



Buck
THE
Halls

MURPHY LAWLESS
ZOE CHANT

BUCK THE HALLS
VIRTUE SHIFTERS: BOOK EIGHT



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MURPHY LAWLESS

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Excerpt: Gladiator Bear](#)

[A Note from Zoe Chant](#)

[Also by Zoe Chant & Murphy Lawless](#)

CHAPTER 1



Stacy Carbone was a grinch, and embraced it. At the sound of the first Christmas carol in November, her smile turned upside-down, her heart shriveled up, and she started counting the days until it was all over.

She hadn't always hated Christmas. She'd loved it as a kid, and even through her teens and early twenties. And it wasn't really that she *hated* it. It was just so...relentless. All the shining happy faces, except for when they were sweaty stressed faces. All the noise, which was always *all* the noise: there wasn't another option during the holidays as far as she could tell. All the decision-making and lights and people honking and running into each other at the store and—

And then they told her all about it. The good, the bad, and the ugly. When they sat down in Stacy's chair at her hairdressing shop, she smiled at them in the mirror, asked what they wanted done with their hair and then—because you sort of had to—asked, “So how are you doing?”

And they told her. Lord, how they told her. They told her until all Stacy wanted was to hide under the bed from November through the end of December, except of course everybody wanted to look their best for the holidays, so she couldn't exactly close up shop for two months during the busiest times of the year.

On top of it all, this year she had somehow gotten roped into doing a charity hair cutting event on a Saturday afternoon, the busiest afternoon of a busy week in a busy season.

Well, it hadn't been 'somehow.' Stacy knew exactly how she'd gotten into this situation. Noah Brannigan, a cute little kid whose arrival in Virtue a few years ago had come with a splash of local scandal—nothing to do with

him, obviously, but when he and his mom arrived in town, they'd discovered some shenanigans at the old Brannigan place—anyway, Noah had arrived on her shop's doorstep two weeks earlier, his expression guilefully hopeful as he pitched a fundraising event to her. The huge town square was under redevelopment, and his dream—told in enthusiastic detail—was to have a massive spaceship-pirate-ship-carousel-jungle gym built as part of the redevelopment.

He had decided that the best way to accomplish this was to pitch it to the town council with an architectural plan and a substantial sum raised toward building it. And his stepdad was, if not an architect, at least a carpenter. Puffed up with enthusiasm and seriousness, Noah had laid out blueprints for the playground on Stacy's salon floor and explained how good it would be for Virtue's kids, and how it would, quote, "encourage an outdoors lifestyle and real world friendships in a generation prone to sedentary, indoor games and virtual relationships."

Stacy assumed he hadn't come up with that line—or most of the plan—on his own, but she'd met Noah before, so she wasn't *absolutely* sure of it.

He already had half the businesses around Virtue's town square providing services for his fundraiser. His mom ran a massage therapy place, and people were donating outrageous amounts for fifteen minute chair massages. Stacy had heard the one hour-long back massage Mabs was offering had a current high bid of over three hundred dollars. You could get three and a half hour-long massages for that, normally!

So Noah had explained, sunnily, that all he needed was Stacy's *time*. He'd already found six people—*six*, Ms. Carbone!—who were willing to have their long hair cut for a fundraiser *and* charity. A double-whammy, Noah had said smugly. The long hair could be used for wigs, *and* people were donating money for every inch of hair cut.

Stacy wasn't *that* much of a grinch.

So now it was late Saturday afternoon and she'd cut nearly twelve feet of hair off seven heads. One woman in her forties had cried, and a girl in her late teens had gone from having hair down to her butt to a pixie cut, which Stacy thought was the bravest chop she'd ever done on anyone. That girl had left the salon almost floating, like she'd been weighed down by all that hair and was now free. The others had mostly looked nervous, both coming in and going out. Stacy had said, "Well, it's hair, it's not like a leg, it'll grow back," a lot this afternoon.

Noah burst in as she finished the seventh cut. “Ms. *Carbone*, Ms. *Carbone*! I know there was only going to be seven but I got another guy! He’s got a ginormous family and they’re all gonna give FIVE DOLLARS for every inch of hair he gets cut and his hair is a MILLION MILES LONG, MS. CARBONE! A MILLION! MILES! LONG!”

Even the woman in the salon chair, Molly, grinned, and Stacy had a hard time remembering she was a grinch in the face of the kid’s enthusiasm. He was about eight, she thought, with blue eyes and a mop of brown hair above a freckled nose in an impish face. “A million miles, huh? I’m not sure I can even fit a million miles of hair into my salon, Noah.” She could barely fit all the people who had come in to watch the charity cuts. Who came to watch strangers getting their hair cut? Lots of people, it turned out!

Although Stacy had to admit she’d gotten a lot of new clients from the stunt. A bunch of people had liked the work they’d seen so much that they’d taken her card, and several had made appointments before they even left. The shop was in a lull now, with only Molly’s kids and husband left to watch the last bits of her hair cut, but Stacy supposed there would be another rush with Mr. Million Miles Of Hair coming in.

Noah’s gaze slid around like he was trying to squirm his way out of his exaggerations. “Well maybe not a *million*. But it’s really long! And he’s out there in the square making people give him more money! Us! The fundraiser! More money! He’s, uh, rallying the people!”

Stacy met Molly’s eyes in the mirror and said, “Well, if he’s rallying the people,” with as straight a face as she could manage.

“This I have to see,” Molly said. She got up, and Stacy went with her to the door so they could see what ‘rallying the people’ for a haircut looked like. Her family came to look, too, so for a moment they were all squished in the door and up against the plate glass windows, which Stacy had reluctantly put a small Christmas tree in, because people kept asking where her holiday decorations were. Somebody made a sound of disappointment, and Molly laughed. “I should have expected that.”

Stacy nodded. “Me, too, but somehow I imagined he’d be right in front of the salon.”

“He’s in the bazaar,” Noah said impatiently. “C’mon, I’ll show you!” He rushed out, leaving Stacy, Molly, and Molly’s kids still smooshed in the doors and windows.

From there, it was practically impossible to see a rally. Virtue’s town

square was literal acres in size. The back of one row of the semi-permanent bazaar kiosks and booths that made up the market's boundaries was visible from Stacy's salon, but she certainly couldn't see into its middle to watch a rally. From where they stood, the view was mostly kids playing in snow.

Of course, people came from all over the region to shop at Virtue's bazaar, so obviously the place to rally them was inside it, not out in the square where there wasn't a captive audience. Disappointed but amused at themselves, Stacy and Molly stepped away from the windows. Molly's kids chased after Noah, and her husband, making a faintly alarmed face at his wife, followed them.

Molly called, "It's fine, I'll be out in a minute," after him, then smiled sympathetically at Stacy. "Your hands must be tired. I know you were looking forward to me being the last."

Stacy flexed her hands absently. "Nah, they're strong. I do this all day, after all. You want to sit back down for some hairspray?"

"No, I think I'm going to hurry out there and see what rallying the people looks like." Molly touched her hair a little self-consciously. "And show off a little, I guess. Or maybe hide."

"Honestly, I think shorter hair really suits you. It really frames your face." Which was true. Molly had rather delicate features, and the heavy length of her long hair had almost overwhelmed them. Now, seventeen inches of chopped hair later, a chin-length, movable bob opened up her whole look.

"You have to say that," Molly said dubiously as she got her coat. "You're a hairdresser. You can't really say 'My God, you made a terrible mistake,' to a client."

Stacy coughed on a laugh. "Sometimes it's really hard not to, though. People come in with a picture of hair that's completely different in texture than their own and insist on getting the cut even if you explain why you don't think it'll work. And then some of them get really mad because you were right."

"But it's not like a leg," Molly said wryly. "It'll grow back. That's what you said when I sat down, right?"

The doorbell jingled and Noah bounced in again as Stacy said, "It's true. But also, you really do look great. Doesn't she, Noah?"

Noah, jittering as he waited for Mr. Million Miles Of Hair Man, said, "Uh-huh," absently, then paused, gathered himself, and turned to examine Molly's hair with a childishly critical eye. "It looks *really* nice," he

concluded after a moment. “It makes your eyes and smile look bigger. Everybody’s gonna love it.”

Molly mumbled, “Oh my gawd,” under her breath, and smiled widely at the little boy. “Well, thank you, Noah. I think I feel less nervous now.”

“*And,*” Noah added, taking a notepad—an actual physical paper one, and a pencil—out from his backpack, “*and* you got *seventeen* inches of hair cut, and I have *fifty-eight* people who pledged one dollar for every inch of hair you got cut so that’s *nine hundred and eighty six dollars* all by yourself!”

“Wow.” Stacy and Molly blinked at one another before Stacy said, “Wow, if you’re making a thousand dollars off everybody’s head, Noah, you’re going to have the playground funded in no time!”

Noah glowed with triumph. “It’s gonna be great! Come on, Ms. Jones, let’s go show everybody your new hair!” He grabbed her hand and dragged her, laughing, out of the shop.

For a few seconds it was blissfully silent. Stacy exhaled loudly into the quiet, glad for a moment by herself. She loved her salon, with its checked black and white floor and three of everything: salon chairs, sinks, hairdryers, and a surprising amount of seating for families waiting around. Some days she filled all the chairs herself, working on color for one person and permanent waves for another while cutting a third, but two days a week, other hairdressers rented out her extra chairs. It was a system that had been working pretty well for almost four years now, ever since she moved to Virtue, but once in a while she thought about expanding the business.

Then she remembered how many more people that would mean at Christmas, and decided against it, as she always did. She got the broom, sweeping up the last bits of Molly’s hair and thinking about the day’s haircuts. The girl who’d gotten the pixie cut had been the most fun, but there was always a certain amount of fun in giving someone a really different look. At least, as long as they didn’t cry. Stacy, again, wasn’t *that* much of a grinch.

The door chimed as someone opened it, and she called, “Come on in, I’ll be with you in a second!” as she shook the dustpan into a garbage can. Putting the broom aside, she turned to see Mr. Million Miles Of Hair Man in the door.

It had to be him. He had thick, wavy, *auburn* hair that fell loosely past his shoulders to somewhere around what would be the bra line on a woman. Stacy’s hands suddenly itched to sink into that incredible heavy hair, and her

heart gave an actual pang at the idea of cutting it. He had a slight reddish scruff along his jaw, and huge dark brown eyes that women the world over would kill for.

She swore he actually struck a pose, framed in the doorway like that. Lots of people paused just inside the door, getting their bearings, but Mr. Million Miles Of Hair paused *dramatically*, somehow. He lifted his square-cut jaw just a little, showing it off to his best advantage. His wide shoulders were held just a little farther back than people usually stood, like a superhero, and he seemed to inhale deeply, filling the door with his broad-chested presence.

He was tall, his long, long legs clad in jeans and his weight slightly off center, like he'd paused mid-step just to be admired. It was so blatant Stacy felt she probably shouldn't admire him, but since she wasn't dead, admiration was her only option. He had big chunky brown leather work boots and an equally big chunky brown leather jacket, suitable for the winter weather, over a flannel shirt he wore open above a white t-shirt.

Stacy hoped with every fiber of her soul that he would take the flannel off as well as the coat, when he came to sit down for the haircut. She had a deep, fundamental need to see that t-shirt stretched tight across his chest, and a sudden urge to turn the air conditioning on. She just wasn't sure if it was to cool herself down, or so she could watch his nipples poke against his t-shirt.

She had never had a thought like that before in her entire life.

It was entirely his fault. Standing around posing like that. What did he expect of a red-blooded woman, if he was going to be so blatantly gorgeous? He would just have to live with the consequences.

Noah, whom she had entirely forgotten about, yelled, "Ta-daaaaaaaah!" and splayed his arms to display Mr. Million Miles Of Hair Man. "I *told* you he had a million miles of hair!"

Mr. Million Miles broke his pose and laughed as he stepped all the way into the shop. His laugh was rich and deep and toe-curling. Stacy had ideas about what to do with him in the hairdresser's chair that she had *also* never had thoughts about in her whole entire life. They involved crawling into his lap and being entirely inappropriate.

His voice was as deep as his laugh, all warm and comforting. "Did you? I'm afraid I'll be a disappointment, then. I'm fairly certain I don't have more than a couple of feet of hair at most. Hi." He crossed the salon in a few long strides and offered Stacy his hand. "I'm Keith, and you're..."

CHAPTER 2



*G*orgeous. That was how Keith wanted to end that sentence. The hairdresser was gorgeous. She—Stacy, he knew her name because the salon said *Stacy's Salon* on the window—was short and curvy, with a big handful of jet black hair tied up in a loose knot at the top of her head. Strands fell around her neck and cheeks, framing the most incredible dark brown eyes he'd ever looked into: large, thoughtful, framed with long dark lashes and the slightest smudge of eyeliner that did something to make them even larger and more doe-like.

Doe-like, his stag said in smug delight. **Our doe. Our fated mate.**

The stag was smug, or at least, overly confident, about almost everything. In this particular case, though, Keith knew in his soul that it was right. Stacy of the salon was his fated mate, a dream come true when he hadn't even known he was dreaming.

Although he couldn't help saying, *Female red deer are called hinds, not does*, to his stag.

The stag bristled. *Then why didn't you say her eyes were hind-like?*

Keith, trying not to grin, said, *Because that's not what people say*, and received a glare of confusion mixed with disdain from his stag. Humans were obviously too confusing for the big beast.

That was all right. Maybe it would keep the stag quiet for a while, so he could admire and maybe flirt with Stacy without being interrupted.

Because he thought he could admire her forever. She wore just a touch of makeup besides the eyeliner: rough warm red on kissable lips, and a glow of something golden-pink on her cheeks. Or maybe that was just her natural skin tone, as her arms, bared by her t-shirt, were that same sort of warm gold with

pink undertones. Her biceps were amazing, and she wore one of those slightly glossy aprons that kept hair and wet off hairdressers over her jeans and t-shirt. She was absolutely perfect, and he couldn't wait to know her well enough to tell her that.

He became concerned that he'd been shaking her hand for too long, but he couldn't remember what he'd been saying, so he wasn't sure how to stop.

She rescued him by saying, "Stacy," which reminded him that he'd introduced himself. "And you're Mr. Million Miles Of Hair Man. Noah wasn't wrong. I know this is for charity, but are you *sure* you want to cut that?"

Keith wrinkled his face around a grin. "I'm sure that when I was growing up, I was desperate for a giant playground, and my insane family have all promised five bucks an inch. There are thirty-six of them."

Stacy blinked a few times. "There are...thirty-six more like you? I'm sorry, are you...what? How does anybody even have thirty-six kids?"

"No! No, oh my God!" Keith laughed out loud. "Oh God, no. Sorry, no, I have two brothers and a sister, but I also have my parents and five aunts and uncles and however many cousins that leaves to make thirty-six."

"Twenty-six," Stacy said with a glint of humor. "You have twenty-six cousins who are willing to fork over a hundred dollars to see you get your hair cut?"

"It's a thing," Keith admitted. "I haven't had it cut since I was twelve, see. Trimmed, but not cut."

His stag tossed its head. Keith, unable to stop himself, tossed his own a little bit, shaking his hair back over his shoulders as the stag said, *Stop talking. Let her admire us. You're not standing up straight. How can she admire us if you don't stand up straight? Take a deep breath. Lift your chin. You look like a fawn, all wobbly and ridiculous. How can she admire us if you're ridiculous? You should let me talk to her.*

Stacy, blissfully unaware of the lecture going on inside of Keith's head, visibly tried to collect her jaw. She was adorable, stunned. She was probably adorable at all times. "You haven't had it cut since you were a kid? Oh my God. I'm simultaneously honored and terrified."

You're a deer, Keith reminded his stag. *You can't talk. Be quiet and let me handle this.* He had spent his entire life arguing with the stag, mostly without much success. *It* had spent his entire life posing and making him look like a self-centered, vain twit, and he hadn't had much success stopping that,

either. But it had no comeback for ‘you can’t talk,’ because it couldn’t. “I’ve seen people coming out of here all day with their new haircuts,” Keith said to Stacy. “I trust you.”

He would trust her anyway. He knew instinctively that he could. With everything, including the mane of hair that he was admittedly very protective of.

She said, “If you’re sure,” a little uncertainly, then drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders like she was putting professional armor on. “All right, then. If you’d like to hang your coat up and have a seat?”

“Right! Of course.” Keith shucked his coat, hanging it up. “Should I lose the flannel, too?”

“I’ll be working around your nape, so yes, please.” Stacy smiled nervously at him. “Fewer hairs to get stuck in your collar that way.”

“Oh, in that case, maybe I should just take my shirt off.” Keith couldn’t believe he’d said that out loud, but his stag said, *Yes! Then she can admire us!* with conviction.

Stacy’s cheeks turned a bit more of that golden pink. “It’s, ah. I. Um. I mean. Pro...I kind of wa... But no. Proba...probably not. You’d, ah. You’d probably...stick to the chair?”

Keith mumbled, “I’m so sorry. I don’t know why I said that,” and ignored his stag’s, *So she can admire us!!!* as he hung up his flannel shirt and slunk to the chair.

Stacy breathed, “Oh, my,” as she untucked his hair from between the back of the chair and his own back, and spread it out. “My goodness. You. Wow. Yeah. Okay. Sorry. It’s not very professional to actually drool over a client’s hair. I’ll get hold of myself in a second.”

“No rush.” Keith smiled at her in the mirror, trying not to promise that he would be happy to get hold of her any time, because that was definitely not what she had said. Or suggested. In any way.

She smiled back, and Keith thought his world could stop right then and there. He could live in that moment forever, gazing at his fated mate’s beautiful smile in the mirror. Stacy, however, had other ideas. “All right, in order to know the full length we’re cutting, it’s best if it’s wet. Are you up for a hair wash?”

“I love having my hair washed,” Keith said with absolute sincerity. “Even when I go in for a trim I get them to wash my hair. It’s the best part of going to a salon.”

Or at least it had been, until he walked into *this* salon and found his fated mate. But that was too much to drop on someone he'd met five minutes ago, so he'd settle for beaming at her until the moment was right.

Stacy said, "Okay," briskly, and patted his shoulder. "Over to the sinks, then. Let's get you set up." She tucked a towel around the base of his neck and fussed his hair into the basin after he sat, her fingers strong and certain against his scalp before she fiddled with the water, then ran a trickle over his head. "How's that?"

Stags didn't purr, and Keith briefly regretted not being a cat shifter. "Great. It's perfect. Incredible."

"Good. Man, you've got a lot of hair. So you haven't had it cut since you were a kid? What's that about?"

His eyes had already closed, but he opened them lazily and smiled up at her. "The embarrassing truth is, a girl I had a crush on said I had great hair and should never get it cut, so I haven't. But twenty years is probably long enough to let go of a childhood promise to someone whose name I can't even remember, especially in the name of a charitable cause."

Stacy laughed. "Was she cute?"

"So cute. That said, I don't even remember what she looked like. Dark hair. Big brown eyes. That's about it." It was true, but he probably would have said it anyway, because he wanted Stacy to think she was his type. His eyes drifted shut again as she worked shampoo into his hair, and he was afraid he gurgled. "That feels so good."

"It really is the best part of a haircut," Stacy said with a smile in her voice. "I think it's one of the reasons I became a hairdresser. It's a little tiny luxury for people and we all need that so much right now." The door chimed and she said, "Oh my *God*," in a completely different tone.

Keith, startled, opened his eyes and lifted his head a little, then dropped it back down into the sink's neck cradle with a groan as fifteen or so people poured into the salon. "I mentioned my family, right...?"

"I didn't know they were all coming to watch you get your hair cut!"

Other voices drowned hers out for a moment: *oh my god, he's actually going to do it!* That was his sister. *But his beautifuull haaaaaaaair!* His mom. *It's about time.* His dad and two cousins, more or less all at once, and then a whole bunch of cousins all with some variety of *I can't believe he's doing it*, while his twin brother came to examine him, lying there in the basin. "Big choice, bro."

Stacy made a startled sound. “I thought you said there wasn’t another one of you lying around!”

His twin, Kevin, glanced up and grinned at Stacy. “I was obviously so great the moment I exited the womb, they thought they’d pump out a second one right away. I’m Kevin. Keith’s my little brother.”

“I’m his *twin* brother,” Keith said in exasperation. “He’s thirteen minutes older than I am.”

Anything else they had to say was overrun by the rest of the family crowding around him like he was a of museum display. “C'mon, back off, guys! You’ve all seen somebody get their hair cut before!”

He caught a glimpse of his mother’s tearful face. “But not *you*, sweetie.”

“Oh my God, Mom, it’s hair. I’m not cutting off my arm or getting a tattoo.”

“And jeez, Mom, it just means he’ll look more like me, you know, your beloved, devastatingly handsome older son? Wouldn’t you want that for him?”

“I’m so sorry,” Keith said to Stacy, whose expression was unreadable, at least from where he was upside-down in the sink. “I want to say they’re not always like this, but...they’re always like this. I might be able to make them go away.”

A chorus of protests met the suggestion. Beneath his family’s ruckus, Stacy asked, “Do you want them to leave? Because I can throw them out.”

“I just don’t want them to *bother* you,” Keith said desperately. Part of him did want them to leave, but that was mostly because he wanted to be able to gaze adoringly at Stacy in the mirror without anyone giving him grief. Mostly, he really just didn’t want them to drive her away. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than his fated mate deciding his family was more than any reasonable person could bear, and running away before he even got to know her.

Her fingers flexed against his scalp, a motion that was relaxing, reassuring, and tantalizing all at once. His stag, dreamily, said, *She could rub my horns*, and Keith choked on his own saliva. His eyes watered and he had to sit up, coughing. Stacy pulled her hands back in alarm, then grabbed a towel to keep the wet sopping mass of his hair from completely soaking his t-shirt.

“All of you!” she barked. “Back off! Keith says you can stay if you want to, but you will *sit down and behave yourselves!*”

Silence fell over the salon before his entire family shuffled off to waiting chairs, benches, and, in the case of a couple of his younger cousins, nervously perching in the other two salon chairs. Somebody mumbled, “Sorry,” and a murmur of guilty agreement followed.

Stacy continued glaring at them. “Whether it’s for a charitable cause or not, cutting this much hair is usually a big deal for the person getting their hair cut, and I *will* throw you out if you aren’t kind and polite about it. Does everybody understand?”

As his extended family mumbled their understanding and their apologies again, Keith also understood something: Stacy really was going to be perfect for him.

His stag was overbearing. Keith knew it. He’d never been entirely able to counteract its tendency to strut and gleam and show off. It was so *sure* of itself, and honestly, it didn’t help that Keith was good-looking and that women often admired the apparent confidence that his habit of pose-striking suggested. They were generally less impressed by the fact that he was, at heart, basically a dork who was happier reading books over cups of cocoa than showing off during a night on the town.

*But they **look** at us when we show off,* his stag said happily. *They see how beautiful I am!*

Technically they generally saw how beautiful Keith was, not that he’d use that word himself, but the stag didn’t differentiate. Which it shouldn’t, since they were one and the same, but it still had an awful lot of overwhelming personality and a more than healthy dose of vanity.

Stacy the salon owner could clearly handle overwhelming, and Keith bet she wouldn’t even mind that he was a dork.

“Okay.” Stacy smiled at him. “Let’s finish washing your hair, and do this cut.”

CHAPTER 3



Stacy had never felt less grinch-like in her life. She swore her hands actually *tingled* when she put them in Keith's hair, which was absolutely ridiculous. She'd cut thousands of peoples' hair! Many of them had been men! Cutting another guy's hair was no reason to get cold-fingered and shaky! In fact, that was a terrible idea! Shaky hands gave bad haircuts.

But all that rich soft hair running through her fingers gave her far too many very clear ideas about clenching her hands in it, whether short or long. She had a hankering to give him a shave. She'd never given anything except her own legs a shave. She had images of that one photo shoot with k.d. lang and Cindy Crawford in her mind as inspiration, which was ridiculous, because those pictures predated her by several years, at least.

And yet the basic idea of them seemed *really* great right now. Stacy could just close up the shop, pull down the blinds, and...

...throw Keith's entire family out into the snow, which would be super subtle.

She guessed she should stop drooling and just cut his hair, then.

Sectioning that much hair for donating took some time, though, because it needed to be done right. She glanced in the mirror at his twin brother—somehow he wasn't as good-looking as Keith, and Stacy didn't think it was the hair—and said, "Are we going for a cut like his once the length is gone, or are you thinking of something else?"

Keith's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought of that. What do you think?"

Stacy beckoned Kevin over and made him turn around a few times, modeling his own haircut. He didn't pose as well as Keith did, either. He had some length on top, enough to put a bit of wax into and give his hair some

height. It was a great cut on him, really, and Stacy said so, which made him grin. “Thanks. So you gonna make Keith here into my mini-me?”

“I’m half an inch taller than you.”

“I don’t think so,” Stacy said, trying not to be too amused. “I think we’re going to leave Keith a little more length, because he’s already going to feel naked with two feet less hair.” The idea of Keith naked was appealing. Stacy reminded herself his family was *right there*.

“Two feet, really?” Keith’s eyes widened again.

“A little more than, when it’s wet. Even if I leave enough to shape what you’ve got,” and she did, changing where she’d positioned the ponytails, “you’re going to have—what did you say? Five bucks an inch? Over a hundred dollars from all thirty-five family members.”

“Thirty-six,” he told her with a smile reflected in the mirror. “I’ll put my own money in, too.”

“Noah didn’t need to find seven other people to fund the playground. Your family is going to bankroll it all by yourselves!”

“Worthy cause.” Keith’s smile got a little nervous, just like everybody else’s had. Well, everyone but the teen girl. She had clearly really wanted a haircut for a long time. “Let’s do it before I chicken out, huh?”

“Nah, it’s too late,” Kevin said on his way back to his seat. “She’s already got you in the chair, so you’re just gonna hafta be scared. Deer in headlights and all that.”

Keith gave his brother a dangerous glare in the mirror, then looked at Stacy’s reflection and nodded a little. “Let’s do it.”

Stacy didn’t know who took a sharper breath when she cut the first ponytail, Keith himself or his eagerly watching family. If his mother started to cry, Stacy decided she would kick her out. Fortunately for everybody, no one cried, although Keith’s eyes stayed wide and his grin stayed nervous the whole time. When the length was gone, she ruffled her hands through what was left—a mess, until she cleaned it up—and his grin got a little wild-eyed. “Oh my God. My head doesn’t weigh anything.”

“It’ll take a few days to get used to it. And you’re only going to need a *tiny* amount of shampoo compared to what you’ve been using.” Stacy tucked all the ponytails together into one big one and held it up, eyebrows lifted. “That’s a hell of a chop, if you don’t mind me saying so. A brave one. *Twenty-seven inches.*”

Keith’s twin said, “Holy shit!” as the rest of the family started to groan

and laugh and take out their wallets, pretending to count their money and complaining about breaking the bank. Stacy, though, set the ponytail aside and slid her hands into Keith's much shorter hair again, rubbing her fingertips against his scalp. Under everybody's moaning and groaning, she murmured, "You doing okay? We're gonna get you a Jaime Lannister thing going here, all right? It's gonna look great."

"It's not going to lead to throwing anybody off a tower, right?"

Stacy grinned at his reflection. "Pretty sure that wasn't the haircut. You ready?"

"You know what, I think I am. Work your magic, Ms. Stacy."

"Carbone. If you've got to go with the Ms., it's Ms. Carbone. But Stacy is just fine. Normally," she added, "I'd ask you about your family, what you do, all that kind of thing, but I have a feeling if I do that right now, *they're* going to answer."

"You are extremely correct about that, and also, I kind of wonder if hairdressers wouldn't like to just work in silence for a while and not have to keep up a steady stream of chatter with clients. You don't have to talk, if you don't want to. I trust your hands."

Stacy inhaled deeply, held her breath, and let it out in a sigh. "That is the nicest thing anyone has said to me in at least a week."

"Which part, the trusting your hands, or the not having to talk?"

"Both. But I was thinking of the not having to talk part." She smiled at him again—this guy was like her own personal anti-grinch measure, or something—and got to work shaping the rough cut she'd already given him. It took a while: even with the length gone, he had a lot of hair, and although the waves were forgiving, she liked to do things right. But as the shape came clearer—tidier than the Lannister haircut, really, shorter in back and neater over the ears, but with a good hand's length or more to play with—Keith's smile slowly went from nervous to surprised and eventually pleased.

One blow-dry later, and his whole family was crowded around again, trying to touch his new haircut and making admiring sounds. Stacy stepped back, satisfied as she watched him turn his head, getting used to the look. Even sitting, he managed to pose. It seemed likely he'd been a model at some point, with the way he mugged for the mirror and anybody looking at him. His mother was sniffing. His dad kept looking between him and Kevin like he was trying to decide how much they looked alike now.

And Kevin was staring kind of enviously at Keith's new hair. "That looks

pretty great, bro. Like, maybe I should grow mine out levels of great. Can you make mine look like that?" he asked Stacy.

She eyed the length of his hair, particularly around the sides. "You've got that pompadour thing going on, so growing out the top wouldn't take too long, but the sides are gonna take a while. Depending on how fast your hair grows—"

The whole family, a lot of whom were redheads or had that chestnut brown hair that red hair often darkened to, more or less shouted, "Really fast!" all at once.

Stacy took a step back, startled, and Keith put his hand over his face. "I'm so sorry. Go away, all of you. You're embarrassing me. Go find that kid and give him all the money you owe him. Seriously." He looked through his fingers. "I mean it."

To Stacy's astonishment, the entire family, looking various levels of guilty, actually shuffled out of the salon, although his twin brother lingered a minute. "You were saying depending on how fast it grows?"

"I could give you a cleaned up version of this cut in about six months," Stacy finished.

Keith sniffed. "No, she can't. This is my haircut. Get your own."

Kevin reached out to ruffle his brother's hair. Stacy, without thinking about it, smacked his hand away. "No messing it up!"

It was hard to say which of the three of them was more surprised, but Stacy was definitely the most embarrassed. She felt a blush crawling up her face as she mumbled, "I'm sorry. That was unforgivably rude."

Keith's surprise turned into a huge grin. "No, that was awesome. Buzz off, bro. I told you to go away."

"You didn't mean me. I'm your *twin*."

"I meant you most of all."

"Hnf." Kevin left, though, and he obviously wasn't actually upset.

Stacy grimaced at Keith, though. "Sorry I smacked him. That was a really weird thing for me to do."

"No, it was genuinely great. Kevin really enjoys being the older brother and I'm terrible at putting him in his place. You're not a younger sibling, are you?"

"Guilty as charged. I'm the oldest of three."

"Great. You can protect me from my brother." Keith laughed, but a surge of conviction ran through Stacy. She felt like she'd protect Keith from

anything, if he needed it. Which was ridiculous, because he was nine inches taller than she was and possibly that much broader across the shoulders, too. Still, if his older brother needed smacking around a little, she was the person to do it. In fact, she'd be kind of mad if anybody else got to, which really didn't make any sense.

She really needed to pull herself together. Having gorgeous guys sit down in her salon chair didn't usually de-grinch her, never mind turn her into some kind of younger-twin-avenging angel. Trying to remember she had a job here, she said, "So what do you think?" and gestured lightly at Keith's hair.

"It's good. I think it's good. I mean, it *is* a good haircut! It's just..." Keith took a deep breath. "Really different, you know?"

"Yeah." She smiled at him in the mirror again, trying to resist the urge to sink her hands into his new hair and play with it. "You got more cut than anybody except a girl who went short-short earlier today. It's a big change."

"It's not gonna go brown all of a sudden, right?" Keith's eyebrows wrinkled. "You know, like Rapunzel?"

Stacy laughed. "I don't know. Are you secretly under an enchantment? Have you been kept in a tower your whole life? Do you have a wicked stepmother, witch, or queen in your life?"

Keith grimaced playfully. "Nope, I've got the original edition mom, no witches that I'm aware of, and if I'm secretly the heir to a throne I..." He paused, considering. "I think I don't want it, actually. It sure doesn't seem to do any of the royals in the papers any good."

"Then I think you're safe and will probably stay a redhead. All right." Stacy didn't want him to leave—possibly ever—but she couldn't think of a way to say that without making it weird. Because she had met him an hour ago, and it would absolutely be weird to invite him to move into her salon.

Well, that would be weird under any circumstances. She glanced out the window, where his whole family was shuffling around in the snow, waiting for him. "I guess you better get going. You have a lot of money to collect for Noah."

"I guess so. I'm surprised he's not already back in here, in fact."

Stacy grinned. "I think he's out playing with Molly's kids in the snow. They're all going to freeze solid."

"They're probably out there in shirt sleeves because they're running around so hard they're overheating." Keith got his flannel, shrugging it on those terrific shoulders before hiding them beneath his winter coat. He flicked

a hand to his nape like he would pull his hair out from under the collar, then froze in surprised confusion. “Oh, that’s weird.”

“You’ll get used to it, but it might take a couple months.”

“Months?”

“You’ve had long hair since you were twelve,” Stacy pointed out. “That’s, what, about twenty years of conditioned behavior? You’ll probably still do it every once in a while for years, if you keep your hair shorter.”

She could tell he wasn’t entirely kidding when he said, “What have I done?”

“Raised like four grand for a playground?”

“Ah. Right. Well. That’s kind of worth it, then, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, kinda. And maybe they’ll let you use the playground when it’s finished. Since you wanted one when you were a kid.” She was talking just to keep him there, which was as unlike her as Stacy could imagine. Especially at this time of year. She should have shooed him out of the salon already, locked up, and gone home to hide in a house with no Christmas decorations up. A house that was her sanctuary against all the noise and loudness of the season.

A house that just wasn’t as appealing as hanging out in her hair salon with Mr. Formerly Million Miles Of Hair Man.

“Stacy?”

Stacy startled a little. Keith had made it to the door, but hesitated there, looking back at her. He wasn’t posing now. He looked nervous, in fact. Shy. “Yeah?”

“I know we only just met and this might be a little fast, but I was wondering if you might like to go out to dinner tomorr—”

“Yes!” Stacy cleared her throat. “I mean, uh, yeah, sure, that’d be totally cool, whatever.”

She had just said ‘whatever’ to the most attractive guy she’d ever seen, when he’d asked her out on a date. She put both hands over her face, mumbled, “Oh my god, I’m an idiot,” and peered through her fingers at him. “Please forget I ever said ‘whatever’ like a fourteen year old trying to be chill. Also please forget I said yes like a desperate housewife. Please remember this as me having said, ‘I would love to go out to dinner with you’ like a nice, normal person.”

Keith’s glorious grin warmed his entirely gorgeous face. “Funny, that’s exactly how I remember it. You want to meet at the Italian place at six, or...

should I get your number and we can discuss it, or...?"

"Yes. Yes, all of that. Good. Sounds good. That yes. Sounds good yes. Oh my god." Stacy was going to crawl under one of her salon chairs and hide forever. She thrust a hand out and whispered, "Give me your phone, I'll put my number in. Or, you know, maybe I'll die of embarrassment."

"Do the first one, not the second." Keith came back to her with his phone, and stood distractingly near while she, with shaking hands, put her number into his phone and hit 'call' so his number would be in hers.

A few seconds later her phone rang and she startled a little, mumbling, "Oh, dammit, I'm sorry, someone's calling me," before she realized what was actually happening. Her face went hot, and, mortified, she handed Keith's phone back to him.

His grin hadn't faltered at all. "Better answer and see who it is."

Stacy, feeling like a prime idiot, did, and he lifted his phone to his ear, voice warm and deep both on the phone and two steps away from her. "Hey, is this Stacy Carbone?"

She squeaked, "Yes," and his grin broadened.

"This is Keith Raleigh, from the hair salon? Mr. Million Miles Of Hair Man? You gave me your number, so I was just calling to make sure we were on for tomorrow night. Dinner at the Italian place at six? I'll make reservations." He sounded like it was a perfectly common thing to have a phone conversation with someone close enough to feel their body heat.

"That sounds great," she whispered. "I'll see you there?"

"Well, it is Sunday," he reminded her. "Maybe we'll run into each other at the holiday bazaar in the square."

Stacy had never gone to the bazaar on purpose in her life. That, she guessed, was about to change. She smiled up at him, feeling oddly shy. "Maybe we will. Thanks for calling, Keith. I'm glad you did."

"I am too." His dark eyes shone with pleasure. "See you tomorrow, Stacy."

He hung up, winked, and walked out of the salon.

CHAPTER 4



You didn't pose for her, his stag said in terrible disappointment as Keith left the salon. *How can she understand our BEAUTY if you don't pose for her?*

Keith, who had been feeling rather pleased with himself, briefly wished he could kick his stag. “Posing isn't everything, bud. She thought I was cute. Or charming. Something like that. She liked me enough, anyway, okay?”

The stag sniffed dubiously. *There is no enough when it comes to our fated mate. Except for me. I'll be enough. No one can resist my BEAUTY.*

It was a wonder, Keith thought, that he had gotten this far in life without at least one woman punching him in his fairly perfect nose. He tried. He really *tried* to keep the stag's vanity under control, but it was like trying to keep a runaway train under control.

More like that, in fact, than seemed fair. In stag form, he was kind of huge: shifter animals tended to be larger than their true counterparts, and a true red deer buck could weigh almost six hundred pounds. Keith hadn't ever stood on a scale in his stag form—heaven forbid the beast should develop a weight complex, which he was pretty sure it would embrace wholeheartedly—but he was reasonably confident he weighed in around seven hundred pounds, maybe even seven fifty.

Having a seven hundred pound deer rampaging through his head was a *lot* like dealing with a runaway train. Keith had no idea how even larger shifters managed at all. Maybe their shifter animals weren't as...

Beautiful? the stag inquired, and Keith, trotting down the salon steps, had to laugh.

I'm sure they're not, he said fondly. He did love the big silly creature,

even if it drove him crazy a lot.

His stag, startled, said, *It's cold!* and Keith, flipping the collar of his coat up, shivered an agreement. He hadn't known how insulating all that hair was. "I'm going to have to buy a hat."

But our hair! If the stag could frown, it would have as it remembered the reason he was cold was because of the haircut. After a moment's pause, though, it recovered. *A hat will mash our new hair and that will not be HANDSOME.*

"Well, take your pick, buddy. Cold, or slightly less beautiful than usual."

The poor stag stared at him in horror from inside Keith's own head, and fell silent to contemplate which of those two terrible options was worse. Keith, grinning, fell in with his family, who were all determined to say the most cutting thing—as it were—about his new hair, and to be as loud as possible about it. Secure in the knowledge that he had a first date with his fated mate lined up the next evening, Keith didn't even mind.

He especially didn't mind when Noah, seeing the whole group of them working their way across the square, broke off playing and came over at a run. The kid skidded to a stop a few yards in front of Keith and spun an imperious finger, indicating Keith should turn. The stag brightened: it liked anything that involved posing and showing off for people.

Keith, grinning, spread his hands a little and turned slowly, letting Noah get the full effect of his haircut, until the kid stepped forward to offer a fist-bump and a solemn, "Lookin' good, Mr. Raleigh. How much did you get cut?"

"Apparently twenty-seven inches."

Noah's eyes popped. "At *five dollars an inch*? That's..." His eyes stayed wide, but he ducked his head and started counting on his fingers, audibly whispering, "If five times twenty is, uh, a hunnred, and five times seven is, uh," his whisper dropped, "five ten fifteen twenty twen—THIRTY FIVE that's A HUNDRED AND THIRTY-FIVE DOLLARS EACH."

Keith thought the little boy might actually faint as he turned an awe-stricken gaze on the extended Raleigh family. Reverently, he whispered, "There are *how* many of you?"

"Thirty-six," Keith's dad supplied. "That's just under five thousand dollars, by the way."

Noah, still in a whisper, said, "'scuze me a sec," and walked several feet away, where, with his back turned to the family, he went, "Yes! Oh my *God!*"

YES!” and fist-pumped several times, then stamped his feet in an excited little dance before recovering himself and returning, all business. “You can bring your donations by my mom’s massage therapy business, or I can collect them now.”

Somehow not a single person in the family laughed, although Keith himself swallowed his own laugh so hard he felt the tubes in his ears squeak with compressed air. “I feel like since I started this, I better pay up right away, huh?” He took out his wallet, and suddenly his whole family was doing the same, counting out bills and trading with each other to make the right change while arguing over whether it mattered where that particular five dollars came from.

A few cousins only had cards, so having given Noah a genuinely surprising-looking pile of cash, the fifteen or so of them escorted the little boy back to his mom’s business, where he first proudly showed her the donations, then threw his arms around her for an exuberant hug, clearly blown away by his own success.

His mom, a small purple-haired woman with a Loki t-shirt and at least two visible tattoos, looked even more stunned than her child did. She mouthed, “Thank you,” over his head, and from the sudden burst of self-satisfied noise from his family, Keith thought they probably couldn’t do any better with holiday gifts than this moment. He couldn’t wait to tell Stacy about it.

Which was a silly thought, given that he’d just met her, but he knew in his soul that sharing this kind of moment with her would make every day of his life just that little bit brighter. He was a Virtue kid, born and raised in the little shifter sanctuary town, but Stacy was new, which was to say, he hadn’t met her before leaving for work a few years ago. He wondered if she knew Virtue’s secret, or if the fact he was a shifter was going to be a total realignment of what she knew about the world. Either way, he couldn’t wait to tell her that, too.

Tomorrow, his stag said. After dinner. We can walk in the snow and pose for her and she will be very impressed and love us forever.

“Easy as that, huh?” Keith murmured as he left the massage therapy building. He knew he talked aloud to his stag a lot, but these days people went around talking to ear buds all the time, so he figured he didn’t look any crazier than anybody else who seemed, at first glance, to be talking to the air. “You think she’ll be up to hearing—seeing—that I turn into a big ol’ stag

after just one date?”

The stag tossed its head, so Keith did too, of course. It felt completely different with short hair. *Of course she will. She's our mate. She'll understand immediately.*

“Yeah.” Keith stood on the shop’s stoop, looking over the still-bustling bazaar, now lit entirely by tiny glowing colored lights and the enormous tree that had been erected in the gazebo. “Yeah, you know what? I think you’re right. I want to tell her right away, too. Maybe not about the fated mates part,” he murmured, “but definitely about who I really am. It feels right.”

It will be perfect, the stag assured him.

“Bro! C’mon, I’ve paid my dues. Let’s head out. I’m itching for a run.” Kevin came out of the massage clinic and knocked his shoulder against Keith’s. “That kid is charming Mom’s socks off, so they’re gonna be in there forever. I think if she wasn’t pushing sixty we’d end up with another little brother 'cause that kid is so cute.”

“*Sister.* There are enough boys in this family.” Kendra, the sole girl in the family besides their mom, spoke as she came out of the massage clinic. Like the twins, she was a redhead; only their brother Kyle had inherited their mom’s chestnut hair instead of their dad’s flaming red locks. “Should I grab the cousins? Are we going for a run?”

Kevin muttered, “A whole herd of us, great. Good thing it isn’t hunting season anymore.”

“Actually, it is,” Kendra said. “But only south of here.”

Kevin stared at her. “Why do you know that?”

Kendra dropped her voice to hiss, “Because I’m a part-time deer, you idiot. Why *don’t* you know it?”

“Because I’m not a hunter!”

Kendra turned to Keith in exasperation. “Is this one of those men/women safety things? Stuff men just never think about because they don’t have to think about safety in the same way women do?”

“It might be. I didn’t know it was still hunting season down south either,” Keith said. “It doesn’t seem like extra safety protocols should have to matter when you’re a deer, but if you’re in the habit of it as a human...that sucks,” he added helplessly. “I’m sorry.”

Kendra tossed her hair in a way that made his stag want to toss his head, too. “Don’t be sorry. Just stop the men around you from being jerks.”

“The men around me aren’t jerks!”

“First, are you sure?” Kendra eyed him. “Second, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.” Keith put his arm around Kendra’s shoulders and squeezed for a second. “Yeah, go get the cousins and we can all go out to the ranch for a run.”

Kendra nodded, went inside, and a minute later emerged with five cousins, and then a sixth who chased after them as they headed for their cars. The drive out to the ‘ranch,’ which was really acres of forest, only took about twenty minutes: Virtue was a pretty compact little town in terms of its population center. A five minute drive in any direction got you into its outlying areas, although its actual charted boundaries were positively enormous. Shifter sanctuaries needed a lot of space, and Virtue had staked its territory out centuries ago. Other townships, and more recently, corporations, had been trying to encroach on it for almost as long, but if there was any one thing the town did well, it was hold on to the land it had claimed.

Even if it wasn’t a long drive, everybody was bristling with energy by the time they reached the ranch. Keith hadn’t been out for a good run since the snow fell, and most of his cousins lived and worked in cities these days. It was dangerous enough to shift in a city anyway, and the fact that their family were red deers, native to Europe, not America, only made it more so. They stood out, in a place known for white-tailed deer: even if their coloration hadn’t been all wrong, the fact that they were pretty much twice as big would make anybody notice them.

A couple of the cousins bounced—on human feet—toward the forest as soon as they poured out of the car. They mostly tried to shift under cover of trees, because satellite surveillance was a thing now. Nobody wanted to be noticed by some overly enthusiastic employee at the DOD or a tech company, but everybody was clearly eager for the run. Keith ambled along, mostly to annoy Kevin, who twitched impatiently as his twin lazed toward the others. He muttered, “You’re such a jerk,” to Keith, then shifted, which seemed to set off a chain reaction: everybody else shifted, too, rapid-fire, until Keith was the last one to change into his stag form.

He shook himself thoroughly, just like everyone else was doing, settling his fur and stamping his feet a few times. It always took a moment to get used to the powerful muscles and strength a stag had, but he loved it. Then he tossed his head, which felt strangely light.

All around him, his siblings and cousins shifted back to their human

forms, eyes round and mouths open. Kendra squeaked, “Oh my *God, Keith.*”

He froze, one hoof lifted in what should have been a magnificent pose, but instead was suddenly awkward and unsure. Kendra fumbled in her pocket, found her phone, took a picture of Keith, and gestured for him to shift back to human. He did, his heart in his throat, unsure of what was wrong until Kendra turned the phone so he could see the picture.

There was a stag in it, all right, and technically he knew it had to be him because he’d just watched her take the picture, but there was something wrong. He couldn’t even figure out what, at first. He looked...naked, somehow. Unfinished. Sort of like a dog whose collar had been removed for a bath.

His stag wailed, *Where are my ANTLERS?!?*, and fainted.



IT TURNED out that when somebody’s shifter animal fainted, they fainted, too. Keith hadn’t known that. Neither, judging from the circle of worried faces above him when he opened his eyes, had any of his family.

He was lying on his back in the snow beneath the tree canopy, in human form—thank goodness, because lying on his back as a stag was hard—and now that he was waking up, his twin brother’s expression was sliding from ‘incredibly stressed’ to ‘fighting off giggles.’ “Bro. Dude. Are you okay?”

Keith lifted his hand to his forehead, like he’d be able to feel the lack of antlers in his human form. He couldn’t, of course, but he did find the new short haircut. A sinking feeling ran through him, and since he was already lying on the ground, that brought him pretty low indeed. “I’m...fine. Just a little...melodramatic, maybe.”

A relieved rush of laughter went around the group gathered above him. “No,” one of the cousins said, “*your* stag? Melodramatic? Never. What, uh. What happened to your...?” He gestured at his forehead, too.

“I think—”

I am UNBEAUTIFUL, the stag howled. *I can never be seen by anyone again! Make them go away! I am too UNBEAUTIFUL to be looked at! My antlers are gone! WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO MY BEAUTY?*

Keith closed his eyes, trying to calm the agitated stag with a few deep breaths. It completely failed to work. The stag kept up its theatrics as Keith,

trying to hear himself over it, said, “I think I shed them because I got a haircut.”

He opened his eyes again to see his family trying hard not to laugh. Kevin, in a voice clearly meant to strangle his amusement, said, “No way, dude. I get my hair cut all the time and this has never happened to me.”

“No, but that’s the point,” Kendra said with sudden understanding. “You *do* get your hair cut regularly. Keith hasn’t had his cut since before he hit puberty. I bet his stag’s self image is completely caught up in the long hair, and now that it’s gone...” She also visibly tried not to laugh, and managed to contain herself, although her voice got a little hoarse. “So are his antlers.”

“They’ll grow back,” another cousin said helpfully. “I’ve shed mine a couple times. But oh my god, dude, you’re going to be so hungry. It takes so many calories to grow those things back!”

Keith sort of chuckled and groaned at the same time. “Great. Well, there are worse times of year to need to eat all the calories, right? Hand over a plate of fudge, stat!” He climbed to his feet, brushing snow off his backside, and said, *At least we’ve got a dinner date tomorrow night*, to his stag.

The stag gasped in horror. *No. Absolutely not. Our fated mate cannot see me when I am UNBEAUTIFUL.*

Keith swore he crossed his eyes, trying to see his animal self inside his head. *Ten minutes ago you were all about telling her the truth about us.*

*That was **different!** I was **beautiful** then!*

She’s still going to like us, Keith pointed out. *I’m pretty sure about that. I think she already does. Fate isn’t wrong, right?*

The stag wailed, *I don’t care about fate! She can’t see me like this! Absolutely not! Never!*

Keith, aloud, said, “How long will it take to grow them back...?”

“Oh, you should have a full rack again by, like, I don’t know, Easter?”

“That’s four months!”

Four months. Yes. Good. We’ll hide in the basement until Easter.

We will not hide in the basement, or anywhere else, until Easter or any time at all! I have a date tomorrow night! I’m not going to miss it just because you don’t have antlers!

The stag did its best to curl up in a ball and put its hooves over its embarrassingly undecorated head, and Keith realized this was going to be a long, long day.

CHAPTER 5



It was a good thing the salon was closed on Sundays, because Stacy was so jittery she'd be dangerous with a pair of scissors. She'd actually put a red bow in her hair that morning. Obviously she had taken it off again immediately, because no self-respecting grinch wore Christmas bows in their hair, but her gaze kept sliding back to it like it was a temptation too great to resist. Somehow she thought Keith would like it.

Not that she had any real idea what Keith would like, and not that she was the kind of woman who decided to wear a silly bow in her hair because a guy would like it. If she was going to wear a bow, it would be because *she* liked it, and she didn't like Christmas stuff at all.

Stacy sort of felt like she should fold her arms and go 'so there!' at the end of that, even though not a single word of it had been spoken aloud.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this nervous-slash-excited to go on a date. Most of her post-hairdressing-school life dating had taken place in Virtue, and the pickings weren't exactly slim in the small town, but they weren't really broad, either. Starting up her salon had been enough excuse to let a handful of early-stage relationships fizzle out.

But she'd never felt that sting of excitement when she'd first seen any of those guys, either, or gotten cold-fingered and shaky from a touch. So maybe fussing over a little red bow was...

...still totally ridiculous, but somehow Stacy found it in her hair again on her way out the door. And worse, she felt *cute*.

Well, that was as bad as it was going to get. She promised herself that. Nothing more festive than a red bow, which didn't even necessarily mean *Christmasy*. It was just...decorative.

She bet she could find *several* people who would believe that. Probably. Almost certainly. Because it was definitely true. And she had at least two hours to kill before dinner, so she could go to the holiday market and find people who would agree with her.

Because she wasn't going to see if Keith happened to be there. He'd said he might be, but that was *sheer coincidence* in terms of her going to a holiday market she had avoided for the entire four years she'd been in Virtue. It was just that there was a booth she was interested in for the first time, that was all. She crunched her way out into the snow, and walked toward town along a tree-lined street which threatened to drop more snow on her from heavily-laden branches.

It was only three-thirty, but the sky was getting twilighty with early winter evenings. That didn't stop kids from playing outside, their cheerful shrieks making the snowy branches seem that much more unstable. The street was littered with snowmen and snowballs alike, as well as a number of frozen lumps that had once been both and had melted just enough to freeze solid again after a brief thaw the week before. Stacy, not realizing it was frozen, had kicked one of those once, and limped for a week afterward.

She had to admit, as a ten minute walk brought her around a corner to the town square, that the early evenings *did* make the holiday bazaar look bright and inviting. Colored lights, strung up everywhere, reflected off the snow and made it all cozy and warm, and the whole thing was never less than bustlingly busy. She stopped at the Winter Doughnut Shop for a cup of tea, and headed into the market with her hands wrapped around it.

Five minutes later, she regretted it, but it was too late then. Or at least, she didn't want to give up on the chance of meeting Keith early, so she persevered, edging through shoppers who seemed to be enjoying the noise and the crowds a lot more than she did. There *were* a lot of cool things in the little storefronts, from hand-thrown pottery to sculptures to—"Terrariums? Aren't they going to die of cold?"

The woman running the terrarium kiosk gestured her in. Not all the shops could be entered, but hers was set up in a little U shape, with the glass-housed plants nestled in insulating-looking shelves that Stacy ran a finger over, and determined might be styrofoam. "Oh, I see. This must protect them quite a lot. And it's warm in here!" Sweat beaded on her hairline almost immediately, in fact, and she wiped her fingers across it in surprise.

"I also don't let anybody pick their purchase up until they're on their way

home from the market,” the woman said with a nod. She was probably twenty years older than Stacy, and had greying pixie cut that suited her round face. “I’m Tara. Tara’s Terrariums at your service.”

“Hah! I’m Stacy, Stacy’s Salon at yours.” Stacy tilted her head toward her salon across the square. Tara followed the tilt with her gaze, then nodded wisely.

“Business must be hopping at this time of year. I live a few towns over, but I’ve been trying to get a booth at the Virtue market for years. If you have any questions besides ‘won’t they die?’ I’m happy to answer them!”

“Do they really not need much maintenance? I like plants, but I’m a neglectful plant parent.”

Tara laughed. “Most of them are pretty good for benign neglect. You’d want to start with a simple one, maybe. I like the cacti for that.” She gestured, and Stacy went over to look at a scattering of cacti in glass bowls.

“This one’s flowering!” Bright pink-red tubular flowers grew at the tips of flat leaves that grew long and fell like a waterfall inside the terrarium. “I had no idea cactuses flowered in winter!”

“Christmas cactus. Almost impossible to kill. Ask me how I know.”

“Really? Maybe I’ll come back for one...well, not tonight. I’m going out to dinner tonight. But you’re here until the end of the market, right?”

“Until the last minute,” Tara said with a smile. “I’ll keep one aside for you.”

“Oh, let me at least put it on layaway.” Stacy put her tea down so she could dig through her purse, and found a ten to give the plant lady. “Will that do?”

“Perfect. Which one do you like?”

“The one already flowering,” Stacy said firmly. “I’m sure it’ll never bother to for me otherwise.”

“They’re pretty forgiving,” Tara promised her, but didn’t argue, either.

“I’ll come pick it up after work tomorrow.” Stacy collected her tea cup and left the terrarium shop feeling chipper. Then she realized she’d bought something at the very first kiosk she’d gone into, and laughed. Never mind being a grinch. The market was obviously dangerous to her pocket book. That was reason enough to stay away, generally.

“Rats,” a familiar male voice said. “I was going to offer to buy you a hot cider if I found you, but I see you’ve got a drink already.” Keith took a couple of running strides so he could fall into step beside her. Stacy glanced

up at him with a smile, and felt her heart flip-flop.

She'd almost convinced herself he hadn't been as jaw-droppingly gorgeous as she remembered him. Mostly because it didn't seem possible for someone to be that tall, that chiseled, that dark-eyed, and also interested in her. Not that she thought of herself as shabby: most of the time, she thought she was pretty cute, and the rest of the time she probably had period cramps and a bucket of ice cream to drown them in.

But Keith was so handsome. He had that golden undertone to his skin that a lot of redheads did, and his cheeks were flushed red with cold. He wasn't wearing a hat, maybe to show off his new haircut, which he'd styled well and looked great with. She said, "Hey. Hi," like kind of a dork, then looked at her cup of tea and laughed. "Oh. I'm just carrying this to keep my hands warm. Cider sounds delicious, honestly."

"Oh, well, in that case!" Keith made a wide inviting gesture and nearly hit another passer-by. He apologized with obvious distress, and the guy muttered an acceptance that wasn't entirely sincere. "Remind me to keep my hands to myself."

Stacy said, "Maybe with other people," right out loud, and if she hadn't been holding a full cup of hot tea, would have slapped both hands over her mouth.

Keith blinked once, slowly, then grinned even more slowly. To her relief, though, he proved himself to be a gentleman, and only said, "So, cider, then? What's in the cup that you're holding just for warmth?"

"Tea. Which I don't like."

"You bought a cup of tea you don't like just to keep your hands warm?"

"It keeps my hands warm longer than a cup of something I do like to drink," Stacy said reasonably. "Because I drink the other stuff, and then my hands aren't warm!"

"Infallible logic," Keith said with a thoughtful nod as they made their way through the crowd toward a cider booth that could be smelled half the market away. "But have you considered...mittens?"

"No, but I am considering ear muffs." Stacy nodded at the booth next to the cider kiosk. "I don't like hats, but my ears are cold."

Keith murmured, "Likes: cider. Dislikes: hats, tea," and pretended to take notes. "Any other important likes and dislikes I should know about?"

She had the funny feeling he would actually remember anything she said, and racked her brain for a good answer. "I'm sorry. I suddenly can't

remember anything I've ever liked or disliked in my entire life."

"Well, fair, I put you on the spot. How much hot cider are we talking about?" They were in line by then, several people back, so they had plenty of time to consider the menu. "It looks like our options are 'thimble,' 'large thimble,' and..." They watched someone go by with a cup that Stacy genuinely thought was as tall as her head. "And 'vat,' apparently."

"If there's something between 'large thimble' and 'vat,' I think I could go for that, but if not, 'large thimble' will have to do."

"I'm very tall," Keith said in solemn tones. "I may have to go for 'vat.'"

As they got closer, it became clear that the 'thimble' size was for kids, the equivalent of a babyccino, and the adult cups were the more usual small, medium, and large. Or 'large thimble,' 'vat,' and... Stacy pursed her lips. "If we've got large thimbles and vats, what are we calling the mediums?"

"Normal? Regular? Average?"

"Those are disappointing when your other choices are thimbles and vats," she pointed out.

Keith pursed his lips, and as they stepped up to the counter, said, "One vat of cider for me, please, and a shoe full for the lady."

The poor guy at the counter blinked at him, and Stacy laughed. "A medium and a large, please. This reminds me of the time I went to see that one Tarzan movie and asked for a ticket to see Alexander Skarsgård's abs."

"Oh, I liked that movie. What'd the ticket guy say?"

"Really? I thought nobody else had even seen it, much less liked it. Anyway, she stared at me a second and then laughed and gave me the right ticket. It was kinda great."

"Well, then, you and I saw it and liked it. It's us against the world."

An unexpected thrill went through Stacy, warming her as much as the 'shoe full' of cider did as the guy slid it across the counter to her. It was ridiculous to think her and Keith against the world sounded great, when she'd spent barely more than an hour in his presence.

It sounded great anyway. She curled her hands around the cup of cider, shivering happily as its warmth sank into her fingers, then smiling up at Keith when he paid. "Thanks. That's nice of you."

"Can't let anybody think I'm not treating my best girl right for our night on the town." He winked, and that little thrill shot through Stacy again. "What's your pleasure?"

"Avoiding any of the booths because I spent money at the first one I went

into? Except the hat booth. My ears aren't getting any less cold." Stacy nodded toward the booth next door, and Keith made a playful bow to guide her that direction. Something struck her as slightly off about the gesture, and she said, "Huh," aloud as he straightened.

"Huh, what?"

"Um. Nothing, really? I just didn't expect you to do that." She smiled sheepishly. "No, not that I didn't expect you to, exactly. It's just that yesterday I thought you must have been a fashion model or something, because you really know how to hold a pose. And it's not that you weren't graceful just now, but that kind of looked more...relaxed than I expected, I guess? Like you weren't doing it to be admired. Oh, man, that makes it sound like I think you're really vain, and that's not what I meant. Ugh, I don't know. I'm not making any sense, am I?"

A strange little crinkle appeared between Keith's eyebrows as she stumbled through that explanation. He raised a hand to rub his forehead, then lifted the other one, too, rubbing two spots just below his hairline.

Stacy felt her face heat up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be weird and rude and now I've made you uncomfortable, which isn't what I wanted at all!"

"No, no, not at all! Honestly!" Keith dropped his hands and gave her an uncertain smile. "No, really, it's just that you're really observant and I wasn't expecting you to notice that so clearly. You're totally right. I usually, um. Yeah. There's a part of me that really likes to pose and show off, but I don't necessarily feel like that's *me*, you know?"

She put her hand on his arm, suddenly sympathetic. "It's got to be hard being a twin sometimes. Trying to make your own space, right? Well, you don't have to try with me. I'm all yours."

Such sheer delight lit Keith's face that Stacy almost didn't blush at the outrageous truth behind that statement. People didn't go around saying things like *I'm all yours* to someone they'd just met, and they certainly didn't *mean* it if they did. Except she had, and she did. Not that she would tell Keith Raleigh that, because she didn't want to scare him off, but...

Well, maybe she wouldn't think about it, because she didn't want to scare herself off, either. They'd gone into the hat booth, which was quite a lot bigger than the terrarium shop she'd gone into, and Stacy decided maybe she'd better turn her attention to finding ear muffs instead of confessing a sudden case of love at first sight to the nicest guy she'd met in ages.

There were all kinds of hats. Mostly winter hats, given the season. Some

hand-knitted, some fur-lined, some brightly dyed felted wool, but also a fair number of all-season cowboy hats and fedoras and other styles she didn't know the names of. A pair who clearly knew their business were talking to other customers, so she and Keith had the chance to look around without any pressure. Stacy drifted over to the ear muffs, and laughed at a row of headbands above them. "Look at these. They won't keep your ears warm, but they're cute."

She took one down and turned to Keith, reaching up to slide it over his head without thinking how forward and intimate that was. He closed his hand over hers at his cheek, and for a few seconds they were arrested there, gazing into each other's eyes, until Keith gave a bone-deep groan of dismay and said, "Oh, God, *no*," with feeling.

CHAPTER 6



Yes! I am almost BEAUTIFUL again! We must wear this ALWAYS!

The stag's voice echoing in his head would have been funny, if Stacy wasn't right there and so beautiful and...so confused, now, because Keith had gone 'oh no' right in her face. He lifted his gaze away from her for a moment, focusing on the row of headbands above the ear muffs.

Every single one of them sported a set of felt reindeer antlers.

They came in all sizes, from little kid sized with a couple of branching horns to a set that would actually do an adult male deer proud, with half a dozen points per soft tan antler. Stacy had chosen one with three or four points, but the stag gasped as Keith looked over the bigger ones. *No I was wrong we want **those** ones!*

Keith, out loud although under his breath, said, "I am not buying a six-point reindeer antler headband."

Stacy, who obviously didn't know he was talking to the pathetically hopeful stag in his own head, knocked her shoulder against his arm and grinned up at him. "Are you suuuuure?"

Apparently she hadn't taken the 'oh god no' badly, which was a relief. Keith supposed it made a certain amount of sense. Adult men didn't usually go around wearing antlers, and a theatrical rejection of that was probably kind of normal. Still, he felt badly enough to say, "I wasn't saying oh no at you..."

She laughed. "I assumed you were saying them at the antlers. I promise they look very handsome."

See?! She thinks I'm handsome! We have to wear them! ALWAYS. Until our real antlers grow back!

As if reminded of the effort it was going to take to regrow his antlers, Keith's stomach rumbled. He took several hasty swallows of his cider, relieved he didn't choke on it, and gave Stacy a mortified smile. "No, it's just...I mean, yes, I sort of was saying no to the antlers, but...well, I was going to explain over dinner, but I might as well—"

NO! No! She can't see me until I'm BEAUTIFUL again! We can't tell her!

Keith, standing there with a panicking stag in his head, a hot cider in his hand, and a beautiful woman at his side, tried to remember any story at all where a shifter's animal didn't want to tell their fated mate their secret. Both his parents were shifters, so it hadn't been an issue for them, but most shifters found their mates in full humans. And most shifters were cautious about telling their mates the truth, because it was more than a little outrageous.

But while every single person he knew who'd found their mate had been cautious about it, their shifter animals had been absolutely confident. They'd had no doubts at all, and to hear the stories his friends told, they'd been impatient with their humans for not going all in right away.

Keith had absolutely no idea what to do with a shifter animal who *didn't* want to tell their fated mate everything.

He'd been quiet a little too long, because Stacy's eyebrows were high and her expression was becoming more concerned. "Keith? Is everything okay? You can tell me anything, you know."

She obviously heard herself say that, and wrinkled her nose with embarrassment. "Which is a lot to say to somebody you met yesterday. Sorry, that must have sounded really weird. But seriously, are you okay?"

"It didn't sound weird at all. I'm just sort of having an argument with myself over something." Keith glanced at himself in the little mirror the shop had up so people could check out hats and ear muffs before they bought them. The antlers were utterly, completely ridiculous. Beautifully made, actually, but totally absurd.

After a moment, with a huge sigh and a cry of objection from his stag, he took the antlers off and put them back on the...rack, as it were.

And then he got the biggest set, the six-pointers, and slid them into place on his head. "Happy now?"

Stacy burst out laughing and clapped. "Perfect!"

His stag made absolute doe eyes at him. *Perfect*. More quietly, it also added, *Thank you*, which Keith thought might be a first. He mumbled

something to both Stacy and the stag, then, feeling completely silly, went to buy the antlers. Stacy, behind him, said, “Oh, no you don’t! Those are a Christmas present! Just let me get a set of earmuffs for myself.”

She loves me in them, his stag said with stars in its voice. *She thinks I’m so beautiful she’ll buy me my antlers!*

Keith opened his mouth and closed it again. There didn’t seem to be much point in arguing with the stag’s interpretation of the gift. *Does that mean I can tell her the truth?*

NO! I am still UNBEAUTIFUL! Keith was certain that if it was possible, the stag would throw the back of its hoof to its forehead like a swooning starlet, and collapse on a divan.

You can’t have it both ways, he said a little impatiently. *Either you’re very handsome with the reindeer antlers or you’re ugl—*

UNBEAUTIFUL.

Keith actually laughed aloud. *Sorry. I didn’t realize ‘ugly’ was going too far.*

The stag sniffled pathetically. *Do you think I’m ugly now?*

“No! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Stacy, trying on a set of red earmuffs that matched the bow in her hair, startled and nearly dropped them. “What? You don’t think the red is good?” Her hand went to the bow, fingers clawed like she’d pull it out.

“The red is amazing! No, I’m sorry! I’m an idiot! Thank you for the antlers!” Keith put his face in his hands, feeling the antlers slide around on his head a little as he tilted it downward.

The stag wailed in alarm. *Don’t let my antlers fall off AGAIN!*

Stacy frowned at him in concern. “Keith? If you don’t like them I won’t get them for you. It was just a dumb idea anyway. I don’t really do Christmas stuff, so...I’m sorry?”

This was amazing. Keith was going to blow it with his fated mate *and* his shifter animal all in one massive go. He lifted his head again, anchoring the antlers more firmly, and met Stacy’s eyes with all the sincerity he could. “No, honestly, they’re wonderful and I love them. I’m also a huge weirdo who apparently can’t talk to girls without making an idiot of myself.”

The stag sniffled again. *You do fine when I’m BEAUTIFUL. I’m ruining everything.*

Keith wasn’t actually sure that was true. He struck a lot of poses and got a lot of superficial admiration when the stag was in good form, but he’d never

really felt like he had much luck connecting with women. Most of the relationships he'd had seemed to be based on him photographing well. He just didn't have much in common with people who were looking for an influencer-perfect boyfriend, and they either dumped him for not being sufficiently into it, or he faded out of their lives from boredom and discomfort. Debating vat versus thimble sized cups of cider was much more his style, and the truth was, he'd had more fun with Stacy in a couple of hours than he'd had in entire years-long previous relationships.

And Stacy was grinning at him now, skepticism bright in her gorgeous brown eyes. "I think you're doing just fine talking to girls. At least to this girl. Look, honestly, if you don't want the antlers—"

Noooooo! My ANTLERS! You can't let her take them away! The poor stag really would clutch its skull and hold the headband in place, if it could. Keith wasn't nearly as traumatized by his haircut as the stag was by shedding its antlers, but he did feel sorry for his animal self.

"No, really, if you don't mind, I'd love to have them."

A trace of relief slid across her round-cheeked face. "Okay. If you're sure. Like I said, I don't usually do Christmas or holiday stuff, so I'm probably just bad at it."

"You actually have no idea how perfect you are."

From the startled look Stacy gave him, Keith thought that was maybe coming on a little strong. "In choosing the antlers, I mean. They're literally perfect and at some point I'll explain why."

But not now? His stag sounded so relieved that Keith wanted to hug it.

Not now, he promised. *I really think it would be fine, but I want you to be comfortable with it too.*

This was not even slightly how he imagined meeting his fated mate would go. Still, he really couldn't see pushing his stag into letting him shift for Stacy if the animal was really that embarrassed about his lack of antlers.

Fawns don't have antlers, the stag whispered miserably. *I am not a **fawn**. I am a virile handsome **stag**, but without my antlers I am UNBEAUTIFUL.*

True stags shed their antlers every year, Keith pointed out, but he wasn't trying to change his shifter animal's mind anymore.

Just as well, too, because the stag sniffed in disdain. *True stags don't have fated mates.*

Keith couldn't argue with that. *Tell you what, how about you let me talk to mine for a while without any more—* He hesitated, fairly sure the stag

would object to being told it was being melodramatic or theatrical in its woe. —*distractions*, he ended, although it was entirely possible the stag would say —

I am not a DISTRACTION! Offense rolled through the stag's entire presence, although it sighed dramatically and conceded, *But I can't talk to her, so you should, yes. Without telling her anything about me! She cannot—* "I know, I know, she can't see you like this."

Stacy, paying for her earmuffs and his antlers, blinked back at Keith. "Who can't see me like this? Or you like this? It's too late for me to make a good impression on your mom, you realize. I threw her out of my salon yesterday."

"I think *I* threw her out of your salon yesterday. You just yelled at her—and everybody else—to sit down."

"Oh, well, that's *lots* better."

Keith grinned. "No, she thought it was great, she said so later. And...I don't even know what I was talking about." That obviously wasn't true, but his stag's gratitude made Keith run with it. "I personally look forward to everyone seeing me wearing two foot tall felt antlers for the rest of the holiday season."

The stag, in a small, hopeful voice, said, *Really?* and Keith couldn't help a laugh. "Really," he promised both the stag and Stacy's skeptical look. He lifted his chin, posing dramatically. "How do I look?"

"Gorgeous."

Handsome!

The stag and Stacy spoke at the same time, with the stag glowing pridefully and Stacy glowing with a blush. "Sorry, that was a little...true," she said after a helpless heartbeat. "You look gorgeous. Even with the silly antlers. You *are* gorgeous."

See? the stag crowed. *She thinks we're gorgeous with the antlers!*

That wasn't exactly—or even close to—what Stacy had said, but Keith was trying hard to ignore the stag so he could have actual real live conversation with the woman at his side, rather than the animal in his head. "You're gorgeous too. I don't actually understand why I'm not at the end of a long line of men trying to convince you to give them the time of day."

"Oh, well, I—" Stacy broke off as Keith's stomach growled so loudly that even the stall owner blinked at him. "I...had better get you a snack before dinner, I think. Wow."

“There’s an explanation for this...”

“Is it that you’re six three and work out?”

Keith paused. That wasn’t *actually* the explanation, but it also wasn’t wrong, except for, “Six two.”

“Oh, my bad, from down here the difference is hard to tell.” Stacy rolled her eyes, which made Keith laugh.

“You’re not *that* little.”

“I’m five four,” she said grumpily. “Last year Noah Brannigan asked if I was one of the Christmas elves.”

“I think five four is exactly the right height.” Keith was certain he could lift her effortlessly, and once he’d done that, he could do all kinds of wonderful things with her. He bet she would be soft and willing and also just a little bit bossy, demanding exactly what she wanted from him. He already knew what her hands felt like in his hair. Imagining them gripping it for different reasons sent a shiver of desire down his spine, and he suddenly couldn’t decide if he was hungrier or hornier.

Hungrier, his stag whispered tragically. *Our horns are gone.*

Keith laughed out loud, which was the wrong thing to do when he’d just reassured Stacy that she was an excellent height. Her eyebrows drew down, more confused than offended, and Keith groaned. “I swear I can explain myself. Maybe over an elephant ear?”

“A what?”

Keith gasped. “You’ve never had an elephant ear?”

“I hope not!” Stacy was obviously only half kidding. “What is it?”

“A big sheet of fried dough with honey or cinnamon and sugar.”

“Oh, kind of like funnel cake?” She nodded. “Now I gotcha. But I can’t eat a bunch of fried dough and then dinner. I’ll try a bite of yours, though, since you’re apparently starving.” She put her earmuffs on, which made her even cuter than she’d been before, and they wound their way through the noisy, beautifully-lit market in search of the elephant ears booth. “I can’t believe how many people there are at this thing. The market in general, I mean, not just in line for the elephant ears.”

There were a lot of them, too, to be fair. Keith’s stomach growled again, and the woman in front of them looked at him with amusement. Not enough amusement to let him go ahead of her, but that was okay. “Haven’t you ever come to the market before? Or is this your first year in Virtue?”

“I moved here about four years ago, but no, I don’t really do Christmas

and holiday stuff, so I haven't ever come to it before, no."

"Right, you said that. Any particular reason, or is that getting too personal?"

"I don't know. Somewhere along the line I just stopped liking this time of year. It's dark, it's cold, everybody's busy and frequently bitchy, and they all want their hair to be perfect for the holidays. It just makes me want to go to Bermuda until January." Stacy shrugged.

"I've never been there. What's it like?"

"Oh, I don't know, I haven't been there either. It just sounds better than upstate New York in December."

Keith laughed. "Yeah, I can't argue with that. So is Christmas grinch your thing instead, then?"

She gave him a startled look. "It is, yeah. I hunch around being cranky and waiting for it to all be over. Except I have to pretend to be cheerful, because my job is, ah, what do they call it these days? 'Public-facing.' It's just exhausting. Oh, those smell really good." They'd reached the ordering counter, with the scent of cinnamon and oil swimming out over the line. "Maybe I'll have two bites of yours."

"You can nibble as much as you like."

Her eyebrows arched and Keith felt himself blushing. "That was dumb."

"'Nibbling' and 'biting' have whole different overtones," she said, amused. "Are you thinking of things that involve nibbling?"

Keith, still blushing, gave her a shyly hopeful smile. He thought he might explode from nervousness, but he still said, "Ears are pretty great for nibbling, so...is it terrible if I am?"

A little color crept up around Stacy's cheeks, too. "No. No, it's not terrible at all. It might even be kind of great."

"Oh, thank goodness." He stepped up to the booth and, as straight-faced as he could, said, "One elephant ear to nibble, please."

CHAPTER 7



Stacy burst out laughing. “Elephant ears? *Elephant* ears? *Those* are the ears you’re thinking about nibbling?”

“I’m *hungry!*” Keith managed to come across as entirely innocent and sparkling with wickedness at the same time. “Why, what were *you* thinking?”

“Oh, *nothing!*” Stacy laughed again even as her cheeks heated up. She knew he was teasing, and loved it, but she’d had a pretty great fantasy going there, one in which he brushed her hair away from her neck, one in which she imagined the softness of his lips exploring its tender skin as he worked his way up to her ear. “I was totally thinking of elephant ears. Obviously!”

“Obviously.” Keith grinned at her so widely Stacy felt like she could fly, somehow. “Cinnamon and sugar or honey?”

“Oh, cinnamon. Honey’s too sticky and messy if we’re only nibbling on elephant ears.”

Keith fumbled his wallet, sending it flipping across the counter. Stacy gave a smug little wiggle. That would teach him to tease her. Not that she really minded, but it was good to get her own in, too.

The young woman on the other side of the counter caught the wallet and handed it back with a dry, “I think she’s got your number, buddy.”

“I hope so. I gave it to her yesterday.”

Both Stacy and the food booth girl, who wore a name tag that said *Missy*, and who also had a fryer with funnel cakes on the go, laughed. “I guess she really does, then. Here you go.” Missy handed over a paper-wrapped piece of fried dough, still so hot the cinnamon and sugar stuck to it. “Enjoy.”

“I always do.” Keith tore off the first piece and offered it to Stacy, who had to dance it on her fingertips as steam rolled off it. She nibbled—nibbled!

—a bite, hissing air through her teeth to cool it, then tried a bigger bite and immediately burned her tongue.

“S’good. Ow. But good. Ooh. I’m hungrier than I thought!”

“You want me to get you one?” Keith hesitated before they stepped away from the booth, but she shook her head.

“No, I’d rather be hungry for dinner. Assuming you’ll still want it after eating a piece of fried dough bigger than your face.”

Keith’s voice dropped into a low rumble. “Trust me, I could eat all night long.”

Stacy’s knees went weak and heat flashed over her whole body, curling low in her belly, but when she looked up at Keith, wide-eyed, he was ripping a bite of fried dough off the rest with savage glee. It was only when he gave her a super quick sideways look that she was sure he’d done that on purpose. She gave another laugh, this one higher and softer than usual. Keith Raleigh was getting *way* under her skin, and the truth was, Stacy liked it.

She liked it enough, in fact, that she momentarily considered skipping dinner and taking him straight home, but two things stopped her. One was the fact that one night stands hardly ever went anywhere, and she thought she might like this guy enough to try going somewhere with him.

The other was that he ate the entire elephant ear in the time it took them to get back to the end of the line, and from the way he glanced *at* the line, she thought he might get in it again.

If she brought him home without a full meal under his belt—Stacy was momentarily distracted wondering about what *was* under his belt, and if it was proportionate to the rest of him—but no, if she brought him home without him eating a real meal, he was apparently going to spend the whole night starving for something that wasn’t her. That was *not* what she wanted out of their first date night. “Do you need another one?”

“I think I can make it to the restaurant now.” Keith sounded like he was both kidding and completely serious.

Stacy looked up at the sky, as if there was a sun still up to tell her the time, but it was winter, and the sun had set twenty minutes ago. “What time did you say you’d make reservations for? Six? Are you sure you’ll survive another hour?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Well, let me know if you’re going to faint from hunger. I don’t think I can drag you to the restaurant.”

“That’d be a sight, wouldn’t it? So you’ve been in Virtue four years? Man, that’s my bad luck. You must have moved here right after I left. What brought you here?”

Stacy, deadpan, said, “A car,” and Keith cackled.

“I see we’re both smartasses. A match made in...Virtue, I guess.”

“A virtuous match, you might say?”

His eyebrows rose as they wandered around the kiosks. “If I was a matron in a Regency romance, maybe. But also, I hope not *too* virtuous.”

“Honestly, I’m pretty sure neither of us is feeling all that virtuous,” Stacy admitted. She certainly wasn’t, and from the combination of relief and delight on Keith’s face, she was quite certain he wasn’t either. “Anyway, no, I’m from a small town in Ohio, but the only thing to do there was marry somebody I’d went to high school with, which, no thank you. A while after I finished hairdressing school, a friend of a friend said she was selling her salon in upstate New York, and it just felt right. My parents think I’m nuts, but they don’t even like going to Cincinnati, which is only a 45 minute drive!”

“So you’ve got an adventuresome streak. Me, I grew up here. Born and raised. I went to college locally, but then I got into advertising and ended up in Jersey City.”

Stacy blinked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say that before. Usually they say they live in New York if they live in Jersey City.”

“Well, living in New York sounds cooler, and I’m not sure anybody outside of New York and New Jersey know that there’s a difference anyway, so might as well be cool, right?”

“So you told me Jersey City because...?”

“...I’m not cool?”

Stacy laughed. “I thought maybe it was in case you wanted to sweep me off to your bachelor pad, although it’s like a five hour drive, isn’t it? So it wouldn’t really be much of a sweep.”

Keith, with enough eagerness to be flattering, said, “Would you *like* to be swept off to my bachelor pad? It’s not a bad apartment, and I don’t have any housemates.”

“Under the circumstances, I think if we’re going to do any sweeping off—that sounded better in my head—my house, which is a fifteen minute walk up the road, would be more practical. Of course, there’s the housemates topic.” She glanced at Keith, who was trying hard not to look disappointed. “I

don't have any."

For an instant he blinked with confusion, then laughed. "You had me there."

Stacy grinned, then made a face at herself. "You're really doing a number on my grinchiness, mister. I'm usually a real grump this time of year, but I'm laughing and smiling all over the place."

"Would it be coming on too strong to say I'd like to thwart your grinchiness for a long time to come?"

"Yeah." A warm fuzzy feeling ran over Stacy. "But I like the sound of it anyway. Look, should we just head over to the Italian place and ask if they've got room for us yet? That bite of elephant ear made me realize how hungry I am."

Keith said, "Yes," swiftly, then hunched his shoulders in embarrassment. "I don't mean to sound like a poor starving orphan straight out of Dickens, but I could eat a horse."

His expression went briefly strange, as if he'd only just heard himself say that, and then, with obvious exasperation that was apparently entirely self-directed, said, "Okay, I could not eat a *horse*, but I *am* very hungry! Leafy greens are not enough!"

Stacy's eyebrows climbed so high she thought she would knock her earmuffs off. "Are you a vegetarian? Or trying to be one?"

"I..." Keith groaned. "No. I do eat a lot of plants, but no, I'm not even a pescatarian. Oh, wait, why, are you? If eating meat is out, I'll never touch it again."

"That's thoughtful," Stacy said slowly. "Weird, but thoughtful. No, carnivores are fine. I just wondered because of the leafy greens thing."

"I have no rational explanation for that." Keith exhaled dramatically, rolled his eyes toward his hairline, and added, "Or if I do, I can't explain it right now."

"Probably because you're so hungry your brain is shutting down," Stacy offered, unable to hide a smile.

"Yes. That's definitely it." Keith gave her a look of gratitude for going along with his absurdity.

Stacy didn't know that she would have with anybody else. She just felt so comfortable and connected to him, it seemed natural. Her parents, who had been married roughly forever, were exceptionally good at finishing each other's sentences, or following each other's thoughts so closely that they

didn't even say whole sentences to begin with. Stacy felt sort of like that with Keith, even though she'd only met him a day ago. They just seemed to fit, somehow.

"Onward to the Italian place, then. So, advertising? Did you model, is that how you got into it?"

He gave her a startled look. "Yeah, kind of. How'd you guess?"

"I saw how you enter a room. You've obviously modeled. And I've heard stories about people doing stock photo shoots and then being horrified that their images are being used to advertise something they'd never support, right? If I was a model I'd get really interested in that kind of thing. You know, kind of wanting to learn how the sausages were made." Stacy almost kicked a lump of snow as they walked along, then remembered the ice ball she'd nearly broken her toe on, and pulled the kick at the last moment.

Her other foot slipped and she teetered. Keith's hand was there instantly, catching her elbow and steadying her. His eyes were kind and concerned as she got her feet back under herself. "You okay?"

"I am thanks to you. That was not going to be a dignified wipeout."

"Is it really possible to wipe out in a dignified way?"

"No, but it's especially impossible on a first date," Stacy said wryly. "Ask me how I know."

"Oh no. What happened?"

"I was wearing a new floor-length skirt that I really loved, but had no practice walking in. I stepped off a curb at a high speed, stepped on the front hem of the skirt, stumbled another step forward, pulled the whole thing around my knees, and face-planted in a four-inch-deep ice-cold mud puddle. I was drenched from my chin to my shins. It was *not* my finest moment."

"Oh my God." Keith looked genuinely horrified. "Were you hurt?"

"A few bruises and a serious blow to my pride. Worst of all, my date didn't even ask if I was okay, he just burst out laughing. I'm sure it looked like pure slapstick, but it was scary, you know? When something that unexpected happens, even if you're not really hurt, it throws you for a loop."

Keith, incredulous, said, "What a jackass. I'm sorry you went through that. If you want to point him out to me, I'll trip him into a puddle in the name of honorable vengeance."

"Aw!" Stacy laughed. "That's nice. Most guys would say they'd punch him in the nose for me or something. No, it was back in Ohio. I left town immediately, obviously. No one could face their neighbors again after a fall

like that.”

“Oh, the truth comes out now, I see. You didn’t leave because you were looking for a way to avoid marrying somebody from high school—oh, no, wait, was this the guy from high school?”

Stacy touched a finger to the tip of her nose and Keith winced even more sympathetically. “Who can blame you. One bone-meltingly mortifying incident like that and I’d be a runner, too. I’m glad you weren’t hurt too badly, though. That could have been bad.”

“See, you’ve checked in about how I was twice already, over something that happened five years ago in another state when you weren’t there. I don’t get how he could have just laughed at me. Complete jerk.” They walked into the restaurant’s parking lot, and the inviting scent of garlic and butter rolled toward them as the door opened and chattering people emerged. “That smells *crazy good*. Are we doing appetizers?”

“Appetizers, salads, main course and dessert,” Keith said with conviction. “Possibly twice.”

“They have huge portions here,” Stacy said dubiously. “I’ll be impressed if you can eat all of one, never mind more than one.”

“Please prepare to be impressed.” He held the door for her, and she sighed happily at the warm, delicious-smelling air inside the restaurant. They were seated within a few minutes despite having shown up almost an hour early for their reservation, and Stacy made a decisive claim on mozzarella sticks as her appetizer while Keith ordered a caprese salad with avocado.

“Oh, you’re one of those millennials,” Stacy said. “Ruining the economy with avocado toast. Is it good?”

"The economy?"

"No, avocado toast, you dork!"

Keith grinned. "I deserved that dork."

"Yes, you did! So is it good? Or, is avocado good? I don’t think I’ve ever had it.”

“You don’t eat guacamole?” Keith asked, stunned.

“Come on, would you say eating ketchup is the same as having a tomato?”

“An excellent argument. I like them, yes. They have a kind of low-key green flavor to me. You can try some of mine.”

“I may even share a mozza stick in return.” The appetizers arrived surprisingly quickly, and they did share, although Stacy accidentally made a

face at the avocado. “It’s a little slimy.”

“See, people say that, but I don’t think so. Or, no, I guess it just doesn’t bother me.”

Stacy waved a mozzarella stick at him. “You can have your mozzarella cold with tomato and slime, and I’ll stick with mine being hot and melty with ranch dressing. You were telling me about working in advertising.”

“I was? Let me just say this, don’t believe anything any commercial ever tells you about anything, ever. That’s what I’ve learned, working in advertising. What worldly wisdom have you picked up from hairdressing?”

“Oh, gosh, um. Aside from ‘trust your hairdresser when she says that cut will *not* look good on you?’ People want a connection,” Stacy said a little more softly, more seriously. “They want to talk and feel seen and to be treated well for a little while. And if they’re bitches to you, you don’t have to bend over backward to make them happy, because if they talk crap about you and clients stop coming to see you, you didn’t want those people as clients anyway.” She nodded thoughtfully. “Pretty much that, I think. But it’s tiring. It’s why I don’t like this season. The happy people are great, but the stressed out ones can tear your whole day down.”

Keith had stopped eating and was watching her as if she’d said something wonderful and profound. Stacy ducked her head, suddenly embarrassed. “That was a lot, wasn’t it? I’m not sure it was as useful as ‘don’t believe advertising.’”

“No, I think it was good,” Keith said gently. Somehow, despite the two-foot-tall reindeer antlers he still wore, he looked completely sincere, and she felt herself believing him. “Different life lessons from different jobs, that’s all. I’ll try to remember yours.” A little more humorously, he said, “Mine’s easier to remember. Everybody knows you probably shouldn’t believe advertising anyway. Okay. Should I flag the waiter so we can order dinner?”

Keith tossed his head vigorously, the way he would need to in order to move the weight of hair he was used to, as he turned to look for their waiter. Without the weight of all that hair, his head moved a lot faster and harder than he was accustomed to. Stacy had seen people with newly short hair do that hundreds of times.

She had not once, *ever*, seen someone do that while wearing a gigantic antler headband.

The headband didn’t just fall off. It *launched*. It *flew*.

It sailed right off Keith’s head, and smacked into a server carrying a tray

full of food.

CHAPTER 8



A terrible moment of silence followed the crash, and into that silence, Keith's stag whispered, *Oh no.*

The server wore fettuccini and marinara, noodles and sauce dripping from his eyebrows to his hips. He hadn't actually dropped the serving tray. It might have been better if he had, because instead, in a flinch reflex, he'd clutched it toward himself, raising his arms to protect his face from the object flying at him.

He had a mushroom in his hair.

Most of the food and tableware had then smashed to the floor, drenching him with Italian food and sodas on the way. Keith could see one plate still caught between the poor guy's ribs and the edge of the serving tray. The server looked down at it, and in resignation, simply moved the tray away from his body.

The final plate slid to the floor and broke with a single sharp crack.

It was as if that noise released the rest of the sound in the restaurant. A combination of horrified, distressed laughter and worry filled the air. Keith was on his feet somehow, his chair knocked over backward, and he realized his hand was extended like he would catch the flying antlers. He whispered, "I am so sorry," which didn't even begin to cover it, and took a couple of steps toward the poor server. "Are you okay? That food must have been hot. Oh my god. I am so sorry."

The server, not unreasonably, backed up a step. Keith guessed *he* wouldn't want him coming near him either, if he'd just attacked someone with a set of felt antlers. "No—don't—I'm fine—" The server looked down at himself, sopping with food and drink, and gave the deepest, most resigned

sigh Keith had ever heard. “The sodas cooled the food off. I didn’t get burned.”

By then most of the restaurant was on its feet, people babbling to offer help that really wouldn’t be much help at all. The entire waitstaff and several other employees were there, surrounding the poor guy Keith had accidentally assaulted. Somebody was already cleaning up the mess, and Keith was just standing there like an embarrassed idiot who didn’t even dare look at his date.

Stacy put her hand in his, and very quietly said, “It was an accident. Are you okay?”

Keith still couldn’t even look at her. He spoke partly to her, and partly to the poor guy who had five people mopping somebody’s dinner off him. “I just got my hair cut,” he explained miserably. “It was really long, and it used to take a lot of effort to move it. I moved my head way too fast. I am so sorry. I’ll pay—for everything. For their dinner.”

He looked around to see whose meal had ended up on the floor, and found a family whose tween daughter’s eyes still hadn’t un-rounded from the shock of it all. She had both hands over her mouth still, in fact, and a little brother whose expression was perfectly torn between horrified delight at the mess, and the dawning realization that his dinner was all over the floor. Keith said, “I’m so sorry,” again, and the mother, whose pose was very like her daughter’s, jerked her gaze to him.

He must have looked incredibly pitiful, because a trace of sympathetic humor replaced her dismay. “It’s not the *worst* mess I’ve ever seen,” she told him, then, brightly, added, “and at least it’s not our fault.”

Keith put his face in his hands. Or in his hand, really, because Stacy was still holding the other one, and when he tried to pull away she held on more tightly. “It’s okay,” she murmured. “It’s a god-awful mess, but it’s okay, okay?”

He managed a nod and offered an apologetic smile to the family whose dinner he’d ruined. “Honestly, your dinner is on me.”

“Au contraire,” said the waiter. “Their dinner is *definitely* on me.”

A burst of laughter rattled around the restaurant like a shot, and suddenly it all seemed a little less awful. The waiter had a rueful smile, like he just hadn’t been able to resist the comment, and Keith said, “I am so sorry,” to him again.

“I’ll live,” the kid promised as he headed into the back to change his

clothes and, Keith hoped, go home for the night. A replacement dinner came out almost as soon as the floor was clean, and within a few minutes the room was bustling with chat and service again, as if Keith hadn't stopped the entire evening with one disastrous fling of his head. He and Stacy sat down again, and it took all his nerve to even look at her.

She had a little smile, but not one that laughed at him. Her dark eyes were worried, and she put her hand out toward him, as if wanting to offer comfort. "I've seen a hundred people toss their heads like that after a big chop. Never to such effect, though. *Are you okay, Keith? That was a lot.*"

"I honestly don't think I've ever been so embarrassed in my life. That poor kid. He's going to smell like garlic for three days. His shoes were saturated. Oh, God, I should buy him new shoes." Keith put his hand in Stacy's, but covered his face with the other one again. "This has been a hell of a first date."

"It'll make a great story for the grandkids."

Keith's head popped up to find Stacy a little wide-eyed and startled at herself. "I mean, not that I'm, uh. Thinking about grandkids. It's just the kind of thing people say. Right?"

"Right." Keith wasn't at all sure it was the kind of thing people said on first dates unless they were with their fated mates, but she didn't know about that part yet.

*We can't tell her, his stag whispered in alarm. Not after **that**. She'll want to know if the antlers were for me and she'll never think I'm beautiful or handsome if she knows. She'll hate me!*

I have to tell her sometime!

Do you? The stag sounded almost wistful. Keith wished, really wished, that he could separate the big deer out from himself for a minute so he could gape at it properly. He had genuinely never heard of a shifter animal arguing against telling their mate the truth.

Of course I do! She's my fated mate!

*But I'm an **embarrassment**.*

Keith could not, at that particular moment in time, argue with that. He managed a weak, *She'll understand*, but none of this would have happened if the silly beast hadn't needed antlers so badly that Keith had agreed to wear a felt set he could throw across the room with a vigorous shake of his head.

He only realized he'd been quiet a little too long when Stacy cautiously said, "Please don't tell me you're coming up with names for the

grandchildren.” She waited just long enough for him to start feeling alarmed at the idea that maybe he was pushing her too fast, and then, straight-faced, she said, “The kids will want to name them themselves, obviously.”

Keith gave a quick startled laugh. “Fair, fair. I hadn’t thought of that. You’re perfect, aren’t you? I’m so glad I met you.”

Pink colored her cheeks and she shook her head, but she was smiling. “I’m pretty great, but I don’t know about perfect. I have to say, though, I’ve known you one whole day and I think I’ve already lost all of my grinchiness. You’re going to make Christmas my favorite season.”

An odd surge of pride rose in his chest. “I’d like that. Not that I mind you being a grinch, if that’s your thing, although it really doesn’t seem like it…”

“That’s because I lost my grinchiness when you walked in my salon! You’re like the anti-grinch! I’ve spent years being grinchy and you just come along and de-grinch me!”

“Oh, come on,” Keith said without thinking about it, “you must have been de-grinched a long time ago. You’re too gorgeous to have never grinched.”

Stacy’s eyebrows flew upward at almost the same velocity his antlers had flown off. “Somehow I think we’re not talking about the same thing anymore.”

“I don’t know how that happened.” Keith put his face in his hands again. “Things just went off the rails there.”

She leveled a finger at him as he peered through his fingers at her. “First, whether you’re pretty or not isn’t the single deciding factor in whether or not you’ve grinched. Some people just don’t want to grinch, you know. That said, yes, I have grinched and I also really hope they’ll bring our food soon so I can stop having this conversation.”

Keith, dismayed, whispered, “We never actually ordered our main course. I attacked somebody with my antlers instead.”

He felt his stag having a hard time with that, because ‘attacked with antlers’ had a pretty specific meaning behind it to a deer, and he certainly hadn’t engaged in a dominance battle with another stag when he’d ‘attacked with antlers’ this time. On the other hand, the stag couldn’t actually argue about that having been what he’d done.

While the stag was trying to work that out, Stacy’s face fell comically. “Oh, damn. I forgot. Oh. No, wait, look—” She bit back a laugh, but not very successfully, as her eyes brightened and she visibly bit the inside of her cheek. Keith, wary, turned to look, and let out a groaning laugh of his own.

Someone in the kitchen had gotten wildly creative with the garlic bread, and fast. Two waiters—not the poor guy who’d gotten food all over him—carried a *platter* of garlic bread out. A platter of garlic bread that had been hastily shaped into a reindeer, on which Keith’s antlers were perched. Someone behind them was carrying a tray with actual food on it, but the garlic bread reindeer was obviously meant to be the center of attention. They laid it out on the table with a flourish, and one of the waiters removed the antlers to replace them on Keith’s head.

The entire restaurant burst into applause.

His stag whispered, *Do they like us?*

Keith, laughing helplessly, said, *Yeah, I guess so. See, it’s not so bad.* He stood and took a careful bow, accepting the laughter and cheers as he clapped one hand to his head, making sure the antlers didn’t fall off again. Stacy laughed and applauded more than anyone, her eyes shining with teasing amusement. His stag puffed up a little, and Keith, somewhere between feeling sorry for it and enjoying its shred of regained confidence, struck a pose that had people taking their phones out for pictures.

“You don’t have to eat the reindeer,” their server said as she put plates down on the table, “but you do have to sit with it for the rest of your meal. And possibly wear those things every time you come in here again for the rest of your life.”

“I think that’s fair,” Keith admitted as he returned to his seat. “Humiliating, but fair. But we didn’t order?”

“No, but you’ve both been in here before, although it’s been years since the chef has seen you,” she said with a nod toward Keith. “But you liked lasagna, and this lady always dithers for a while and then orders seafood linguine.”

“I am both horrified and delighted,” Stacy said wryly. “It’s what happens when you live in a small town, though. Or even a not small one. I have a friend who used to order from a Chinese place in Cincinnati all the time during college, and when she came back ten years later and called to put in an order, the owner recognized her voice *and* remembered her order.”

Keith and the waitress both put their hands over their hearts and said, “Oh my God,” nearly identically. The waitress’s eyes were shining. “I love that for her.”

“Me too. It was one of the greatest things I’ve ever heard. And this looks great. You’re right, it’s what I would have ended up ordering.”

“Never underestimate the power of the chef.” The waitress winked.

“I won’t,” Keith promised, then lowered his voice as he tilted his head toward the family whose dinner he’d accidentally ruined. “Look, can you make sure their bill goes on mine? Anything they have tonight, including desserts, if they order them? I feel like a complete idiot, but at least I can make it up to them that way.”

“Yeah, of course.” The waitress left them to their food as Stacy smiled across the table at him.

“You’re a pretty decent guy, aren’t you?”

“I’d like to think paying for the dinner I wrecked is the bare minimum of decency, but if it’s not, then yeah, I guess I am. I gotta give that poor kid enough money to buy new shoes, too, or he’s going to smell garlic for the rest of his life.”

“I’m almost certain he won’t wear the same shoes for the rest of his life.” Stacy’s smile broadened, though. “Yeah, you really are a good guy. I’m glad Noah found you yesterday.”

“Me too.” The moment suddenly felt right. Keith leaned forward, forgetting about his dinner. “Stacy, there’s something I’d like to tell you about myself.”

NOOOOOOOOOO!

The stag yowled so loudly it actually made Keith’s head hurt. He blinked, trying to work his way through the sudden ache as Stacy’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. You’re not married, are you?”

“What? No. No, nothing like that.”

“Gay? About to flee the country because the Feds are after you? No, wait.” Her gaze went very serious and she leaned in, too. “Keith. Give it to me straight: are you not a natural redhead?”

Tell her that! his stag wailed. *Don’t tell her the truth. Not now!*

“I—” He had never really tried to do something the stag really didn’t want him to. It was much more difficult than he’d ever imagined. “No, no, I’m a redhead.”

“Whew.” Stacy sat back. “So which is it, then, the Feds or a secret boyfriend?”

“Neither!”

“Well, good, because I’m a one-guy kind of woman and I’d rather have a one-person kind of guy.” Stacy waved a hand. “I mean, I don’t care if you’re bi, just as long as I’m the only one you’re dating.”

“Am I dating you?” Somehow Keith felt as though he’d completely lost control of the situation. Worst of all, he was almost relieved. Or maybe it was his stag’s relief, but either way, he didn’t think he could explain about his shifter animal right then.

Or ever, his stag said with relief. At least not until Esther.

...you mean Easter?

The stag shrugged.

Stacy, however, smiled with a mix of hope and embarrassment. “I don’t know. Are you dating me? We *are* on a date, but I’m not sure if one date counts as dating.”

“Do you want it to?” Keith sounded as hopeful as she looked, and then, with the sudden certainty that laying it out on the line would be a good idea, added, “I want it to. If that’s not too much.”

Stacy lit up, her smile getting not bigger, but brighter somehow. “I think I do too. Which seems crazy, but crazy sounds great right now. Even if it comes with assaulting people with reindeer antlers.”

“I *promise* that is not normal for me. I hardly ever assault people with any kinds of antlers at all.”

Her gaze grew distant and thoughtful. “Now I’m trying to decide whether that means you don’t assault people who wear antlers, or whether you don’t wear antlers when you assault them.”

“Both! Neither! No assault! Only deer!”

Stacy blinked at him. “You assault deer?”

“Only during—” He couldn’t possibly say ‘rutting season.’ His panicked mind grabbed onto that, at least. Not that he was in the habit of rutting with deer, either, for God’s sake, but this was already getting away from him. “—hunting season?”

His stag gasped in absolute horror. *You’ve been **hunting deer**?*

No! Of course not!

Stacy didn’t look much happier than the stag sounded, although at least she sounded a little more surprised than revolted. “You’re a hunter?”

Keith wailed, “No! I don’t know why I said that! Because my family was talking about hunting season earlier.” He calmed down a little, realizing that, while his stag was still having palpitations and Stacy looked as if she was trying to work her way through what had been a very unusual evening so far.

Cautiously, after a moment, she asked, “Are *they* hunters...?”

“No, but...” Keith took a deep breath, steadying himself. “But we all do

like to get out into the woods and spend time in the wilderness, so we keep an eye on when the hunting seasons start and finish.” That was even true, and made his stag relax slightly, although it still eyed him a little suspiciously from the inside of his own head.

“Oh, okay. Yeah, that makes sense, kind of, although you’re a little strange, Keith.” Stacy didn’t say it like it was a bad thing, but he felt a lurch of worry drop through his belly. He didn’t want her to think he was strange. He wanted her to think he was—

Beautiful, the stag whispered almost tragically. *Wonderful. Handsome. Kind. Beautiful.*

You said that already.

It’s very important!

Keith wasn’t sure it was as important as Stacy not thinking he was a weirdo, but it wasn’t worth arguing, either. “I’m not usually this bad,” he promised her. “I also haven’t usually met a woman who’s knocked me off my feet.”

“Oh?” Stacy looked bland as she swirled up a forkful of linguine. “Who’s that?”

He stared at her, and she burst out laughing. “Come on, you could have gone for a Samson and Delilah thing with the haircut, and you just took ‘knocked you off your feet?’ I had to give you a little grief.”

Keith lifted a hand to his hair, and the antler headband. She had no idea how right she was, in a way, about having cut away his strength. “Dang it, you’re right. Can I get a do-over?”

“Nope. It was right there and you walked past it, so I’m going to take that as meaning that you don’t think of me as the sort of woman who would betray you. I also don’t think of myself as someone who will betray you, so we’re all on the same page. And last I knew, you were starving, and this is delicious, so let’s eat.”

See? Keith said to the stag. *She’s on our side.*

I know, the stag said mournfully. *But I still want to be beautiful for her.*

“Yeah.” Keith spoke aloud, smiling ruefully and trying to choose his words so they made sense both to the stag and the wonderful woman across the table from him. “Yeah, I get that. Okay. Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER 9



Keith Raleigh really was an odd duck, but he was also the sweetest guy Stacy had met in years. After watching him eat *everything*, including the entire garlic bread reindeer and four cannolis, she reached for her wallet to pay for her own dinner. Keith said, “Oh, please, no, let me, I’d feel like an ass if I didn’t, after what I subjected you to,” and she agreed with a laugh.

So he’d paid for their dinner, the dinner he’d accidentally ruined, a bottle of wine for the parents of the ruined-dinner family, and left literally several hundred dollars in tip money, with an explanation to the waitress that however much the guy’s shoes cost, that should come out of the tip money, and the rest should be split between everybody who had to clean up the mess he’d made.

“You can come back and make a mess any time,” the waitress promised him after a glance at the tip. “But you have to wear the headband.”

He put his hand to the antlers, visibly dismayed, and both Stacy and the waitress laughed. The woman said, “You’ve got yourself a good one there,” and although Stacy wasn’t sure she could quite claim him as hers, she still nodded a happy agreement.

“That wasn’t exactly the first date I’d had planned,” Keith admitted as they walked out through new-falling snow. “I’m sorry about...well, all of it.”

“No, don’t be. I don’t think anybody could have handled the aftermath better. Especially buying the waiter new shoes. That was really nice of you.”

“Let’s just hope he wasn’t wearing limited edition Air Jordans or something.”

Stacy held up a palm, circling her hand in the air in a full-stop motion.

“Anybody wearing limited edition Jordans while working at a restaurant deserves whatever happens to them. I will hear no arguments.”

She had, in fact, come to a full stop herself as she made the gesture. Apparently it was effective. They were also at the end of the restaurant’s driveway, which meant a decision had to be made. She wasn’t *quite* ready to invite Keith home yet, but she also didn’t entirely want to end the evening.

He solved the problem by saying, “Can I walk you home?”

Her chest filled with lightness. Stacy had the impulse to stomp it all back down, grinch-like, but she felt too bubbly. “That would be great.” The new snow squeaked under their feet as they turned away from town, heading up the street toward her house. “So how long are you in town for?”

Keith looked completely startled. “Oh. Wow, you know what, I haven’t thought about going back down to Jersey since I met you. I’m here through the New Year, but I’m really only in the office two days a week now anyway, what with, you know, everything. I can put off going back a little while longer. Huh. Wow. I’m gonna have to...think about how all that’s gonna work.”

That bubbling feeling rose in her chest again. Equally nervous and hopeful, she said, “How what’s all going to work?”

He turned to her in the snow, flakes landing on his antlers and glittering briefly in his hair. “How living five hours away is going to work out with dating you, obviously.” Sudden alarm widened his eyes. “Unless tonight was so much of a disaster you’re only being polite when you asked me to walk you home—”

“I didn’t,” Stacy pointed out. “You offered.”

Keith’s eyes widened even further. “Oh, God, no, please don’t tell me you were just being polite? I mean, definitely do tell me, I don’t want to overstep, but—”

She put her hand on his arm. Even through his fluffy winter coat she could feel the strength of his biceps, and for a moment couldn’t think of anything except how wonderful being held in those strong arms would be. Before her imagination ran away with her entirely, she said, “No, I wasn’t being polite. I wanted you to walk me home. And tonight was the most interesting first date I’ve ever had.”

Keith winced with his whole body. “‘Interesting’ isn’t usually what I’m going for on a date.”

“Well, too bad. I’m not giving you a do-over. You’ll just have to see what

comes of a second date.”

“After tonight I’m amazed you’re willing to go out with me again, but very grateful.”

“On one hand, I see your point. On the other, again: the most interesting first date I’ve ever had. That’s got to be worth something.” Stacy smiled up at him as they reached her driveway, and tilted her head toward the house. “This is me.”

“Oh! The Sanders used to live here, before they moved out west. I didn’t know somebody’d bought it! It’s a great little house. Big lot. We used to trampoline in it. But it used to be blue!”

“I painted it, yeah. I like yellow. Weird, that you knew the people who used to live here. I never met them.”

“Well, small towns. You probably know who lived in all the houses in your town.”

“They all still live there,” Stacy said dryly.

Keith snickered. “Yeah, okay, to be fair, there’s not a lot of turnover in Virtue, either. Although Mom’s said there’s been an influx of new shi—shakers and movers in the past couple years.”

Stacy’s eyebrows went up. “Shi...take?”

“No! Not shitake—isn’t that a mushroom? Just new people. Changing things up some. It’s not a bad thing.” Keith looked faintly panicked, like he’d really blown it. “It’s just that Virtue was kind of...I don’t know. You know how small towns are. They dry up. It’s part of why I went to Jersey to work. But things have been turning around here for a while, I guess. New people, new ideas, new businesses. It’s good. It’s good!”

“Well, you don’t have to convince me. I’m one of the newbies, and I’d like to think I’m adding something to the town with my presence.” Stacy paused. “If only random antler attacks.”

Keith threw his head back, laughing aloud and losing his antlers a second time. At least they only fell off the back of his head this time, fwumping down to the snow to leave an imprint. “Nooo! My antlers!”

“I’m going to get you a ribbon and tie them on,” Stacy said, amused.

He picked the snowy antlers up and put them back on his head, shivering as snow fell down his neck. “This not having hair thing is cold! Why didn’t you warn me about that?”

“And break Noah Brannigan’s heart?”

Keith almost groaned this time. “Yeah, that kid is too cute for his own

good. Look, can I walk you to your door? Or I'm sort of afraid I'll keep you standing here in the snow all night, talking to you."

"It's better to stand on the porch all night?"

"I think so. Our feet won't get as cold if we're not *in* the snow, right?" Keith smiled and offered his elbow, so Stacy put her hand in it and he walked her up the driveway. "Are you busy tomorrow?"

"I'm working until seven."

Keith blanched. "That's late. Do you work those hours all the time?"

"During the holidays, yeah. Nine to seven. Nothing to be done about it. My boss is really pushy about a lot of hours during this time of year."

Stacy watched a flash of indignation rush across Keith's face before suspicion settled in. "Wait a second, aren't you your boss?"

"Yeah." She grinned as she got her keys out, although she didn't really want to go inside. "So when I tell you the boss is a real stickler for the hours, I'm not kidding."

"Does she at least give you a lunch break?"

"Eehh." Stacy wrinkled her face. "She's not great about it, honestly."

"Right," Keith said firmly. "What time should I bring lunch over?"

"Really?" Stacy blinked at him, then ducked her head to hide embarrassed delight. "Twelve thirty, maybe? That's kind of in the middle of a couple of coloring appointments, so I could grab a minute to eat."

Keith drew himself up and saluted. "Twelve thirty it is. Any allergies I need to know about?"

"I have a faint allergy to long-haired cats, but I assume you won't be bringing one of those for lunch."

"Well, I was *going* to, but obviously now I won't." Keith hesitated. "I'd really like to kiss you good night, if that wouldn't be too much."

A thrill shot through Stacy, warming her from head to toe, although a lot of that heat seemed quite centered around the middle of her. "I think it would be just right."

He lowered his head toward hers a little, a smile playing on his lips. "I may have garlic breath."

"That's okay. So do I. Kiss me anyway." Stacy curled her fingers into his coat and stood on her toes, surprised at her own impatience.

Keith was still smiling as his mouth touched hers, and Stacy, with a shiver of delight, thought their first kiss tasted of a smile, not garlic. His mouth was warm and certain and not too demanding, but she could feel the

restraint in it, as if he really just wanted to pick her up and kiss her breathless. She kind of wanted that too—well, not kind of at all, in fact—but there was escalating and there was *escalating*, and she wasn't sure she was ready for the second one. Not yet.

Not when she could fall into that smiling kiss and imagine all of its promises coming true. Not when she could quiver happily as Keith's arms encircled her and drew her closer, almost off her feet because he was so tall and she was so small. Not when there was so much time to explore the warmth and the obvious connection between them. She didn't want to rush anything. Not this time.

He looked a little glazed when he put her back on her feet, like that kiss had hit him with the force of a semi truck, too. He touched his forehead to hers and whispered, "Wow."

Stacy laughed, hardly more than a breath of sound. "Yeah. Wow. Wow."

They stood there like that, all close and snuggled and content, until Keith gave a groaning laugh of his own and said, "I'd better go. If I don't, I really will want to stand here all night. But I don't want you to freeze, either. And it would be weird if I stayed on your porch all night like an ice-coated Romeo."

A giggle ran through Stacy. "Frozen guys on the porch: not romantic. Also Romeo was a teenager, which, ew."

Keith staggered back, a hand clapped to his heart. "Thwarted by the realities of life. And besides, I want to tell you more about me before we get —" He lifted his head sharply, nearly throwing his antlers off again, then sighed dramatically. "Before we get too serious, which is a silly thing to say after one date, I know, but..."

"But this feels good," Stacy said simply. "It feels right, to me, at least. Do you have some dark secrets I need to know? We already covered the whole FBI thing."

"Not dark," Keith promised her. "But there's stuff worth talking about. *Not* in thirty-seven degree weather at a quarter past nine at night, though. Tomorrow, maybe."

"Perfect. I'll see you at lunch tomorrow." Stacy went inside feeling as light and happy as she ever had.

She even thought she might put up a Christmas tree.



IT WAS ridiculous to be excited about going to work in the morning because she was going to have lunch with a boy.

Stacy told herself that all night and most of the morning, but she was still unbelievably cheerful as she cut hair the next day. The two women who sublet her extra chairs were in, chattering cheerfully about the holidays, and it didn't even annoy Stacy. She actually chatted back, and every time the door chimed, a shiver of anticipation went through her, although she imagined Keith wouldn't be there until about the time he'd promised to be. He was sensitive enough to figure that hairdressers probably didn't want to talk all the time, so she figured he was also sensitive enough to realize that she was working, and that showing up early would be disruptive.

Still, it was kind of fun to be looking forward to seeing him that much. Her client—Donna Arnesen, the town's deputy—kept meeting Stacy's eyes in the mirror and laughing. "I'm sorry," she said after a while. "You just look so happy. I get my hair cut this time of year every year—"

Stacy, trying to be stern, said, "Oh, come on, Donna, you get your hair cut every six weeks," and the deputy snorted laughter.

"Yeah, but you know what I mean. The point is, I've been coming to you since you opened the salon, and you're always a grumpy Gus at this time of year. You look like the Grinch most of the time, but you're all smiles today." Donna arched an eyebrow. "Did you meet somebody?"

"Maaaaaybe."

"Tell me more!" Donna actually tried turning around in the salon chair. Stacy squeaked in alarm and she remembered she was getting a haircut, so settled back down, but her reflected expression was hopeful. "Is it anybody I know?"

"I don't...yeah, maybe. You grew up here and I think you're around the same age. Keith Raleigh?"

"Ah yes, Rapunzel." Donna snickered at Stacy's own reflection in the mirror. "All that hair. We used to tease him."

"Well, I cut it Saturday. That's how we met."

"Oooh." A sort of knowing delight spread over Donna's face. "And you hit it off instantly?"

"Yeah." Stacy felt silly, but also secretly happy to confess this to someone. "I know it sounds fairy tale, but—ugh, no, I can't even say it."

"Love at first sight?"

"Yeeesss!"

“I believe in it,” Donna said with a smile. “Good for you. I’m happy for you.”

“But it’s crazy, right?”

“Way less crazy than you think,” the deputy promised. “I think it’s gonna work out for you.”

“I hope so. He’s coming over with lunch in a few minutes,” Stacy admitted. “I’m looking forward to it like I’m fourteen.”

“Fourteen,” Donna said, “is a *great* age. Embrace it.”

Stacy, happily, said, “I will,” and shot another nervous glance toward the door. The whole town square was bustling, and if three square acres could seem to bustle, there had to be a *lot* of people out there today.

One of them was presumably Keith Raleigh, but he never showed up.

CHAPTER 10



The line at Kate's Cafe was extremely long.

Keith knew it probably would be, so he'd shown up twenty minutes earlier than he thought he needed to. It was long despite that, with cheerful people chatting endlessly with the staff behind the counter about their holiday plans and who was visiting and whether they were going anywhere and what the kids wanted for the big day instead of putting their orders in so Keith could get to the front of the line and get lunch and bring it to his fated mate on the other side of the square!

He took a deep breath. Stacy would understand him running a few minutes late, and if he didn't calm himself down, he would work his poor stag into a worried lather.

It's okay, the big deer whispered tragically. I've ruined everything anyway. No one can love someone as unbeautiful and clumsy as me.

Keith, under his breath but aloud, said, "Pretty sure girls don't kiss you like that if you've ruined everything, buddy."

Because the memory of their goodbye kiss the night before could keep Keith warm for a week. Stacy had leaned into him so perfectly, as if she believed in her heart that their kiss was only the first of many. She'd been warm and small and curvy and smelled—well, like garlic and some kind of delicious shampoo, really, but it was a *good* smell—and her smile when they'd broken apart had been enough to make his heart leap with joy. He'd cut through the woods when he'd left her, in fact, and shifted into his stag form because he couldn't run fast or leap high enough as a human to express his joy.

The stag had insisted he shift *with* the ridiculous reindeer antlers, and had

nearly burst into tears when—of course—they'd flown off as soon as he started running. Never mind that deer didn't cry tears. Keith had been pretty sure the stag would manage it somehow. He'd shifted back to human, found the antlers, and said, "This is why we bring our clothes *with* us when we shift," to the winter night.

His stag had wailed, *But unbeautiful!* in real dismay. Eventually it had accepted that no one was going to see them without antlers, and had agreed to run home through the woods after all, but Keith had felt it worrying the whole way.

It didn't help that when he'd gotten back to the ranch, his wretched twin brother was out chopping wood and yelled, "Hello, Hornless!" in greeting. The stag was so crushed its knees buckled and Keith found himself jaw deep in the snow as he transformed back to human without warning.

Kevin had to put the axe down because he was laughing so hard, and the only reason Keith didn't kick him into next Tuesday was because the stag refused to transform again. *Never again*, it said woefully. *Not until ether*.

Easter, Keith said strenuously, even in his own head again at the cafe. At the moment, trying to knock the stag out with ether until Easter didn't seem like a bad idea, except Keith was pretty sure he couldn't render *it* unconscious without doing the same thing to himself.

He *finally* got up to the counter, and the woman behind it—Kate herself, whom he'd known since grade school—looked up at him with the most solemn expression she could manage. It wasn't very, given that she was rather small and elfin, but she tried, and did say, "Nice horns," completely deadpan.

Keith touched the antler headband with resignation more than self-consciousness. People had been grinning at him since he ducked his way into the cafe, and he couldn't blame them. The antlers scraped the extra awning Kate had put out to keep the stairs clear of snow. They didn't reach the cafe's ceiling, but only because it was about ten feet in height. He couldn't wear them in the car, despite the stag's preferences, because the car didn't have a sun roof to open so the antlers could stick out. "Thank you. I'm sworn to wear them until the end of time."

Until Hester, the stag protested in a small voice.

"*Easter*," Keith said aloud, and when Kate's eyebrows rose, said, "Until Easter. Technically. Not until the end of time."

Kate said, "Mmhmm," in that tight-voiced hum people used when they

were trying very hard not to laugh. “What can I get for you, Keith?”

He hadn’t thought to ask Stacy what she liked for sandwiches. The thought struck him with the full horror of a slasher film. Or maybe not quite that bad, because he didn’t watch those because they scared the bejeezus out of his stag. “...I don’t suppose you know what kind of sandwich Stacy Carbone likes?”

Kate called, “Hot turkey club with provolone on a sandwich roll, please!” over her shoulder, and grinned at Keith. “And for yourself?”

“Oh, God, I don’t know, I only spent twenty-seven minutes in line unable to make a decision.” Keith cast a panicked look at the chalk specials board, which sat alongside the regular items that were available daily. He *had* made a decision at least three times, and second-guessed himself at least four times. “A French dip and two cups of soup to go? And what’s your favorite dessert?”

“*Mine* is the lemon cheesecake, but this time of year Stacy comes in and sighs at the chocolate explosion brownies before getting a gingerbread latte and a minidoodle.”

Keith froze. “A...minidoodle? Is that...a small dog?”

Kate cackled. “No, it’s a miniature snickerdoodle for when you need a treat but can’t justify a cookie the size of your palm.”

“I can always justify a cookie the size of my palm.” Keith had, in fact, eaten a genuinely stunning number of the Christmas cookies at home already that morning, after a breakfast involving bacon, eggs, biscuits, orange juice, and the pancakes he’d been forced to make for himself because he was still starving, and then for everybody else because they thought that sounded great. So a cookie the size of his palm seemed... “In fact, I’ll have two of those and the chocolate explosion brownie and did Stacy already order her gingerbread latte today?”

“No, she only gets them on Fridays. And *you* are over six feet tall and have a thirty year old man’s metabolism, which is frequently more forgiving than a five foot four woman’s.”

“I’ll finish her latte if she doesn’t want it,” Keith promised, knowing it didn’t exactly make sense. He suddenly realized he was doing exactly what everyone else had done, which was hanging out at the till bantering with the staff instead of getting a move on so other people could order. “That’s everything. Thanks for the help.” He paid and stepped to the side, waiting for his order with a bunch of other people milling around in the small space

available. Sitting would be more comfortable, but the cafe's seating was chock-full too, with kids sitting in adult laps so there would be a little more room. Keith found himself smiling at the loud busyness of it all, and at all the scents and different foods coming through, and at the conversations going on around him.

He didn't know if he'd missed all of this before meeting Stacy, but now that he was home in Virtue and his fated mate was waiting for him, he missed it with his whole heart. He wanted this to be his daily life from now on, although he might have to go to the city a couple days a week for work. But that would be all right. He could sell the apartment and get a studio, and live

A laugh ran through him. Live with his parents, he guessed, until things progressed far enough with Stacy that they might talk about moving in together. Which was a big step for a relationship that hadn't quite made it to the second date yet. Especially a relationship that had a stag-shaped secret yet to be shared.

But not yet, his stag whispered tragically. Not until I'm beautiful again.

Buddy, I'm sure she'll love you anyway, but we'll take it as slow as we can, Keith promised the stag again. *I know you're dealing with a lot.*

Or without a lot, he guessed, since the whole problem was the missing rack, but mostly, he just wanted to be sympathetic to his animal self. He really was confident that Stacy would accept the stag antlers or not, but it was so sad at the idea of showing off its antler-less self Keith couldn't bring himself to insist. Maybe the poor vain creature would become more comfortable with the idea in a few more days or weeks.

A sudden rush of orders came through and everybody in front of him cleared out. Kate called, "One more minute!" to him, and barely a minute later, handed over two bags of food. "The coffees are in that one, be careful."

"Yes'm." Keith waved a bag as he headed for the door, remembering to duck so he didn't knock his antlers off. The main porch had a high roof, too, but he didn't duck far enough under the awning Kate had put up, and the antlers scraping it sent a shudder right down into the bones of his neck. It was like getting branches or ivy tangled in antlers: sometimes he didn't notice at all, and sometimes it felt like an actual attack.

His stag shrieked, *There's something in my antlers!* and tried to throw its head to get the *something* off. Keith, vividly remembering what had happened last time he tossed his head, tensed his neck and shoulders at the

same time his feet hit an icy patch on the sidewalk, and...

...the truth was, he didn't know exactly what happened then. He knew he learned fast that hitting an icy patch while holding his neck and shoulders rigid was a Bad Plan, and that there was a terrible cracking crash and splinters and a billowing awning, but after that he really didn't know much of anything until he woke up, sore-headed, on a cold metal table with a bright medical light glaring down at him. He started to sit up and a woman's voice said, "Nope!" so stridently that Keith immediately gave up any plans to sit up, possibly ever again.

Once he was under orders not to move, he slowly realized they were good orders. He hurt in an awful lot of places, especially around the neck and shoulders and, now that he was thinking about it, the head. *Especially* around the head. He gathered himself to ask a question like a capable adult, and instead whimpered, "What happened?" in a pained tone.

"You wiped out spectacularly," the woman reported. He couldn't really see her beyond the light. "The whole Looney Tunes thing. Feet in the air, landing on your head, bringing the entire awning *and* half of Kate's porch down with you. You'll be fine, but you're lucky your sister was in the square and came to help you. Apparently Noah Brannigan got it on film. You'll be social-media-famous by tonight."

"Oh, God, no." Keith groaned. "Can somebody stop him from posting it?"

"I already did, actually." His sister put her head between him and the light. For a second he couldn't see anything, but it was better than the glaring brilliance. Then he could see her more clearly, her cloud of red hair helping block the light and giving her something of a halo he was pretty sure she didn't deserve. "Noah's a good kid, and his stepdad's one of us, so he knows better than to go around posting things that happen in Virtue without making sure it's okay with everybody. Also he's like seven and his mom limits his internet access so he can't just go around uploading things willy-nilly. Keith, are you okay? That was really scary."

"I'll be fine if I could just..." Keith didn't want to finish the sentence because he had no idea who the doctor was, and it wasn't safe to go around saying *shift* in front of most people. "Oh my God! Stacy! I missed our date!" He tried to sit up again, and this time Kendra pushed him back down.

"You heard the doctor: *nope*. Stacy, who's—Stacy? The hairdresser? You had a date with her?"

Keith clutched Kendra's shoulder, pulling her close to whisper, "She's my fated mate, Kendra. I knew it as soon as I went into—"

"Oh my God why didn't you tell any of us! Oh my God! That's so exciting! That's amazing! And you stood her up?" Kendra's eyes opened wide. "Dude, you better call her! She'll understand but why didn't you tell us? OMG! I have to tell Mom, she'll be so exci—"

"This is why I didn't tell you!"

"Don't make my patient strain himself," the doctor said sternly. "He's probably got a concussion, and I need him to rest a little bit before we get him on his feet to get this dealt with."

Kendra had the grace to look abashed. "Sorry. But it's important for him to call his date. Do you know what happened to his phone?"

"This one?" The doctor's hand came into view with Keith's completely smashed, wet phone in it. "I don't know which was worse for it, him landing on it or the puddle he landed *in*—" That was when Keith noticed he was wet as well as cold and in pain. "—but I don't think he's calling anybody with it."

"You have to go over to her salon," Keith said wildly. "Go explain, please? Tell her I'll be there as soon as I can. And that I'm sorry about lunch. And, oh, God—"

"Hey, hey, hey." Kendra put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, big bro. It's okay. I'll go talk to her. It's gonna be fine, all right? Rest until the doctor says you can get up and then you can get fixed up."

"But—"

"Trust me," Kendra said, and scurried off.

CHAPTER 11



Stacy was almost relieved when Keith's younger sister burst through the salon door.

No, not almost. She *was* relieved: it was after one, when he was supposed to have come over with lunch around twelve thirty. Maybe it was a little self-centered, but Stacy honestly didn't think he would have been late for a date with her unless it was an emergency. So part of her was genuinely relieved when Kendra threw the door open and stepped inside looking a little wild-eyed.

The rest of Stacy knotted up with terror, though. She whispered, "Excuse me," to her client and put the scissors down with suddenly shaking hands, which she dried before crossing the room to Keith's little sister. "What happened? Is Keith okay?"

A look of sympathy and kindness made Kendra's face the nicest one Stacy had ever seen. "He's fine. He broke his phone and wanted me to come tell you as soon as he woke up."

"Woke up?" Stacy's voice rose and broke. "He *overslept*?"

"Oh my God! No! He took a tumble over at Kate's Cafe and knocked himself on the head pretty good. Your lunch is all over his shirt."

Stacy put a hand out for stability, afraid her knees would stop working and she'd fall down. Her heart knocked around in her chest like it was looking for a way out, and a high trill of laughter escaped her. "Don't tell me the antlers got him again."

"It—yes, I think they did, but—again?"

"He forgot he didn't have two feet of hair last night and tossed his head and hit a waiter at the Italian place with the antlers," Stacy whispered. "I

bought him a deadly assault weapon. You're sure he's okay?"

Kendra compressed her lips together so hard her eyes visibly watered as she tried not to laugh. Her, "He did *what?*" came out scratchily, and she took a moment to put her face in her hands and give in to one quick fit of giggles.

But Stacy thought maybe she was worried about her brother, too, from the way she looked up a few seconds later with a watery grin. "Poor Keith. Yeah, he really is fine. A concussion, probably, but he just needs to—" Her gaze skittered beyond Stacy to the young woman waiting in the salon chair, then at the other clients, and dropped her voice. "He just needs to, *you know*. And then he'll be fine."

"Rest?" Stacy asked in bewilderment. "Or no, not rest. Or at least not sleep. You're not supposed to sleep with a concussion, right? Oh my God. Is he at the hospital? I'll come right over. As soon as I can."

"The hospital?" This time Kendra sounded bewildered. "No, he's at the veterinarian."



A LONG SILENCE filled the salon after Kendra said that. Long enough for Stacy to look around to see if anybody else had heard it, because if they had, maybe they could *explain* it.

Long enough for Kendra's big brown eyes to get even bigger, and for her hands to creep up over her face as if she was realizing she'd said something wrong. "Oh my God," she whispered through her fingers. "You don't know yet."

"I don't know...*what...yet?*" Stacy looked around again, but Robin, the young woman in the salon chair, had picked up a magazine and wasn't listening, and the other two hairdressers were busy washing and blowing hair dry, so nobody was within ear shot. "Are you...are you serious? Keith's at the *vet*? Wh—he should be at the hospital if he's got a concussion! What the hell is wrong with—who brought him there? Did you? Why did you do that?"

Kendra whispered, "Oh my Gooooood," again, and shook her head hard enough that her ponytail bounced. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, he said you were his faaaaaah no I can't say that either, oh, God, I'm ruining everything, look, *Robin*, can your haircut wait, I *really* have to take Stacy to see my brother like *right now*."

“Oh yeah,” the girl in the chair said. “I can definitely go around for the rest of the holidays with half a haircut. I’ll tell everybody it’s a fashion statement. No, seriously, it’s fine, this is clearly an emergency. Go on. I can come in early tomorrow morning to get it finished?” she said to Stacy.

“At no cost,” Stacy promised. “Eight thirty? Is that too early? You’re my heroine, Robin, thank you. Lynn, Cameron, can you two possibly take over my next couple of appointments? I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

“As long as none of them are the judge,” one of the hairdressers said. “She hates me.”

“That’s my *mom*,” Robin said in outrage.

“That’s amazing,” the other hairdresser said to Shelley. “You really know how to put your foot in it.”

“She does hate me,” Lynn said with a shrug. “We haven’t gotten along since high school.”

Robin, still outraged, said, “I wonder why!” but Kendra grabbed Stacy’s coat and dragged her out of the salon before she heard any real gossip.

“What is going *on*?” Stacy demanded as she shrugged herself into her coat. “Honestly, Kendra, why is Keith at the vet? Was he hurt so badly you couldn’t bring him to the hospital.” Sickness swam up, making her dizzy. “You said he was okay, though.”

“He is, he is, I promise that he is but this isn’t something I should be explaining, it’s something *he* should—I can’t believe he didn’t tell y—well, I guess you’ve only known each other three days but oh my *god* I don’t know how these things are supposed to work, I’ve never met my—” For a girl who didn’t seem to be able to finish a sentence, Kendra stopped that one particularly short and eyed Stacy. “True love,” she said after a few seconds, as if even that was dangerous to say.

“What is with—you’re the second person today who’s said true love about me and Keith.”

“Who was the other?”

“Donna Arnesen. The deputy!”

Kendra actually cackled. “Yeah, I bet she did. Yeah, true love, that works, look, I’m *very* sorry for messing all of this up, but *really* it’s not for me to explain and it’ll all make sense when you talk to Keith, I *promise*.” She tugged Stacy along, crossing one of the least snowy, or most-compacted, stretches of the town square in a shortcut toward the veterinarian’s office.

Stacy was torn between stopping dead and demanding an explanation,

and a conviction that no matter how much she asked for one, she wouldn't get it from Kendra. That left stomping through the snow to the vet's office to hear from her boyfr—not a boyfriend, they hadn't gotten anything like that far—from her...her *friend*...why he was seeing a vet instead of a doctor. There had to be a good explanation. She couldn't think of one, not unless the entire world had gone post-apocalyptic since she went in to work that morning. Vets always seemed to do well in the apocalypse, but given that there were tons of cheerful people shopping, kids playing in the snow, cars creeping down snowy roads, and a general sense of well-being, she didn't really think there'd been a ten A.M. apocalypse.

She hadn't been in the vet's office before, but it looked perfectly normal. A couple people with cats in carriers and a dog who couldn't decide if he wanted to say hi or pee on the floor, a receptionist, and a cork board with pictures of peoples' pets pinned to it. Kendra said, "We're here for Keith," in a rather grim tone to the receptionist.

He waved them to the hall, saying, "Out back," and Kendra pulled Stacy down a somewhat antiseptic-smelling hall, around a couple of corners, and out the back door.

Two things struck Stacy immediately: one was that the veterinarian's office had an unexpectedly enormous back yard. One wall—and they were walls, not fences—was lined with kennels, and the back half was corralled off, obviously for larger animals. But even more surprising was the fact that the walls went up at least twenty feet before tilting inward like big cat enclosures did at zoos. Stacy didn't think there was anywhere in Virtue high enough to see into the vet's back yard, except maybe the church bell tower, which was on the wrong side of the square.

The other thing that struck her was the *gigantic* red deer standing in the middle of the yard. Its—*his*, definitely a his—back was to her, but even from there she could tell he must be almost as tall as she was at the shoulder, and it was Way Bigger than her including its neck and head. Stacy was pretty sure Way Bigger was an official unit of measurement.

He was wearing the reindeer antlers Stacy had bought for Keith.

She made a noise. She wasn't sure if it was a squeak or a, "Keith?" that sounded like a squeak.

Either way, the deer spun around like something terrifying had happened behind him, saw Stacy, and reared up on his hind legs with his front legs pawing at his head. He knocked the antlers off, wailed—she'd had no idea

deer could wail—and collapsed to his knees, head ducked between them like he could hide there.

Kendra said, “Oh my *God*, Keith,” and the poor deer scootched itself around so his back end was to them again, and kept his head down, clearly trying to hide.

“*Keith?*” Stacy’s gaze jerked between Kendra and the deer several times before she said, “*Keith?*” again and, giving the deer a wide berth, went around his back end to his head. She crouched beside him uncertainly, trying not to put a hand on him for balance. “Um, *Keith?*”

The deer’s eyelashes fluttered and he cast a miserable glance at her, then tried to scrunch down even farther. Stacy’s heart melted somehow, and she put her hand on his head after all. “Aw, honey. Poor baby. It’s okay, sweetheart. Look at you, you pretty thing. You’re beautiful, aren’t you? Were you afraid to tell me? Well, I can’t blame you, I guess. ‘I’m a part-time deer,’ is kind of a big thing to drop on a first date.” Somehow she didn’t *exactly* feel like she was talking to Keith. It was more like she was talking to a deer who was part of Keith, and awfully shy about it right now. “It’s all right, buddy. Aww, look at you.” She rubbed his forehead, between his eyes and then where she guessed antlers would be in the summer. “You’re very handsome,” she promised him. “You don’t have anything to be worried about. Aww, poor thing. It’s okay.”

Somewhere in there, the deer started blinking hopefully up at her, until she swore he looked like he was smiling. “There we go,” she said encouragingly. “Now you’re feeling better, aren’t you? Goodness, look at you, you beautiful creature. Well!” She laughed. “No wonder you were at the vet!”

All at once, the deer disappeared and Keith was there, his expression one of pure relief. “See, I *told* you she wouldn’t think you were ugl—*unbeautiful*—without your antlers, you silly goose.”

He was obviously not talking to her. He was obviously talking to the deer that was part of him, and his expression twitched in a fond smile. “Yes, I know. Silly stag, not a silly goose. Stacy, *thank you*.” He knelt up and pulled her into his arms.

She nearly fell, then got her knees under herself with a laugh and leaned into him. “You’re welcome? For what? Why didn’t you—well, I mean, I understand why you didn’t tell me, but—”

“You don’t, though,” Keith said with rueful laughter in his voice. “I was

going to, right away. But I shed my antlers when I got my hair cut, and nobody, least of all my stag, expected that. It was so embarrassed that it didn't want me to tell you anything until they grew back. It was afraid you wouldn't think it was beautiful."

Stacy leaned back to blink up at him, genuinely surprised. "How could I not? He's so beautiful! I'm sure he's even more handsome with his antlers, but he's absolutely gorgeous."

It was like she'd turned a tap of confidence on. Keith's shoulders straightened a little and his jaw came up, and suddenly he was posing like he'd done the first moment she'd seen him, standing in the salon doorway inviting everybody to look at him. Stacy blinked again, then burst out laughing. "Oh my God. It's the stag. That's why you pose. Because he likes to show off!"

Keith managed to continue his pose while simultaneously looking absolutely sheepish. "It loves to show off. I swear, I'm not really that much of a poser—er, you know what I mean—"

Stacy laughed again. "I do, yeah. You're a poser, not a poseur."

"Right, yes, but it's the stag," he said in a rush. "I don't care about being the influencer-lifestyle guy, even though I photograph well. I'm just—I'm a shifter, and you're my fated mate, the person I'm meant to be with, and—"

"Oh my God. You mean like, I'm your true love? Donna knew!" Stacy said accusingly. "As soon as I said I'd fallen for you as soon as I'd seen you! She's a—what did you say? A shifter? You're shifters? She's a shifter too? And your sister is? Your family is? Is everybody in Virtue except me?"

Keith laughed and raised his hands against the barrage of questions, although he put them right back around her waist and tucked her close. "No, not everybody in Virtue, but quite a few people. More than most places. Virtue's a shifter sanctuary town, and yes, Donna is one, and my whole family, and, well the veterinarian isn't, but her boyfriend is, and—and you're okay with this? It's okay?"

"Are you kidding? It's magical. It's amazing and wonderful and also my knees are getting really cold, so could we stand up now?"

"Oh! Yes! Sorry!" Keith surged to his feet and pulled Stacy with him, beaming down at her. "I knew you'd understand. I'm sorry I had to convince my silly stag. He's sweet, really. He's just..."

"A poseur?" Stacy grinned.

"Well, yes." Keith's eyes sparkled. "I hope you don't mind."

“No, no, that’s all right. The only thing I mind is that I’m never going to be able to sing that Christmas carol with the right words again, now that I’ve got a male deer of my own.”

Keith’s eyebrows drew down in confusion. “Which Christmas carol? I’m a red deer, not a reindeer...?”

“No, not that one.” Stacy managed a huge, dramatic sigh. “You know. The one that goes ‘Buck the halls with boughs of holly, fa-la-la-laaaaahaha!’” The words were muffled in a laughing kiss, and Stacy knew then and there that she was about to have a happily ever after.

Please turn the page for an excerpt from
GLADIATOR BEAR by Murphy Lawless!

EXCERPT: GLADIATOR BEAR



Dr. Anna Liffey had been up unexplored rivers and down dormant volcanoes, but she'd honestly never been anywhere like the gala hall where the people who funded her work got together. Everyone there looked more comfortable and confident in this setting than Anna was. The three people closest to her were all each, individually, wearing jewelry worth more than she made in a year. Or possibly in a decade.

On the other hand, Anna bet not one of them could track an endangered species by half a paw print in soft mud and a single dropping four miles further on. It was a niche field, but it had gotten her an invitation to the Gladiator Foundation's annual gala ball.

Dear Dr Liffey, that invitation had said. Anna had read it so often she'd memorized its words. Every year, the Gladiator Foundation invites several of our most successful grant applicants to join us at the Gladiator Gala, our annual fundraiser and celebration of the year's work. Thanks to your tireless efforts and contributions to world wildlife conservation, we would like you to be one of this year's special guests. Please RSVP with the enclosed SASE at your earliest convenience.

It was signed by Susan Elizabeth Connolly, the foundation's director. She was the only person here tonight that Anna really wanted to meet, and that, just long enough to make a good impression before their meeting in the morning. Once she'd done that, Anna could escape, and no one would notice she'd gone.

A confident smile plastered over her nervousness, Anna zeroed in on Director Connolly, made her way through the crowd, and eventually stepped forward as the Gladiator Foundation's director disengaged from a

conversation that sounded like it had been worth millions of dollars. "Director Connolly? I'm Dr. Anna Liffey—"

Susan Connolly was a petite redhead with green eyes that shone with relief as Anna spoke to her. "Doctor Liffey, what an absolute pleasure to finally meet you face to face. This is Dr Anna Liffey," Connolly said to the gathering around her. "She's one of the very people whose work you're enabling when you support the foundation. Dr Liffey is just off an incredibly successful venture in Madagascar, where—well, you tell the story, won't you, Dr Liffey?"

A few dozen laser-bright gazes focused on Anna. She swallowed, and smiled uneasily. "My pleasure. Now, I imagine you know that the island of Madagascar is the only place on earth that lemurs evolved?" This got nods and exchanged glances of self-satisfaction amongst the donor class before they returned their glittering attention to her. "Very good," she said cheerfully. Asking questions the audience knew the answers to was always a good way to warm them up. "How big are lemurs?"

Another exchange of glances before a dark-skinned woman with the most exquisite manicure Anna had ever seen said, "About this big?" and made gestures with her beautiful hands.

"That's right. Most of the best-known lemurs weigh about four to five pounds and are around a foot and a half long, not counting the tail. But did you know that up until about two thousand years ago, when humans first arrived on Madagascar, there were lemurs the size of *gorillas*?"

"Oh my goodness," said the manicured woman. "Did we kill them all?"

"Unfortunately, that seems to be the case. Or it did, before my team and I, guided by oral traditions from Malagasy locals, followed a centuries-old rumor into the mountains and discovered a small enclave of surviving giant lemurs."

A gratifying gasp went through the gathering, and someone asked, "Will we be able to go see them?" eagerly.

"I'm afraid not. Think of humans as paparazzi and the lemurs as being—" She paused for startled effect— "Well, as being *you*! The bright, beautiful and wealthy, that the rest of the world wants to peek in on!"

Laughter burst upward ringing the swirling steel rafters and Director Connolly, at Anna's side, made a satisfied sound. Anna, smiling for real now, concluded, "We humans make a very dangerous kind of paparazzi, though. Too many of us aren't satisfied with photographs. I've stood between

poachers and their prey, and I thought I might very well die, doing it."

"Would you do it again?" A very handsome man with dark red hair and richly sepia skin spoke.

Anna met his eyes. "In a heartbeat. It's what we're here for. It's what all of us are literally right here tonight to do: to stand between our incredible natural resources and extinction. There are so many amazing things left to see—to find!—in the world. The research, protection, and conservation funded by the Gladiator Foundation is life-changing work. It's made me who I am today." Her smile softened and she glanced around the crowd, catching as many gazes as she could. "You, with your generosity and support, have made me who I am, and I thank you for it."

Applause erupted, and Director Connolly, drawing Anna away from the gathering, breathed, "That was *perfect*. If I'd known you were that good at charming the rich I'd have had you in here years ago. What are you doing on September 17 next year?"

Anna gave a nervous laugh. "I don't know?"

"You're coming to the gala," Connolly said firmly. "Whatever it takes, I'm getting you here again to impress everyone into opening their wallets. I'll get the executive director down here to ask you on one knee himself, if that's what I have to do."

Anna laughed again, this time more fully. "I didn't believe he actually existed."

"Oh, like the ROUS, he exists. He's just terminally shy. Even I don't see him often. May I be candid? This was a tough crowd tonight. I wasn't sure how well we'd do with fundraising, but I'd say you've changed the whole trajectory of the evening. It's not your job, but I really appreciate it."

"Oh, I don't know. A big part of my job *is* getting people to give me money. I'm just usually asking foundations and charities, not the actual rich people themselves." Anna shrugged too, feeling inelegant next to the tiny redheaded director. At least the enormous ferns hid her from the crowd, so no one would notice her awkwardness. "I'm good at it, though. I have to be, or I can't continue my work."

"You have a meeting with us tomorrow, don't you? I'm really looking forward to it now." Director Connolly smiled as a good-looking blond man approached. "Scott, hi. Is it time for me to go back to mingling? Dr Liffey, this is Scott Asher. He works with the Selkie Group, I don't know if you're familiar with them?"

"Sealife preservationists out of Ireland," Anna said with a smile. She shook hands with Asher, who returned her smile and dropped a kiss on Director Connolly's cheek.

"I'm afraid there are several donors who won't cut a check unless they feel personally attended to, yeah," he said to Director Connolly. "No rest for the wicked."

"Or for me." The director stepped back, her arm tucked through Asher's. "Enjoy the rest of your evening. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"So do I. It was a pleasure to meet you, Director." Anna waited until Director Connolly was definitely facing the other way before she whipped toward the windows and indulged in a violent one-two fist-pump of triumph.

That would have been fine, except she accidentally punched a man in the stomach.

Gladiator Bear is available now!

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