his skin flushing, sweat dotting his forehead.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked him when he crouched down in front of me, peeling my pants off for me with shaking hands.

“Sure,” he choked out. “Why wouldn't I be okay? I should be asking you that.” I realized in this moment one very big difference between us. Having a baby was something I had some experience with, but this was all new for Ben. He was scared, just like I was when I went into labor with Kit.

“Hey,” I said softly, placing a hand under his chin to bring his gaze up to mine. “Everything will be fine. Our bag is packed. Dad will take care of Kit while you drive me to the hospital. There's lots of time.”

He nodded, his brown eyes glossy with a sheen of tears. “Okay.” He drew in a long, slow breath, then he sat up on his knees to kiss me with tenderness. “I just wish I could do this for you.” There was a slight tremor to his lips on mine, but I didn’t mind taking the lead on this. All year, he’d been the one with experience, and now it was my turn.

“Some things I have to manage on my own, but I’ll tell you what. I could really use a hand to hold, someone to rub my back, feed me ice chips. Do you think you can do that for me?”

He seemed relieved to have a job to do, a set of tasks to focus on. “I’ll be the best damn hand-holder, back-rubber, ice-chip-feeder you’ve ever seen.”

“I know you will.” I kissed him once more before standing up and letting him pull up my dry pants. Then we grabbed our birthing bag and headed to the car.

Kit’s excited chanting of, “The baby’s coming! The baby’s coming!” was still echoing in my ears when we arrived at the hospital. He had stood on the porch and waved at us until our car was out of sight. He still hadn’t told us what names he’d chosen for the baby, so while we paced the hallway, waiting for our room to be ready, I distracted Ben from his stress by coming up with the most outlandish name possibilities. “Maybe it will be... Mandrake McGillicuddy.”

He laughed, his shoulders shaking. “Or Blueberry Bubble-bottom.”

“Plucky Ducky,” I said.

And he volleyed back with, “Whammy Woo-woo.”

I made a face. “Maybe we should be grateful if it’s only Blaze.”

“Mr. Howe and Mr... Salmonella? No, sorry, that’s not right. Mr. Staunch...”

“Just Ben is fine,” I answered for him, laughing, until a contraction turned the laugh into a wheeze. Poor kid might end up with an unfortunate name, between Kit’s choice for first name and Ben’s last name. First, though, I had to focus on bringing them into this world.

Labor was not fun—like, at all. Even though it had been seven years since I’d gone through this the first time, as soon as the pain bore down on me, it brought back the memories in stark detail. “Oh yeah,” I moaned. “I remember this.”

Kit’s birth had been long and drawn out, with hours and hours of pushing, but if I was being honest, I hadn’t really been trying very hard. It hurt, dammit, and it was only natural to be scared of the pain. As I got more and more exhausted, they had threatened to do a C-section because they were worried about how long it was taking, but in the end, I finally managed to get it done.

This time, I was determined the birth would be a whole lot faster. Instead of shying away from the pain, I would lean into it. I was going to get this over with as quickly as possible so I could get home to my family. I didn’t want to waste any more time than necessary. If losing Embry had taught me anything, it was to live every moment to the fullest, because we had no

idea how much time any of us had on this earth. We had a life to live, and I was eager to get back to it.

After a long night of slowly progressing contractions, it was finally time to push. With the doctor between my bent knees, I took Ben's hand and sat up, and I let out an almighty bellow. The burning truly set in like a red-hot searing pain, and I was distantly aware of Ben cheering me on, but it was the command inside my own head that I heard: *I can do this. No hours of pushing, no fear. Get to work and bring that baby into this world.*

And that was what I did.

With a rush and a gasp and a reedy cry, our daughter was born, and I collapsed back onto the bed in relief. "I did it," I whispered so softly, almost surprised, but Ben heard me.

"You sure did," he said, kissing my sweaty forehead. His eyes were filled with tears of joy, and they trickled over his beard, making his kisses salty. "Thank you for choosing me. You have made me the luckiest man alive."

The entire experience was night and day when compared to my first child. The nurses didn't coddle or pester us like they had when I was a first-time parent. I guess because I had some experience, they assumed I had it all figured out. I was just grateful for the chance to rest.

I managed to get our daughter latched on to feed, then closed my eyes for a few minutes.

There was a soft knock at the door, and I dragged open my heavy eyelids to see who was here. I must've fallen asleep. My dad was peeking around the doorframe. "Are you decent?" he whispered. "We can come back later if you're sleeping."

"No, come in, please. I want to introduce you to your granddaughter. Where's Kit?"

Dad ducked out and came back a moment later with Kit, who'd been waiting out in the hall. His eyes were wide and his lips pinched tight. Dad probably told him he had to be quiet around the baby, but I could see his excitement in the way he was tugging on the hem of his shirt. He was fighting not to squeal, I just knew it.

"Come here, bud. Come meet your sister, and then maybe you can tell us what her name is."

Kit's grin was all teeth, and he gave a hop, skip, and a jump over to the bed, and Ben lifted him up so he could sit on the edge of the bed and peer into the wrapped bundle in my arms. Kit oh, so carefully reached out one finger before asking, "Can I touch her?"

"Of course you can. Just be gentle."

He stroked the tip of his finger over her little fist, and she opened her hand and grabbed at him in reflex. Kit giggled in surprise, his face filled with joy. "I love her so much," he told me, not taking his eyes off her. Then, he leaned in and placed the softest of kisses on her fingers and whispered, "I love you, Evelyn."

My eyebrows jumped, and I glanced up at Ben who was wearing a similar look of surprise. “Evelyn?” I asked. “Where did that come from?” It was not just a *normal* name, but also kind of lovely.

Kit shrugged. “I had a dream last night about Daddy, and he said it was his mom’s name, and I thought it was pretty.”

I felt a chill skitter down my spine. “I—you’re right,” I said breathlessly. Embry’s mother had died when he was a child, and I hadn’t had the chance to meet her. Kit must’ve heard the name before and remembered it... right? Because a dream message from Embry, that was impossible...

“It’s perfect,” Ben said, placing a kiss on the top of Kit’s head. “Just like you.” He said it to Kit, but he squeezed my hand to let me know that he meant it for me too. For all of us. Our perfect little family. And in some way, I knew that included Embry too, wherever he was.





# Ben

HOME. THIS WAS WHAT I'd been waiting for ever since Shane told me he was pregnant. All of us under one roof, the house I felt like we had built together. A family.

As I took the last turn, heading down our street, I looked in the rear-view mirror at Shane. He had wanted to sit in the back seat next to Evelyn for her first car ride, so I was playing chauffeur. "Everything okay back there?"

"Perfect," he said, gazing back at me with love in his amber eyes. I knew he was in pain, but he was hiding it well. He was stronger than he would ever admit. The doctor had offered us another night in the hospital, but Shane had been eager to get home, and I wasn't about to argue with him.

I pulled into the driveway and came to a stop. "Stay there. I'll come help you," I told him over my shoulder before hopping out and coming around to the back. I offered Shane my hand and helped him ease out of the car.

"Thanks, hun," he grunted, wincing.

He went to pick up the diaper bag, but I beat him to it. “No, I’ve got it. You don’t lift a finger around here this week. Just relax and heal.” He did all the hard work, but this was something I could do to make it easier for him. Once I was sure he was stable on his feet, I propped one knee on the seat and crammed myself through the door to unlatch the car seat from the base. Evelyn was crashed right out, much as she’d been since the minute she was born. It was hard work doing all that growing, and I knew these first weeks would be filled with a lot of eating and sleeping. For now, she was such a tiny thing, so fragile. I could easily cradle her in the crook of one arm. Heck, Dmitri was three times her size at this point. Too soon, though, she would be running all over the house, chasing after her older brother, no doubt.

It was with that thought that I began planning all the babyproofing I needed to do before she started crawling. We would need baby gates for the stairs and plug covers, locks on the cupboard doors, rubber protectors on the corner of every table. And of course, a baby swing added to the playset I put up in the backyard, and maybe a sandbox...

With the car seat in one hand and my other arm tucked around Shane’s waist, we made our way up the porch steps. The front door swung inward, revealing Zack. He’d probably been watching for us from the bay window since we texted him that we were leaving the hospital. “There you guys are. Here, let me take my grandbaby.” He made grabby hands at the car seat.

I passed her over, and he immediately started cooing at her. Oh boy, she was going to be one spoiled princess, I could already tell.

Zack set the car seat down in the entryway so he could undo the buckles, and Dmitri snuck in behind him, sniffing at Evelyn's head. We all watched to see how it went. Zack had brought home a baby blanket from the hospital after their visit yesterday, to help Dmitri get used to the smell, and I'd been told he cuddled up in the blanket and started purring straight away. Yeah, I wasn't worried about the cat accepting the baby at all.

Sure enough, he touched his cold nose to her forehead and gave a little nudge in greeting, before sitting down beside her, content not to leave her side. His size in comparison made her seem even smaller.

"Where's Kit?" Shane asked his dad, holding onto my shoulder as I knelt at his feet to help him remove his shoes.

"Kit's upstairs waiting for you." Zack gave me a knowing glance.

I knew exactly what Kit was waiting for, and it was killing me having to go slow. I was so excited to show Shane what Kit and I had been working on, but it was just as much Kit's surprise as it was mine, and I knew he wanted to be the one to handle the big reveal.

While Zack took baby Evelyn out of the car seat, I helped Shane as he walked tenderly up the stairs. He had the railing clenched in one hand, and I was glad I had replaced the loose

balusters so that it was steady under his grip. I held his other hand, bracing my palm on his lower back, ready to catch him in case he slipped. I'd offered to carry him everywhere, but he insisted that moving around would be good for his healing.

We came around the corner and saw Kit standing guard in front of the super-secret closed door. Shane was electric with anticipation. He'd been dying to see inside the room for weeks. "What are you up to?" he asked Kit suspiciously. "Are you finally done teasing me?"

"Yep! It was so hard to keep the secret, but I was so sneaky. And now it's finally time!" With a jerky flourish, Kit turned the knob and threw open the door at long last, revealing the baby's nursery.

The walls were painted a soft sage green with white trim. One wall had built-in bookshelves we'd constructed ourselves, and there was a crib and a rocking chair that I let Kit pick out at a local furniture shop. Apparently, they were made by a man in town, and the work was exquisite. I certainly couldn't have made anything like it myself. And, of course, the nursery wouldn't have been complete without one of Shane's paintings hanging over the crib.

Shane stepped through the door, his breath catching in his throat as he took it all in with wide eyes. "Oh wow! You guys did all this yourselves?"

Kit was standing in the middle of the room, beaming with pride. "Ben told me I'm his pro—proto—"

"Protégé," I reminded him.

“Yeah! I’m his protégé! It means I’m his helper. He let me paint and use a screwdriver and a hammer and even a drill! I’m gonna be a ‘lectrician like him.”

When Shane turned around, his eyes were overflowing with happy tears. “I can’t believe you did all this. This is so amazing, thank you.”

Kit saw those tears and ran to give his dad a hug, but I had been expecting this and caught him before he could knock Shane over, swinging him up off the ground.

“Whoa there, little man. Remember what we talked about?”

“Oh yeah, gentle,” he said, frowning. “Sorry, Papa. I got too excited and forgot. Can I give a soft hug?”

Shane practically melted, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “Of course you can. You give the best hugs.”

I held Kit up so Shane wouldn’t have to bend over, and he moved his arms around his dad with exaggerated caution. I wanted to get in on this, so I wrapped my arms around them both, sandwiching Kit between us.

“I love you both so much,” Shane gushed, sniffing, before giving Kit a loud kiss on his cheek, and a quick peck for me on my lips. “This was the best surprise ever.”

Zack came into the room behind us with Evelyn. “What do you think of your room, angel?” he whispered to her. “Your big brother made it just for you.” He gave me a wink. I didn’t mind at all if Kit took the full credit for this one. It was a

pretty special gift for his new baby sister, and he really had done a lot of the work. I was just here to supervise.

Even though our lives had majorly shifted that weekend, our routines turned upside down, it was like what we'd all been waiting for. We were suddenly complete.

Later that night, once Kit was asleep, with Dmitri cuddled in under the blankets with him, and Evelyn was swaddled in the basinet in our bedroom, a peaceful quiet descended over the dark house. I helped to ease Shane into bed, and he blew out a long, contented sigh.

“Are you okay?” I asked, crawling in beside him and tucking one of his curls back off his forehead. “Do you need anything? Glass of water or a foot rub?”

He offered me a sleepy smile. “No, thank you, everything is perfect. I was just thinking how much my life has changed in such a short period of time. I honestly thought I was destined to struggle forever. I couldn't have imagined such a future for myself. But then you came along...”

“And everything changed,” I added, kissing the smooth skin of his shoulder. “Trust me, I couldn't have predicted this either. Within a year I went from single alpha to father of two incredible children and a soon-to-be husband. All because of an emergency call to fix an elevator.”

“And a teeny-tiny electrical fire, hardly worth mentioning,” he said, laughing softly.

“Now, what can we possibly imagine will come next?”

He hummed as I clicked off the bedside lamp and assumed my usual position on my back, so that Shane could curl up against me, resting his head on my shoulder. He splayed his hand over my chest and swirled a fingertip through my chest hair as he said, “Maybe Evelyn will become the President... or a scientist who cures cancer... or a wife and mother and give me a dozen grandchildren.”

“And maybe Kit will become an architect and build skyscrapers, since he obviously loves to work with his hands,” I said, and I could almost see it. “How about I make him a little workshop in the basement, so he can hammer and glue bits of wood together to make toys?”

“That’s a great idea.” The movement of Shane’s hand was slowing down, and I knew he was close to falling asleep. “And maybe I’ll become a world-renowned artist and make millions of dollars.” His voice was tapering off, his body going limp.

“And I’ll marry you,” I whispered, kissing his forehead, “and I’ll be the happiest man ever.”

# Epilogue

## THE STAFF

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU agreed to this,” Emily muttered to her boss, Emerson Holland. “They must’ve paid you a small fortune.”

She was referring to the small, flowered archway currently being erected in the middle of the hotel lobby. Emerson didn’t know how to tell her that the guests weren’t actually paying anything extra for the bizarre request, but Ben had instead offered to do free maintenance and repairs on the elevator for the next five years, and that future security was worth more than a quick buck now. The couple was still paying to use the banquet hall for the reception, but the ceremony itself would take place in the spacious lobby.

Instead of explaining any of that, Emerson said, “He swears it will be over in under ten minutes.” He peeked down at his watch. It wasn’t their busiest time of day, but guests were still moving around the obstruction, throwing it curious glances.

“I think it’s romantic,” Roland said, sighing wistfully. “This is where they met, and I heard he proposed in one of the rooms



upstairs, too.” His eyes flicked over to Emerson’s and held his gaze for a long moment. “Don’t you think it’s sweet?”

Emerson’s heart gave a heavy thud, much like it always did when close enough to Roland to inhale his aroma. “Mm,” he grunted, remaining his usual stoic self. “I think a person’s definition of romantic depends on personal experience.”

“Oh?” Roland asked, tilting his body in such a way that his hips angled toward his boss, and Emerson had to fight not to glance down toward his crotch. “And what do you consider romantic?” He looked genuinely interested in the answer. “Candlelit dinner and a walk on the beach?”

When Emerson thought of romance, he couldn’t help but put Roland in the position of recipient. And while there was nothing he wanted more than to wine and dine the omega, he knew that would never be an option for them. Steeling himself, he said carefully, “Well, I don’t think it’s something that can be measured so easily. For example, I believe the true evidence of someone’s feelings can be seen in the sacrifices they make. Sometimes pain is more romantic than pleasure.”

Roland’s expression softened. “You’re probably right, but I think anyone would choose pleasure over pain.” There was so much being left unsaid.

Emerson turned away, feeling dejected. Obviously people would opt for what felt good—unless it was to protect someone they loved, and that was exactly what he was choosing, again and again. He swallowed past the lump in his

throat. He needed to get away, take a breath of air not scented by Roland's sweet musk.

Without another word, the hotel manager stepped away from his curious staff and moved over to the large man in a suit who was supervising the setting up. Ben saw him coming and held up his hands. "We're almost ready. Just five minutes and we'll be out of your hair."

Emerson found himself smiling, the first genuine one he'd offered anyone all day. There was something about this gentle giant that just put him at ease. "No hurry. I just wanted to come over and see if there was anything I could do to help."

"No, I think we're good to go. I'm just waiting for my fiancé. He's getting ready upstairs."

After looking around at the distinct lack of chairs, Emerson asked, "No guests?"

Ben shrugged. "Nah, just Shane's dad and his boyfriend as our best men—oh, and our kids, of course. The rest of our friends and family are already waiting for us in the banquet hall, but we wanted this part to be private. It feels more personal this way." It seemed strange to imagine a wedding in a public space being private, but it somehow made sense to Emerson. Ben chuckled, a warm rich sound. "That and I was pretty sure rows of chairs in the lobby would be a fire hazard."

"You're probably right." Although Emerson still might've done it. There was something special about this wedding, and he felt privileged to be a witness to it. At The Scarlet Hotel, they'd hosted galas, festivals, and charity fundraisers, but

never the actual wedding ceremony, and certainly not in the lobby.

An older couple came over, and Ben introduced them to Emerson as Zack and Jonathan. “Ready, son?” Zack asked, reaching up to clasp Ben’s shoulder.

“More than,” he replied. “Thank you both so much for being here today. We didn’t want to interrupt your travels.”

Jonathan put his arm around Zack’s waist. “Are you kidding? We wouldn’t have missed this day for anything.”

“Not even for a beach in the Caribbean?” Ben asked, one eyebrow arched in skepticism. “Warm sun, soft sand, and unlimited margaritas?”

“Nah, we’ve had our fill of beaches. We’re headed to the cafés of Paris next.”

Emerson had to admit, a tropical beach sounded pretty good right about now. In fact, with all the stress weighing him down, the possibility of running to a far corner of the world to escape his problems sounded awfully tempting—but only if he could take Roland with him.

The elevator dinged, and when the doors opened, Ben’s focus turned toward it, like a magnet’s pull took control of his body. When Emerson turned to look, he saw the groom, wearing an untraditional outfit—a baby strapped to his chest. His older son was at his side, and together, they paused in front of the check-in desk.

“Oh! That’s my cue,” Zack said, hustling over to where he’d set a Bluetooth speaker. Flipping it on, he pressed a button of his phone, and a soft classical piece filled the lobby. As if planned, the hotel’s guests quieted down and turned to watch. The hush descended so that all that could be heard was the music. Goosebumps raised along Emerson’s skin, and he stepped back to join his staff, to give the couple the illusion of privacy.

A path in front of Shane was clear, and he bit his lip nervously, taking in the small audience, but as soon as he locked eyes with Ben, his nerves seemed to melt away. He walked toward him with complete confidence in the future they were about to embark on together.

True to Ben’s word, the ceremony lasted only a few minutes. The justice of the peace gave a short speech, followed by vows whispered so quietly to each other that Emerson couldn’t hear a word, no matter how hard he strained his ears. And then, at long last, the men kissed. He could tell even from here that it was more chaste than they would have liked. There was just a hint of tongue, but with a baby between them and an older child already tugging at his dad’s sleeve, they would have to wait for their moment alone.

They stepped apart but kept in contact, their hands entwined, as the justice of the peace raised their voice and said, “It is my pleasure to introduce you to Mr. and Mr. Howe.”

The few hotel guests might have been complete strangers, but everyone clapped and cheered all the same.

There would be no rice thrown in the lobby, but as the newlywed couple made their way to the banquet hall, Roland snatched a couple of the hotel's mints from a bowl on the desk and tossed them. Their son grinned and caught them one by one, shoving them into his pocket for later.

Emerson waited outside the door, listening to the cheering from their friends and family in the hall. Once it had died down, he snuck in to make sure everything was running smoothly. Or at least that was what he told himself. In reality, he found himself drawn to share in this small snapshot of their lives together. It was something he'd always dreamed of having, but thanks to his family's expectations for what a marriage should be—a negotiating business tactic—Emerson had resolved himself to being a lifelong bachelor. He would be no one's pawn.

*It's better this way, he told himself, all while threading through the crowd and feeding off their overflowing love and happiness. Roland is better off without me. He'll meet a nice alpha and fall in love and get married... and have babies...*

Ignoring the way that thought twisted his insides, Emerson crossed the room to offer his congratulations to the couple. He shook their hands and gave their son an awkward high five. He couldn't remember ever having given someone a high five in his life, but he had to admit, he kind of liked the casual gesture.

The DJ changed the music to something upbeat, and Kit jumped up and down, begging his omega dad to dance with

him. “If I’m not back in five minutes, come save me,” Shane teased, letting his son drag him by the hand, which left Emerson alone with Ben.

“I have to ask,” he said, leaning in and raising his voice to be heard over the music. “I noticed you changed your last name to Howe. Isn’t it a bit unusual for an alpha to take his omega’s name?”

Ben’s thick beard split with a wide, toothy grin. “My husband’s name is important to him. He’s an artist, and he’s known for his name, but it’s more than that. It’s a connection to his first husband who passed, and it’s his son’s last name. I really wanted to share a name with them, though, and my last name was a bit of a mouthful, so I thought, why not? I have to say, I’m looking forward to people being able to pronounce my name.”

Ben’s eyes were focused not on Emerson but across the room on the dancefloor where Shane was now dancing with his dad. When the song shifted to a slower tempo, Ben said, “If you’ll excuse me. They’re playing our song.”

“Of course.” Emerson watched on with a heavy heart. He wanted this, but staying to witness it was like some kind of torture, nothing more than a tease.

When someone approached, nudging his shoulder, he didn’t even need to look to know it was Roland. He would know him anywhere. “Care to dance?” Roland asked shyly, ready for rejection.

Emerson Holland hadn't had a single drop to drink, but with the music tugging at his heartstrings, he found himself extending a hand to Roland. "Sure, why not." He would allow himself this one moment to indulge himself, though he knew it would make keeping his distance that much harder.

They didn't even bother moving to the dancefloor; instead, they stood there off to the side, their chests pressed close, arms around each other. Emerson closed his eyes and imagined they were somewhere else, maybe a restaurant in the Caribbean. Money problems, overbearing fathers, and a failing business were all a world away.

For one perfect moment, they were in love, and nothing could stand in their way.

# About the Author

Trisha Linde spends all her time immersed in books, both reading and writing, mainly because she lives where it's too cold to do anything else, and what better way to keep warm than with a hot book. The first time she read mpreg, it was love at first sight, and there's no turning back now.

When she gets older, she will likely invite strangers over for dinner, and you can bet your ass there will be sequins.

To follow Trisha, you can subscribe to her newsletter here:  
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# Also By Trisha Linde

## **The Scarlet Hotel series:**

Room 404

Room 1016

Room 709

Room 215

Room 307

Room 1212

Room 519

Room 1003

Room 810

Room 908

The Back-up Date (written with Summer Chase)

The Omega Mix-up

An Omega's Wish

Hoarding His Omega

Encore

Chasing Ever After

Role Play

The Noel Before Christmas (written with Harper B. Cole and  
Colbie Dunbar)

Make Me Love You

**The Royal Heat** (written with Lorelei M. Hart and Colbie  
Dunbar)

The Dragon Prince's Daddy

The Dragon Prince's Binding

The Dragon Prince's Crush

The Dragon Prince's Mates

**Once Upon An M/M Romance** (written with Colbie Dunbar)

Bad Apple

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Building Bridges

Odd Man Out

**Fairest of Them All** (written with Harper B. Cole and Colbie  
Dunbar)

Cinders

Red

Seared

Rebel

Slumber

Just Right (written with Lorelei M. Hart)